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Bliss and Dickens: A Note on Little Nell and "Little Willie"

Thomas H. Stewart

Blue Mountain, Mississippi

With the publication and first-year sales in 1840-41 of *The Old Curiosity Shop* approaching 100,000, this novel firmly established its popularity.¹ By the turn of the century, however, critical views of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, in particular those relating to Dickens's treatment of the death of Little Nell, had become unfavorable. Whatever condemnations a present-day critic may heap on Dickens's handling of Little Nell, he cannot deny Dickens's success in gaining wide audience appeal.²

A reader may easily conclude that Nell is not long for the world when in Chapter Fifty-five a little boy runs in "with eyes full of tears" to put his arms around her neck and lament: "Why, they say ... that you will be an angel, before the birds sing again." He pleads, reasoning in reference to a departed brother:

"After a time ... the kind angels will be glad to think that you are not among them, and that you stayed here with us. Willy went away, to join them; but if he had known how I should miss him in our little bed at night, he never would have left me, I am sure."

Yet the child could make him no answer, and sobbed as though her heart were bursting.

"Why would you go, dear Nell? I know you would not be happy when you heard that we were crying for your loss. They say that Willy is in heaven now, and that it's always summer there, and yet I'm sure he grieves when I lie down upon his garden bed, and he cannot turn to kiss me ..."³

In this case the separation is painful but temporary. Eternal separation, in which one soul is in heaven and another soul is in hell, is worse. And the Dwight L. Moody crusades, among others, were carried on to save souls.

Music was a necessary part of Moody's evangelism; and it was led by Ira Sankey, a singer and composer of musical scores. Lyrics were usually set down by either Philip Phillips, P. P. Bliss, George C. Stebbins, or James McGranahan. Although most singing would be congregational, Sankey rendered a few solo numbers that reportedly would leave audiences "bathed in tears."⁴

"Little Willie" was written by P. P. Bliss shortly before 1875, and its content demonstrates that *The Old Curiosity Shop* was still alive

and well in the public mind:

“I should like to die,” said Willie, “if my papa could die too;
But he says he isn’t ready ’cause he has so much to do;
And my little sister, Nellie, says that I must surely die,
And that she and mamma, then she stopp’d, because it made her cry.

“But she told me, I remember, once while sitting on her knee;
That the angels never weary watching over her and me;
And that if we’re good (and mamma told me just the same before),
They will let us into heaven when they see us at the door.

“There will be none but the holy — I shall know no more of sin;
There I’ll see mamma and Nellie, for I know He’ll let them in;
But I’ll have to tell the angel, when I meet him at the door,
That he must excuse my papa, ’cause he couldn’t leave the store.”⁵

The pathos that dominates *The Old Curiosity Shop* recurs in the lines of “Little Willie.” Some of the words reflect the conversation between Nell and Dickens’s Willy’s brother. Significant, too, both Dickens’s Nelly and Bliss’s Nellie lose their power to speak as a result of grief. Further, both the prose and the verse contain specific references to reunion in heaven in the presence of angels.

The Old Curiosity Shop enjoyed immense popularity, and its wide-spread familiarity made an impression — a deep and long-lived impression — on popular culture as well as on the literary world.

NOTES

¹ Malcolm Andrews, *Introd.*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. Angus Easson (New York, 1977), p. 8.

² George H. Ford, *Dickens and His Readers* (New York, 1975), pp. 64, 68, 193.

³ *The Old Curiosity Shop*, pp. 509-10.

⁴ William G. McLoughlin, Jr., *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York, 1959), pp. 234-35.

⁵ McLoughlin, p. 236. “Little Willie” appears in *Sacred Songs and Solos with Standard Hymns Combined, Compiled, and Sung by Ira D. Sankey*, No. 415 (London, n. d.), a copy of which is deposited in the Brown University Library, Providence, Rhode Island.