Night Walks

From All the Year Round, July 21, 1860

Charles Dickens
© 2022, The Dickens Project.

This edition of “Night Walks” was produced for the Dickens Day of Writing with the Dickens Project.

Photo of the Santa Cruz clock tower by Steve Jordan.

Night Walks

Charles Dickens

Introduction by John O. Jordan
Annotations by Tara N. Thomas
Introduction

Charles Dickens is the greatest English novelist of the nineteenth century and one of the greatest writers in world literature of any time. Best known as the author of novels like *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*, as well as of shorter works like *A Christmas Carol*, he was also a journalist, a noted public speaker, and a prolific writer of essays and other non-fiction prose. “Night Walks” is a good example of his style and of some of the themes that appear in his novels and in these shorter forms.

Born in 1812, near the end of the Napoleonic wars in Europe, Dickens lived through a period of political conflict and significant social transformation that saw the rise of great cities, enormous population growth, and the rapid industrialization of Victorian England. He witnessed at first hand many of the problems created by these changes, including increased poverty, crime, homelessness, and environmental degradation, and he wrote powerfully about these problems both in his fiction and in his essays.
Dickens’s family was middle class, but they lived precariously on the edge of poverty. When Dickens was a boy, his father was arrested for debt and put into prison, where, according to the custom of the time, he was joined by members of his family. Only young Charles, aged 12 or 13, was excluded from the prison. Instead, he lived alone in a London boarding house and was sent to work in a “blacking factory,” pasting labels on jars of shoe blacking. This experience marked him for life and deepened his understanding and sympathy for the poor and outcast members of society. In later life, he went on to write about these issues with compassion and with a vivid eye for detail.

“Night Walks” is a semi-autobiographical essay in which Dickens assumes the identity of a man who suffers from insomnia and whose remedy for this affliction is to walk at night through the streets of London until dawn before returning home exhausted to fall asleep. The essay describes the people he encounters and the places he sees on these walks. The narrator at first refers to himself as someone who is “houseless,” but later he begins to use “Houselessness” as if that were his name, thus identifying himself more closely with other anonymous nocturnal wanderers and with the homeless population of the city.

Rather than tracing a single itinerary, the essay superimposes the memory of many different nighttime walks, giving it the quality of a recurring dream or of an extended journey into the underworld or the unconscious. (The map attached to this printing of the essay traces one possible itinerary among many.) Ghostly figures appear and then suddenly disappear, like the young man whom the narrator tries to help, but who suddenly vanishes, leaving the narrator holding an empty garment in his hands.
The narrator passes by many of London’s important public buildings: churches, bridges, prisons, hospitals, the Bank of England, the houses of Parliament, the courts of law; but this is no ordinary tourist’s visit. Everything is transformed at night. The narrator crosses the river several times as if it were the threshold into another world. He enters an empty theater and imagines that he is “a diver . . . at the bottom of the sea,” looking up into the gloomy vault above and seeing “a shipwreck of canvas and cordage” in place of the expected ropes and curtain. He comes upon the famous hospital for the insane and wonders whether he and its inmates may not be suffering from similar delusions.

In these and other ways, “Night Walks” engages our sympathies and enlarges our social vision. It invites us to look at familiar places with fresh eyes, to see people who might otherwise remain invisible, and to imagine what we have in common with those less fortunate than ourselves.

John O. Jordan
Night Walks

Some years ago, a temporary inability to sleep, referable to a distressing impression, caused me to walk about the streets all night, for a series of several nights. The disorder might have taken a long time to conquer, if it had been faintly experimented on in bed; but, it was soon defeated by the brisk treatment of getting up directly after lying down, and going out, and coming home tired at sunrise.

In the course of those nights, I finished my education in a fair amateur experience of houselessness. My principal object being to get through the night, the pursuit of it brought me into sympathetic relations with people who have no other object every night in the year.

The month was March, and the weather damp, cloudy, and cold. The sun not rising before half-past five, the night perspective looked sufficiently long at half-past twelve: which was about my time for confronting it.

The restlessness of a great city, and the way in which it tumbles and tosses before it can get to sleep, formed one of the first entertainments offered to the contemplation of us houseless people. It lasted about two hours. We lost a great deal of companionship when the late public-houses turned their lamps out, and when the potmen¹ thrust the last brawling drunkards into the street; but stray vehicles and stray people were left us, after that. If we were very lucky, a policeman's rattle sprang and a fray turned up; but, in general, surprisingly little of this diversion was provided.

¹ potmen – waiters in a “public house” or pub.
Except in the Haymarket,\(^2\) which is the worst kept part of London, and about Kent-street in the Borough,\(^3\) and along a portion of the line of the Old Kent-road, the peace was seldom violently broken. But, it was always the case that London, as if in imitation of individual citizens belonging to it, had expiring fits and starts of restlessness. After all seemed quiet, if one cab rattled by, half-a-dozen would surely follow; and Houselessness even observed that intoxicated people appeared to be magnetically attracted towards each other; so that we knew when we saw one drunken object staggering against the shutters of a shop, that another drunken object would stagger up before five minutes were out, to fraternise or fight with it. When we made a divergence from the regular species of drunkard, the thin-armed, puff-faced, leaden-lipped gin-drinker, and encountered a rarer specimen of a more decent appearance, fifty to one but that specimen was dressed in soiled mourning. As the street experience in the night, so the street experience in the day; the common folk who come unexpectedly into a little property, come unexpectedly into a deal of liquor.

At length these flickering sparks would die away, worn out—the last veritable sparks of waking life trailed from some late pieman or hot-potato man\(^4\)—and London would sink to rest. And then the yearning of the houseless mind would be for any sign of company, any lighted place, any movement, anything suggestive of any one being up—nay, even so much as awake, for the houseless eye looked out for lights in windows.

\(^2\) the Haymarket – an area in Westminster, known for rowdy nightlife and prostitution.
\(^3\) the Borough – an area south of the river Thames.
\(^4\) pieman or hot-potato man – street vendors.
Walking the streets under the pattering rain, Houselessness would walk and walk and walk, seeing nothing but the interminable tangle of streets, save at a corner, here and there, two policemen in conversation, or the sergeant or inspector looking after his men. Now and then in the night—but rarely—Houselessness would become aware of a furtive head peering out of a doorway a few yards before him, and, coming up with the head, would find a man standing bolt upright to keep within the doorway’s shadow, and evidently intent upon no particular service to society. Under a kind of fascination, and in a ghostly silence suitable to the time, Houselessness and this gentleman would eye one another from head to foot, and so, without exchange of speech, part, mutually suspicious. Drip, drip, drip, from ledge and coping, splash from pipes and water-spouts, and by-and-by the houseless shadow would fall upon the stones that pave the way to Waterloo-bridge;\(^5\) it being in the houseless mind to have a halfpenny worth of excuse for saying ‘Good-night’ to the toll-keeper, and catching a glimpse of his fire. A good fire and a good great-coat and a good woollen neck-shawl, were comfortable things to see in conjunction with the toll-keeper; also his brisk wakefulness was excellent company when he rattled the change of halfpence down upon that metal table of his, like a man who defied the night, with all its sorrowful thoughts, and didn’t care for the coming of dawn. There was need of encouragement on the threshold of the bridge, for the bridge

\(^5\) Waterloo-bridge – one of many bridges over the Thames; a toll-bridge in Victorian times. (see map)
was dreary. The chopped-up murdered man,\(^6\) had not been lowered with a rope over the parapet when those nights were; he was alive, and slept then quietly enough most likely, and undisturbed by any dream of where he was to come. But the river had an awful look, the buildings on the banks were muffled in black shrouds, and the reflected lights seemed to originate deep in the water, as if the spectres of suicides were holding them to show where they went down. The wild moon and clouds were as restless as an evil conscience in a tumbled bed, and the very shadow of the immensity of London seemed to lie oppressively upon the river.

Between the bridge and the two great theatres,\(^7\) there was but the distance of a few hundred paces, so the theatres came next. Grim and black within, at night, those great dry Wells, and lonesome to imagine, with the rows of faces faded out, the lights extinguished, and the seats all empty. One would think that nothing in them knew itself at such a time but Yorick’s skull.\(^8\) In one of my night walks, as the church steeples were shaking the March winds and rain with the strokes of Four, I passed the outer boundary of one of these great deserts, and entered it. With a dim lantern in my hand, I groped my well-known way to the stage and looked over the orchestra—which was like a great grave dug for a time of pestilence—into the void beyond. A dismal cavern of an immense aspect, with the chandelier gone dead like

\(^6\) the chopped-up murdered man – in October 1857, a dismembered corpse had been discovered in a bag on a pier of Waterloo Bridge. Although published in 1860, “Night Walks” is thus set in a period before that grisly event, when the “murdered” man is imagined as still being alive.

\(^7\) the two great theatres – the Adelphi and the Lyceum, both not far from Waterloo Bridge.

\(^8\) Yorick’s skull – a reference to the famous gravedigger scene in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Act V.
everything else, and nothing visible through mist and fog and space, but tiers of winding-sheets. The ground at my feet where, when last there, I had seen the peasantry of Naples dancing among the vines,\(^9\) reckless of the burning mountain\(^{10}\) which threatened to overwhelm them, was now in possession of a strong serpent of engine-hose,\(^{11}\) watchfully lying in wait for the serpent Fire, and ready to fly at it if it showed its forked tongue. A ghost of a watchman, carrying a faint corpse candle, haunted the distant upper gallery and flitted away. Retiring within the proscenium, and holding my light above my head towards the rolled-up curtain—green no more, but black as ebony—my sight lost itself in a gloomy vault, showing faint indications in it of a shipwreck of canvas and cordage. Methought I felt much as a diver might, at the bottom of the sea.

In those small hours when there was no movement in the streets, it afforded matter for reflection to take Newgate\(^{12}\) in the way, and, touching its rough stone, to think of the prisoners in their sleep, and then to glance in at the lodge over the spiked wicket,\(^{13}\) and see the fire and light of the watching turnkeys,\(^{14}\) on the white wall. Not an inappropriate

\(^{9}\) the peasantry of Naples dancing among the vines - a reference to Daniel Auber’s opera *Masaniello* (1826), which the narrator presumably once saw performed at this theatre.

\(^{10}\) the burning mountain – the volcano of Mount Vesuvius near Naples.

\(^{11}\) a strong serpent of engine hose – a long fire hose backstage at the theater.

\(^{12}\) Newgate – the great prison of London.

\(^{13}\) the spiked wicket – a grated door or window in the outside wall of the prison.

\(^{14}\) turnkeys – jail keepers, prison guards.
time either, to linger by that wicked little Debtors’ Door—shutting tighter than any other door one ever saw—which has been Death’s Door to so many. In the days of the uttering of forged one-pound notes by people tempted up from the country, how many hundreds of wretched creatures of both sexes—many quite innocent—swung out of a pitiless and inconsistent world, with the tower of yonder Christian church of Saint Sepulchre monstrously before their eyes! Is there any haunting of the Bank Parlour, by the remorseful souls of old directors, in the nights of these later days, I wonder, or is it as quiet as this degenerate Aceldama of an Old Bailey?

To walk on to the Bank, lamenting the good old times and bemoaning the present evil period, would be an easy next step, so I would take it, and would make my houseless circuit of the Bank, and give a thought to the treasure within; likewise to the guard of soldiers passing the night there, and nodding over the fire. Next, I went to Billingsgate, in some hope of market-people, but it proving as yet too early, crossed London-bridge and got down by the water-side on the Surrey shore among the buildings of the great brewery.

15 Debtors’ Door – the door through which debtors entered and left the prison. This reference no doubt recalls Dickens’s father, who was imprisoned for debt in the Marshalsea prison when Dickens was a boy.
16 church of Saint Sepulchre – a church near Newgate.
17 the Bank Parlour – a large reception room inside the Bank of England on Threadneedle Street. (see map)
18 Aceldama – literally “field of blood.” In the New Testament, the place where Judas Iscariot dies (one of Jesus’s twelve disciples and the one who betrayed him) is known by this name. See Acts I:19.
19 Old Bailey – the street on which Newgate and the Central Court of England and Wales (also known as Old Bailey) are located.
20 Billingsgate – London’s principal fish market. (see map)
There was plenty going on at the brewery; and the reek, and
the smell of grains, and the rattling of the plump dray horses
at their mangers, were capital company. Quite refreshed by
having mingled with this good society, I made a new start
with a new heart, setting the old King’s Bench prison21 before
me for my next object, and resolving, when I should come to
the wall, to think of poor Horace Kinch,22 and the Dry Rot in
men.

A very curious disease the Dry Rot in men, and difficult to
detect the beginning of. It had carried Horace Kinch inside
the wall of the old King’s Bench prison, and it had carried
him out with his feet foremost. He was a likely man to look
at, in the prime of life, well to do, as clever as he needed
to be, and popular among many friends. He was suitably
married, and had healthy and pretty children. But, like some
fair-looking houses or fair-looking ships, he took the Dry
Rot. The first strong external revelation of the Dry Rot in
men, is a tendency to lurk and lounge; to be at street-corners
without intelligible reason; to be going anywhere when met;
to be about many places rather than at any; to do nothing
tangible, but to have an intention of performing a variety
of intangible duties to-morrow or the day after. When this
manifestation of the disease is observed, the observer will
usually connect it with a vague impression once formed or
received, that the patient was living a little too hard. He will
scarcely have had leisure to turn it over in his mind and
form the terrible suspicion ‘Dry Rot,’ when he will notice a

21 the old King’s Bench prison – a prison south of the Thames, mainly
a debtor’s prison. Another reference that recalls Dickens’s father’s
imprisonment. (see map)

22 Horace Kinch – unidentified; perhaps a real person who was
imprisoned in the King’s Bench prison and died there; perhaps a
fictitious person.
change for the worse in the patient’s appearance: a certain slovenliness and deterioration, which is not poverty, nor dirt, nor intoxication, nor ill-health, but simply Dry Rot. To this, succeeds a smell as of strong waters, in the morning; to that, a looseness respecting money; to that, a stronger smell as of strong waters, at all times; to that, a looseness respecting everything; to that, a trembling of the limbs, somnolency, misery, and crumbling to pieces. As it is in wood, so it is in men. Dry Rot advances at a compound usury quite incalculable. A plank is found infected with it, and the whole structure is devoted. Thus it had been with the unhappy Horace Kinch, lately buried by a small subscription. Those who knew him had not nigh done saying, ‘So well off, so comfortably established, with such hope before him—and yet, it is feared, with a slight touch of Dry Rot!’ when lo! the man was all Dry Rot and dust.

From the dead wall associated on those houseless nights with this too common story, I chose next to wander by Bethlehem Hospital; partly, because it lay on my road round to Westminster; partly, because I had a night fancy in my head which could be best pursued within sight of its walls and dome. And the fancy was this: Are not the sane and the insane equal at night as the sane lie a dreaming? Are not all of us outside this hospital, who dream, more or less in the condition of those inside it, every night of our lives? Are we not nightly persuaded, as they daily are, that we associate preposterously with kings and queens, emperors and empresses, and notabilities of all sorts? Do we not nightly jumble events and personages and times and places, as these do daily? Are we not sometimes troubled

23 Bethlehem Hospital – also popularly known as “Bedlam,” the first English lunatic asylum. (see map)
by our own sleeping inconsistencies, and do we not vexedly
try to account for them or excuse them, just as these do
sometimes in respect of their waking delusions? Said an
afflicted man to me, when I was last in a hospital like this,
‘Sir, I can frequently fly.’ I was half ashamed to reflect that so
could I—by night. Said a woman to me on the same occasion,
‘Queen Victoria frequently comes to dine with me, and her
Majesty and I dine off peaches and maccaroni in our night-
gowns, and his Royal Highness the Prince Consort does us
the honour to make a third on horseback in a Field-Marshal’s
uniform.’ Could I refrain from reddening with consciousness
when I remembered the amazing royal parties I myself had
given (at night), the unaccountable viands\textsuperscript{24} I had put on
the table, and my extraordinary manner of conducting myself
on those distinguished occasions? I wonder that the great
master who knew everything,\textsuperscript{25} when he called Sleep the
death of each day’s life,\textsuperscript{26} did not call Dreams the insanity of
each day’s sanity.

By this time I had left the Hospital behind me, and was
again setting towards the river; and in a short breathing
space I was on Westminster-bridge,\textsuperscript{27} regaling my houseless
eyes with the external walls of the British Parliament—the
perfection of a stupendous institution, I know, and the
admiration of all surrounding nations and succeeding ages,
I do not doubt, but perhaps a little the better now and then
for being pricked up to its work. Turning off into Old Palace-

\textsuperscript{24} viands – provisions, food.
\textsuperscript{25} the great master who knew everything – Shakespeare
\textsuperscript{26} Sleep the death of each day’s life – from Shakespeare’s \textit{Macbeth}, Act 2,
scene 2.
\textsuperscript{27} Westminster-bridge – another main bridge over the Thames. (see
map)
yard, the Courts of Law\textsuperscript{28} kept me company for a quarter of an hour; hinting in low whispers what numbers of people they were keeping awake, and how intensely wretched and horrible they were rendering the small hours to unfortunate suitors. Westminster Abbey\textsuperscript{29} was fine gloomy society for another quarter of an hour; suggesting a wonderful procession of its dead among the dark arches and pillars, each century more amazed by the century following it than by all the centuries going before. And indeed in those houseless night walks—which even included cemeteries where watchmen went round among the graves at stated times, and moved the tell-tale handle of an index which recorded that they had touched it at such an hour—it was a solemn consideration what enormous hosts of dead belong to one old great city, and how, if they were raised while the living slept, there would not be the space of a pin’s point in all the streets and ways for the living to come out into. Not only that, but the vast armies of dead would overflow the hills and valleys beyond the city, and would stretch away all round it, God knows how far.

When a church clock strikes, on houseless ears in the dead of the night, it may be at first mistaken for company and hailed as such. But, as the spreading circles of vibration, which you may perceive at such a time with great clearness, go opening out, for ever and ever afterwards widening perhaps (as the philosopher has suggested) in eternal space, the mistake is rectified and the sense of loneliness is profounder. Once—it was after leaving the Abbey and turning my face north—I came to the great steps of St.

\textsuperscript{28} Courts of Law – (see map)
\textsuperscript{29} Westminster Abbey – a large gothic church in Westminster. (see map)
Martin’s church\textsuperscript{30} as the clock was striking Three. Suddenly, a thing that in a moment more I should have trodden upon without seeing, rose up at my feet with a cry of loneliness and houselessness, struck out of it by the bell, the like of which I never heard. We then stood face to face looking at one another, frightened by one another. The creature was like a beetle-browed\textsuperscript{31} hair-lipped youth of twenty, and it had a loose bundle of rags on, which it held together with one of its hands. It shivered from head to foot, and its teeth chattered, and as it stared at me—persecutor, devil, ghost, whatever it thought me—it made with its whining mouth as if it were snapping at me, like a worried dog. Intending to give this ugly object money, I put out my hand to stay it—for it recoiled as it whined and snapped—and laid my hand upon its shoulder. Instantly, it twisted out of its garment, like the young man in the New Testament,\textsuperscript{32} and left me standing alone with its rags in my hands.

Covent-garden Market,\textsuperscript{33} when it was market morning, was wonderful company. The great wagons of cabbages, with growers’ men and boys lying asleep under them, and with sharp dogs from market-garden neighbourhoods looking after the whole, were as good as a party. But one of the worst night sights I know in London, is to be found in the children who prowl about this place; who sleep in the

\textsuperscript{30} St. Martin’s church – a church near Trafalgar Square in central London. (see map)
\textsuperscript{31} beetle-browed – having thick, bushy eye brows.
\textsuperscript{32} the young man in the New Testament – The reference is to a passage in the Gospel of Saint Mark (14:51-52): “And a young man followed [Jesus], with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.”
\textsuperscript{33} Covent-garden Market – the principal flower, fruit, and vegetable market of London. (see map)
baskets, fight for the offal,\textsuperscript{34} dart at any object they think they can lay their thieving hands on, dive under the carts and barrows, dodge the constables, and are perpetually making a blunt pattering on the pavement of the Piazza with the rain of their naked feet. A painful and unnatural result comes of the comparison one is forced to institute between the growth of corruption as displayed in the so much improved and cared for fruits of the earth, and the growth of corruption as displayed in these all uncared for (except inasmuch as ever-hunted) savages.

There was early coffee to be got about Covent-garden Market, and that was more company—warm company, too, which was better. Toast of a very substantial quality, was likewise procurable: though the towzled-headed\textsuperscript{35} man who made it, in an inner chamber within the coffee-room, hadn’t got his coat on yet, and was so heavy with sleep that in every interval of toast and coffee he went off anew behind the partition into complicated cross-roads of choke and snore, and lost his way directly. Into one of these establishments (among the earliest) near Bow-street, there came one morning as I sat over my houseless cup, pondering where to go next, a man in a high and long snuff-coloured coat, and shoes, and, to the best of my belief, nothing else but a hat, who took out of his hat a large cold meat pudding; a meat pudding so large that it was a very tight fit, and brought the lining of the hat out with it. This mysterious man was known by his pudding, for on his entering, the man of sleep brought him a pint of hot tea, a small loaf, and a large knife and fork and plate. Left to himself in his box, he stood the pudding on the bare table, and, instead of cutting it, stabbed it,

\textsuperscript{34}offal – variety meats, the viscera and entrails of a butchered animal.

\textsuperscript{35}towzled-headed – disheveled.
overhand, with the knife, like a mortal enemy; then took the
knife out, wiped it on his sleeve, tore the pudding asunder
with his fingers, and ate it all up. The remembrance of this
man with the pudding remains with me as the remembrance
of the most spectral person my houselessness encountered.
Twice only was I in that establishment, and twice I saw
him stalk in (as I should say, just out of bed, and presently
going back to bed), take out his pudding, stab his pudding,
wipe the dagger, and eat his pudding all up. He was a man
whose figure promised cadaverousness, but who had an
excessively red face, though shaped like a horse’s. On the
second occasion of my seeing him, he said huskily to the man
of sleep, ‘Am I red to-night?’ ‘You are,’ he uncompromisingly
answered. ‘My mother,’ said the spectre, ‘was a red-faced
woman that liked drink, and I looked at her hard when she
laid in her coffin, and I took the complexion.’ Somehow, the
pudding seemed an unwholesome pudding after that, and I
put myself in its way no more.

When there was no market, or when I wanted variety, a
railway terminus with the morning mails coming in, was
remunerative company. But like most of the company to be
had in this world, it lasted only a very short time. The station
lamps would burst out ablaze, the porters would emerge
from places of concealment, the cabs and trucks would rattle
to their places (the post-office carts were already in theirs),
and, finally, the bell would strike up, and the train would
come banging in. But there were few passengers and little
luggage, and everything scuttled away with the greatest
expedition. The locomotive post-offices, with their great

36 railway terminus – one of the great Victorian railway stations, perhaps
King’s Cross, Paddington, or Euston; “mails” were speedy trains with
special coaches for carrying and sorting the mail.
nets—as if they had been dragging the country for bodies—would fly open as to their doors, and would disgorge a smell of lamp, an exhausted clerk, a guard in a red coat, and their bags of letters; the engine would blow and heave and perspire, like an engine wiping its forehead and saying what a run it had had; and within ten minutes the lamps were out, and I was houseless and alone again.

But now, there were driven cattle on the high road near, wanting (as cattle always do) to turn into the midst of stone walls, and squeeze themselves through six inches’ width of iron railing, and getting their heads down (also as cattle always do) for tossing-purchase at quite imaginary dogs, and giving themselves and every devoted creature associated with them a most extraordinary amount of unnecessary trouble. Now, too, the conscious gas began to grow pale with the knowledge that daylight was coming, and straggling workpeople were already in the streets, and, as waking life had become extinguished with the last pieman’s sparks, so it began to be rekindled with the fires of the first street-corner breakfast-sellers. And so by faster and faster degrees, until the last degrees were very fast, the day came, and I was tired and could sleep. And it is not, as I used to think, going home at such times, the least wonderful thing in London, that in the real desert region of the night, the houseless wanderer is alone there. I knew well enough where to find Vice and Misfortune of all kinds, if I had chosen; but they were put out of sight, and my houselessness had many miles upon miles of streets in which it could, and did, have its own solitary way.

37 conscious gas – London streets were lighted by gas lamps. The gas is “conscious” because it has been “awake” during the night.
“Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward”
by Luke Fildes (1874)