

Aunt Georgy

*A play about the life and times of Charles Dickens.
Now also available as a DVD.*

This is a preview script and can only be used for perusal purposes. A complete version of the script is available from FOX PLAYS with details on the final page.

The life of Georgina Hogarth

[A sister-in-law of Charles Dickens]



Georgina Hogarth [Aunt Georgy] was a younger sister of Catherine Dickens the wife of the famous novelist Charles Dickens. Georgina lived with her sister and brother-in-law for many years, cared for their children, ran their house and was with the great man when he died.

The Script

Most, if not all, of the events in this play took place. Apart from the excerpts from plays, novels, books, articles and letters, the dialogue and plot are invented.

Reviews of *Aunt Georgy*

Aunt Georgy at Labassa offered audiences a very rewarding combination; an outstanding performance by Eileen Nelson as Aunt Georgy; a strong script by Cenarth Fox; and a wonderful setting in a mid-Victorian mansion that might have been built to house such a presentation.

Eileen's performance was virtually flawless. She was entirely convincing as she recounted her experiences in association with Dickens, from late childhood through to becoming housekeeper at Gad's Hill, and subsequently guardian of Dickens's reputation. Her account was by turns an exciting narrative, a confession, an accusation and a eulogy. In addition to acting out Aunt Georgy's story, Eileen supplemented the narrative with recreations of Dickens's own experiences. Especially memorable was her rendering of Dickens performing "Sikes and Nancy".

Cenarth Fox is to be congratulated for his reconstruction of Georgina Hogarth's life. As far as I could tell there was nothing in the script that could not be documented – nothing that was fanciful or obviously invented. He skillfully picked out the compelling and significant moments in Georgina's life, incidentally giving us fresh insight into the character of Dickens while at the same time supplying a narrative which was in itself an enthralling story, with moments of humour and pathos, triumph and tragedy.

Labassa made, as ever, a wonderful theatre. For this show there was no need to interpose a set between the audience and the wonderful fireplace and mantelpiece. This made the auditorium slightly more capacious than usual I should imagine that the company would wish to take Labassa with them wherever they perform. But, wherever they perform, they will give great pleasure to their audiences.

A large number of Dickensians and their friends attended and I think, went away regarding the show as one of the best Dickensian things to have come their way in a very long time.

Alan Dilnot

The Dickens Newsletter Melbourne April 2010

What a complete and utter triumph!!!! The audience sat spellbound during the amazing performance of *Aunt Georgy*. **The Dickens Fellowship**

A wonderful theatrical experience, *Aunt Georgy* was brilliantly written and Eileen Nelson was marvellous. **Southern FM**

An intriguing and enjoyable insight into the life of Charles Dickens. Eileen Nelson gives a superb portrayal of Georgy.

Melbourne Observer - Cheryl Threadgold

It's an absolutely stunning performance by Eileen, and a brilliant piece of writing by Cenarth. Congratulations! **Strathmore Theatre Arts Group**

An exceedingly interesting and charming piece of theatre that captures you from the moment Aunt Georgy makes her entrance. It's truly a tour de force performance that embraces the audience with charm and considerable ability. The audience was completely engrossed and showed their pleasure with their applause. The well-researched script is always interesting and informative. It's an excellent production and highly recommended. **Curtain Up**

Aunt Georgy is a wonderful piece of entertainment. **David Creedon**

We were privileged to have launched *Aunt Georgy* at the mansion. It was such a successful production. Written by Cenarth Fox and performed by Eileen Nelson, this was outstanding entertainment. Eileen's capacity to engage the audience and Cen's ability to tell an interesting story resulted in the much deserved standing ovation for Eileen. Both are to be congratulated on their achievement and are thanked sincerely for their contribution to the cultural life at Labassa.

Friends of Labassa

Aunt Georgy

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Plays about Charles Dickens

Aunt Georgy is one of two stage works about Charles Dickens written by Cenarth Fox. The other is *Boz* a musical about the life and times of the great novelist.

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Introduction

Charles Dickens was a prolific writer. His work, particularly his novels, became hugely popular in his lifetime and remains internationally renowned today. In praise of great English writers, Dickens and Shakespeare are often bracketed together.

It was not uncommon in Victorian times for a younger sister of a bride to live with her brother-in-law and his wife. Dickens married Catherine Hogarth and her younger sister Mary moved in with the newlyweds. Mary died soon after. Several years later, Georgina Hogarth, another of Catherine's younger sisters took on the role first played by her sister Mary.

Georgina Hogarth never married, became a helpmate to her sister Catherine who bore Dickens ten children, and a housekeeper/nanny to this family. Georgina became a co-executor of the will of Charles Dickens, edited a collection of his letters and had an intimate view of the comings and goings in the Dickens household.

Dickens once said of Georgina, "No man on earth ever had such a friend as I have had – and have – in her. She is the most unselfish, zealous and devoted creature".

Script Notes

The headings in caps throughout the script are not to be spoken. They are points of reference and exist to assist with rehearsals.

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Character

Georgina – a spinster, aged between 60 and 85. If the play is set in 1887, Georgina will be 60. If the play is set in 1907, she will be 80. Dickens died in 1870, Georgina in 1917.

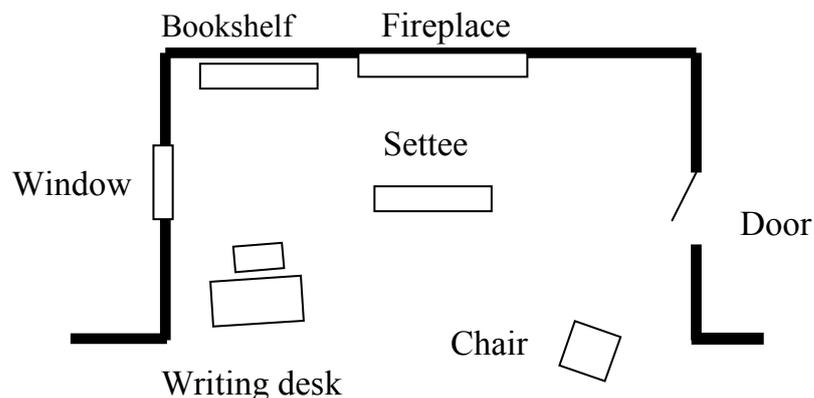
Georgina appears in paintings and photographs. Like her sister Catherine, Georgina was short though not as rounded. In fact Georgina was nimble of foot and one of the few females able to keep up with Dickens on his many long walks. Within the Dickens household, Georgina was both nanny and housekeeper and more besides. She became the most important figure in the domestic life of the family Dickens. With their mother often pregnant or poorly, the many children of Charles and Catherine were kept in line by their Aunt Georgy. She was at times a secretary to Dickens, a de facto mother to his children and a helpmate to her sister. She declined at least one marriage proposal to remain a fulltime member of the family Dickens. She figured prominently in the troublesome times when Charles and Catherine separated, she was involved intimately in the scandal of Charles's private life and she was with the great man when he died. She edited the publication of many of his letters after his death and survived her brother-in-law by almost fifty years. She was a lively woman, a pianist and a mimic and acted in some of the amateur theatricals for which Dickens had such a passion.

Accent, Appearance and Costumes

Georgina was born in Scotland and moved to England when quite young. [Halifax, Yorkshire and then London]. It is assumed she had a middle-class English accent. From photographs and paintings, we can establish her dress. This is a period piece set, depending on age of Georgina in the play, from 1887 to say 1912. Georgina died in 1917. The full dress of Victorian times would still have been worn by older women and black was a common shade.

Set Design

Georgina moved a number of times in her final years and was at one stage alone with a maid in a small London house. Her £8000 inheritance [from the will of Dickens] ran low towards the end of her life but she was cared for by at least one of her nephews and was comfortable. The play is set in her sitting-room which is tastefully furnished without being grandiose. She needs access to a collection of books many of which were written by her famous brother-in-law. Some are on her writing desk or table and some are upstage in a bookshelf. She needs a comfortable sitting chair. If a settee is in place it could be the one on which her brother-in-law lay dying nearly 50 years ago. Cut flowers are in abundance.



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[Before the play begins appropriate music of the period is played. The set is dimly lit. When the play is about to begin, slowly fade the house lights and music and RAISE LIGHTS TO DAY TIME INTERIOR. The weather outside is mild. GEORGINA enters. She has some guests in her living-room. Like so many others, they have come to see and hear the woman who knew so much about Charles Dickens, his family, friends and his writing. She is living history and the last 'older' link with the novelist. GEORGINA addresses her guests directly and so the audience has become this small gathering. Apologising, GEORGINA speaks as she enters and heads to her chair]

INTRODUCTION

Oh I do apologise. I have a new maid and wanted to be sure she has everything just right for high tea. *[Smiles]* It's lovely to see you all.

[She sits with a little difficulty as she is a mature, if not, elderly woman]

Now do forgive me if I sit a while. I'm no longer the sprightly spinster who kept up with that famous walker.

Oh and can you all hear me? *[They can]* Good. I've never had a loud voice which is why I didn't perform in Manchester. *[Smiles]* But that's another story.

So then, I think we both know why you're here; it's because my sister married Charles Dickens. That's what makes me an item of curiosity. If Catherine hadn't married Charles, today I'd be Miss Anonymous or Mrs. Nobody.

These days I read, write letters and enjoy flowers. *[Indicates her room with its flowers]* My extravagance with blooms makes my finances a touch Micawberish.

But enough about me; let's talk Dickens.

[Serious, sad] Actually it's a bitter sweet time. I love reminiscing about his life and work and not a day passes when I don't think about Charles *[Reminisces]* I miss him.

[Snaps out of her melancholy mood]

[Vague wave of room] I have many of his books and letters. It's true that there are more than 14,000 letters extant many of which I edited for publication.

[Looks around] Where is that maid?

[She could give a small bell a ring. Back to her friends] I'm hoping there'll be some nice biscuits with our tea. *[Smiles at her guests]*

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FIRST MEETING

[Georgina born 1827, died 1917. First met Dickens in 1837. Went to live with Dickens in 1842 when she was 15. If play is set in 1907, it would be 70 years since their first meeting]

Now let's begin with our first meeting. Would you believe it was 70 years ago?
[Change the date according to the year in which play is set which is set by the age of the actress playing GEORGINA]

I was 10, a slip of a girl, whereas Mister Dickens was a terribly old 23. He worked for a newspaper with my father which was how Charles and Catherine met. She too was terribly old, *nineteen*, and after the couple began walking out, it was time to meet our potential brother-in-law.

We sat in our drawing-room in Chelsea where Catherine and my mother couldn't stop talking about *Mister Dickens*. It was confusing for a wee lassie like me so I piped up with what I considered a most sensible question.

[Imitating herself as a child] "Is Catherine getting married?"

Well, talk about a conversation-stopper. Had I stolen the Crown jewels? Only my dear father remained calm.

[Imitating George Hogarth, a Scot] "Now Georgina, remember that young ladies may only speak when spoken to." *[As herself]* Oh dear.

So, suitably chastened, I sat in silence awaiting the arrival of my sister's new beau.

I waited. We *all* waited. *[Hand to ear]* I listened for the door bell. Silence.

[She suddenly rises and heads to window. She speaks dramatically to embellish the action, speaking as she moves]

Suddenly the French windows sprang open.

We watched spellbound as a dashing young sailor burst into the room.

[GEORGINA keeps talking over the music]

FX *A few bars of a sailor's hornpipe plays*

He began to whistle a hornpipe and, as he did ... *[She dances a hornpipe across the room as well as an octogenarian can]* he danced ... around ... the room.

[She finishes with a flourish as the music stops. Then she breaks her pose]

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Then, in a trice, he was gone and I'm sure my father's eyes were laughing.

But was that Catherine's young man? He was a journalist, not a sailor. I was in shock and, what was worse; [*Annoyed*] I wasn't allowed to speak.

Then came a door knock [*GEORGINA taps on the table*] and in strode Charles John Huffam Dickens. He'd changed from his sailor's outfit, shook hands with everyone and never once stopped laughing.

[She heads back to her chair and sits a trifle puffed]

It's impossible to forget my first meeting with the man who turned my world upside down.

MARRIAGE, MARY and FAME

Catherine and Charles were married and my sister Mary, who was 15, went to live with them. In those days, a younger sister of the bride moved in with the newlyweds to help run the house and be on hand when the children arrived.

And arrive they did as Catherine became, well, a baby machine. Looking back there seems to have been little time when she *wasn't* with child. In the siblings-having-children-stakes, it became Catherine 10, [*Softer, slower*] Georgina....

[She snaps out of it and continues]

Now you all know Charles became a famous novelist but perhaps not how quickly.

He was 24 when he married and had been writing short stories but with his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, success exploded.

His novels appeared in instalments and when the loveable character Sam Weller – or Vella as Sam would say – bobbed up in Chapter 10 of *The Pickwick Papers*, it became a sensation.

There were no copyright laws so people wrote stories about Sam; he appeared in plays and there were even Sam Weller dolls and knick knacks.

[GEORGINA is excited thinking back to those halcyon days]

My brother-in-law was feted as the world of literature hailed their brave new hero. Back in the humble Hogarth home, we were buzzing with news of Catherine's young husband. I became an auntie when Charles Dickens Junior was born but even that wonderful news was overrun by the literary triumphs of his father.

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The newspapers acclaimed the wit and wisdom of Charles Dickens and we basked in the glory of our brilliant novelist. My sister Mary gave us all the inside gossip.

DEATH OF MARY

[She stops and is quiet. She moves to her desk to pick up a copy of The Pickwick Papers]

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”

Charles wrote those words towards the end of his life. But *[Indicating novel]* it was during *The Pickwick Papers* we suffered a tragic loss, my dear sister Mary died.

She was 17, bright, happy and dearly loved. Parents should never outlive their children.

I was distraught, Catherine cried for days and my parents were inconsolable. But our grief combined was nothing to that of Charles. He was devastated. *[Indicates novel]* *The Pickwick Papers* missed its deadline and *Oliver Twist* was put aside.

[She picks up letter from desk]

Charles had extraordinary feelings for his young sister-in-law. *[Reading]*

“I wish you could know how I miss that pleasant smile and those sweet words. Thank God she died in my arms and I solemnly believe that so perfect a creature never breathed. She had not a fault.”

[Puts down letter] When Mary died, Charles removed a ring from her finger and kept it for the rest of his life. He had a locket of her hair as a keepsake, would lay out her clothes in remembrance and chose the words on her headstone.

*Young, Beautiful and Good
God in His mercy numbered her among His angels
At the early age of seventeen*

He wanted to be buried in her vault and it was only when my brother died a few years later that Charles withdrew his request.

[Brighter] He was always a romantic. Over the years he fell in love with several women ... *young* women.

Some say his character of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is Mary. My sister was pure and noble and died before her time.

FX *Children playing*

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GEORGINA BECOMES A NANNY

[GEORGINA returns to her chair]

But life moved on; Charles continued being famous, Catherine continued having children and Mr and Mrs Dickens were invited to America.

Their four young children were cared for by friends but a budding young nanny stood waiting in the wings. I called often to see my nephews and nieces. *[Fade FX]*

And when Charles and Catherine returned, their four darling children sang the praises of their favourite Aunt Georgy. Charles was a star in America and at 15, I was a star in London. I moved in and stayed for almost 30 years.

THE TIDY CHARLES DICKENS

And my goodness did life change for Georgina Hogarth. *[A touch intimate]* My family home was somewhat on the untidy side with dust everywhere, cushions out of place, bills not paid on time and meals eaten at all hours.

Not so in my sister's abode where I served under Sergeant-Major Dickens otherwise known as Mr Meticulous. Cleanliness next to godliness, meals prepared and served like clockwork, bills paid religiously on time and anything not put back in its rightful place meant bread and water for a week and, for a second offence, *[She slaps a table or chair - threateningly]* transportation to the colonies.

Charles Dickens turned me into the world's tidiest housekeeper. *[Indicates]* Go on. Look around. I'm *still* Miss Tidy Drawers.

[Hops up to inspect for dust. Points outside] There are specks of dust in that street terrified to set foot in this room. Every book, letter and knick-knack is in place and London tradesman can stake their life on me paying my bills on time.

THE PLAYFUL CHARLES DICKENS

[Stops, she thinks she's giving the wrong impression]

Oh but please don't think that life with the family Dickens was all sobriety and silence; hardly. We had noisy children, noisy dinner parties, noisy games, noisy celebrations and very noisy entertainment. And why?

Charles Dickens. *He* was the cutup, creator, conductor and court jester all rolled into one.

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[She prepares to perform. She moves to sit but keeps talking as she does so]

He called me and Catherine his ‘pair of petticoats’. We sat *[Mimes needlepoint]* performing our needlepoint. *[Indicates the imaginary children]* The four young children there on the floor. And then the novelist would come alive in a return season of the Sailor’s Hornpipe.

In November it was ... *[She rises and imitates Dickens]*

*Please to remember!
The fifth of November
For Gunpowder treason and plot;
I see no good reason
Why Gunpowder treason
Ever should be forgot.*

And then his poetry. *[She recites a la Dickens]*

*Lord Bateman vos a noble Lord,
A noble Lord of high degree;
He shipped his-self all aboard of a ship,
Some foreign country for to see.*

*He sail-ed east, he sail-ed vest,
Until he came to famed Tur-key,
Vere he vos taken, and put to prisin,
Until his life was quite wea-ry.*

[She sits and rests. She too is a trifle weary]

What fun, what happiness, what joy, what pleasure, peace and love ... what *life!*
[Slower] If only we knew what lay beyond the horizon.

FX Brahms lullaby *[GEORGINA talks over it]*

THE RELIGIOUS CHARLES DICKENS

Catherine was expecting, Charles was away so the children and I were inseparable. I taught them to read and write and if one cried in the night, I would attend. At bedtime, I knelt with them to say *[She kneels as she did some 60 years ago]* a prayer written by their father.

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'Pray God make me kind to my nurses and servants and to all beggars and poor people and let me never be cruel to any dumb creature; and pray God to bless and preserve us all this night and for ever, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.'
[Rises and goes to fetch book]

Charles was religious without being a true believer. *[Takes up book]* And this is unique - a novel written by Charles Dickens which has never seen the light of day.

He wrote *The Life of Our Lord* for his children and made me promise to never let it out of the house. When I die I shall leave it to the last of his children. *[She reads]*

My dear children, I am very anxious that you should know something about the History of Jesus Christ. No one ever lived, who was so good, so kind, so gentle, and so sorry for all people who did wrong. And as he is now in heaven, where we hope to go, you never can think what a good place Heaven is, without knowing who he was and what he did.

[Puts down book and is concerned she again has given the wrong impression]

Oh dear. Father Charles. The Reverend Dickens. *[Laughing]* Not a bit; he loved life and we all lived like lords. On summer evenings Catherine and I would take a carriage to Hampstead Heath, pick wildflowers, stop for refreshments and trot home with the setting sun.

HOLIDAYS

FX *Sounds of children playing, beach sounds*

On holidays the whole family adored the beach where the children built sandcastles and took thrilling donkey rides as Charles wrote in our nearby cottage.

Back home there were parties, games and endless, joyful fun. *[Fade FX]*

But whatever we did or where, nothing would stop the world's busiest man writing. And at night as the household slept, in weather fair or foul, he walked the darkened streets of London; ten, fifteen, twenty miles with ideas, stories, people and places buzzing inside his brain. He heard accents, saw crime, pain and poverty and tasted life.

His writing bloomed, his fame, social circle and entertaining expanded and with Catherine constantly expectant, at age 17, I took over.

Aunt Georgy – 11

FX *Piano music of well-known Italian song or horse and cart and people*

[Her memories grow even happier and she ever more excited]

TRIP TO ITALY

And then came my first trip abroad. We went to Italy in a huge carriage *[Indicating]* about the size of this room. What a party.

There was Charles, Catherine, me, five children, four servants, a courier and Timber the dog. We arrived in Genoa where Charles rented a crumbling pink villa.

He had a piano brought in so I could play and only when the rats and fleas took over did we move to a nearby palace. It was enormous with Charles declaring, “It’s four times the size of Whitehall”. *[Fade FX]*

As you read his novels you may wonder about the source of his plots. I’ll tell you. His books are full of adventure because his *life* was full of adventure. He took risks and the excitement in his stories comes from the excitement in his life.

Here’s proof. The average tourist in Italy visits art galleries, churches and wineries. Not Charles Dickens. He climbed Mount Vesuvius.

And imagine my shock when he announced we would *all* make the climb and at sunset so the darkness could best show off the fiery red belly of the smoking beast. Thank goodness the children were safely back in Genoa.

So from a pleasant picnic on Hampstead Heath, Catherine and I progressed to leaping the lava flows of an active volcano. *[Shaking her head]* I remember thinking, is this normal for a nanny?

Of course with Charles everything had to be done in style so the climb involved 22 guides, six pack horses and an armed guard.

FX *Lighting dims, eerie sounds begins*

[She acts out the event]

Half a league, half a league, half a league onward and at the snow line, Catherine and I were transferred to litters as we moved up an almost perpendicular slope. It was dark, cold and terrifying.

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[Gives a travelling tip] Now ladies, if you ever plan such a trip, I should inform you the slopes of Mount Vesuvius do not have a single public convenience.

[Back to the tale] As we lurched up the mountain I longed for the donkey rides on the beach at Broadstairs. We stopped a hundred yards from the summit. Thank heavens we could now begin the descent. But oh no, not our intrepid adventurer. He had to see *inside* the volcano. Did he not know in the last twenty years, Mount Vesuvius had erupted three times? *[1822, 1834, 1839]*

FX *Add roar of explosion but eerie sounds continue*

He disappeared into the mist. It was like a London pea-souper with lashings of soot. Catherine and I were dressed in the finest Italian fashion – *[Indicates foul smell]* sulphur-crested bonnet with matching cinders and lace.

Finally a grinning Charles returned. *[Imitating Dickens]* “I have seen the heart of an active volcano.” His hair and clothes were alight in several places and his face resembled an excited monkey on Guy Fawkes Night.

[Makes grinning face then shakes head in disbelief] Did I mention he was mad?

Finally the descent. *[She demonstrates as she speaks]* It was pitch black, the ice treacherous and on foot, we inched down in single file. I held hands with the head guide in front and Charles behind. Suddenly a scream *[FX Scream or GEORGINA could add scream]* and the guide slipped *[Indicates her hand]* out of my hand and plunged into the darkness. Then another fell and a third. I froze. I literally could not move. The night air was full of acrid burning, the ground was icy and would the madness of King Charles kill the sisters Hogarth?

FX *Fade FX and return lighting to normal*

[Shakes her head in disbelief at her bad memories of the climb]

We returned to civilization. Two of the fallen survived but we never knew about the third. Charles was elated at his mountaineering triumph but a new sadness was about to dawn.

MARRIAGE SADNESS

[Sad reminiscing] He befriended an English woman in Genoa. Catherine complained. Then we met the woman in Rome and she travelled with us back to Genoa. Catherine took a vow of silence.

Aunt Georgy – 13

There was clearly no need to be jealous and Charles was embarrassed. He worried about her state of mind; [*Shake of the head*] a portent of things to come.

Finally we returned to London where the Dickens ritual continued. Charles wrote and Catherine was delivered of baby number 6, a son called Alfred named after ‘Half a league’ Tennyson.

GEORGINA - THE NANNY AND HOSTESS

[*Returns to her chair*]

And speaking of names, you know my brother-in-law invented some 2000 characters to populate his novels but did you know he invented nicknames for his children?

Number 6, Alfred, was Skittles and some others were Chicken Stalker, Young Skull, Lucifer Box, Mild Glos'ter and Flasher Floby.

So I ran the house and with Catherine indisposed, I replaced her at dinner parties.

Then with publishing matters Charles would instruct people to “Write to my little housekeeper, Miss Hogarth”. [*Indignant*] Little housekeeper! I was *so* busy.

ITALY AGAIN AND PARIS

And no-one could keep up with our Mr. Dickens. He ordered *another* Italian holiday. This time Charles travelled with six children, four servants, two nurses, his wife, sister-in-law and the dog.

It was two years since the unforgettable Mount Vesuvius and this time Charles took his pair of petticoats on a short trip - ten hours, on mules, across the Alps. *The Alps!*

He wanted to experience life and share it with others. Did he know that ladies prefer carriages, donkeys are for children and his wife was with child for the *seventh* time?

On our way back to England we stopped in Paris where Catherine was exhausted. Charles and I strolled the boulevards admiring the shops and cafes. By now I had met many of his friends and acquaintances and found I could mimic people including a titled lady, who shall forever remain anonymous.

[*GEORGINA mimics toffy woman in exaggerated fashion; an eccentric Joyce Grenfell?*]

Aunt Georgy – 14

“Tell me, Mr. Dickens, does your brain ever run out of words? Is your head ever empty? Hmmm? Well? Well?”

What a sight. There on some Parisian street, the world famous novelist doubled over with hysterical laughter with tears rolling down his cheeks.

Whatever else Charles Dickens could do, he could laugh; at others and always at himself. In Paris he went to change currency and I offered to handle the transaction, my French being superior. “Non, non”, snapped Charles. We entered a bank where Monsieur Dickens addressed the teller.

[She imitates Dickens with his not-so brilliant French]

Bonjour. Je m'appelle Charles Dickens and je voudrais echanger ces dix livres sterling pour des francs. Vous pouvez executer une telle tache?

A pause. The teller smiled and replied. ‘Certainly, Mr. Dickens. Will that be all?’

[She laughs remembering the scene] In the street we fell about in gales of laughter.

[Smiles as she fondly remembers. Sighs]

They were halcyon times for a young woman. I should have been at home listening to my father playing the violoncello while waiting for Mister Right. Instead I was travelling the world with its most famous novelist.

Later I thought of the pitiful comparison. Charles was famous and brimming with life while the expectant Catherine was morose and alone. *[Serious question]* Should I have been with her? Was I too busy enjoying myself to notice my sister’s sadness?

CATHERINE or GEORGINA?

Back home, Charles was constantly in demand. Suddenly, Catherine had another miscarriage. Charles simply carried on with his hectic schedule and a short time later Catherine was again with child.

Each confinement seemed harder to bear. Did Charles notice? He was never busier - writing, editing, parties, banquets, theatre nights. And with his wife weary and expecting, the novelist would introduce his housekeeper.

[Imitating her brother-in-law] “I’m afraid Mrs. Dickens is hardly presentable. May I present my sister-in-law, Miss Hogarth.”

Aunt Georgy – 15

Soon Charles was telling everyone I was wonderful with the children, a superb housekeeper and stimulating companion. And all the while, his wife, my sister, lay belly swollen and bellyaching.

Was Charles controlling my life? Did he prevent me from marrying because I had become indispensable?

AUGUSTUS EGG

Now let's be clear about this. I am a spinster by choice and one suitor I rejected was a Mr. Augustus Egg. Charles encouraged the courtship but unlike Barkus, I was just *not willin'*. I mean imagine the teasing had I become Missus Egg.

Augustus was a wonderful painter and I sat for him with my portrait hung in the Royal Academy. But I was concerned by his stature. He was well named. Small and round and I could never accept a man who stood on a box in order to kiss me.

Catherine gave birth to Dora, her third daughter and baby number 9 as Charles became serious about staging plays with his friends and family.

One year I played the leading lady with the diminutive Augustus Egg as leading man. Who could resist a lover who wooed like so?

[Imitates Augustus Egg wooing her in a play. Does she stand on a footstool?]

"You are ripe for a husband; and a minute's loss to such an occasion is a great trespass in a wise beauty".

[Aside] They don't write love scenes like that any more.

CATHERINE THE ACTRESS and the DEATH OF DORA

Our plays became so successful we toured to magnificent aristocratic houses. But amidst all this jollity, a domestic disaster loomed large.

Charles tried to help his heartbroken wife and cast her in a play as Lady Clutterbuck. She had one immortal line. *[Imitates her sister]* "Certainly, sir".

Alas the world never saw her thespian talents as she sprained an ankle and retired from the stage forever.

Aunt Georgy – 16

She went downhill. She hated the fun of our plays. She was called Lady Clutterbuck behind her back and detested Charles flirting with young actresses. She complained of dizzy spells and dimness of sight.

Charles responded with a firm hand. He sent his pair of petticoats to a spa for the ‘vigorous discipline of exercise, air and cold water’. *Cold* was apt. We were sisters separated by the same man. I missed the social and theatrical whirl and Catherine missed her baby, Dora.

We passed the time in polite indifference.

Then a letter from Charles. Terrible news. Baby Dora stricken with grave illness. Return at once. Prepare for worst.

We were too late. Dora, the darling infant, had slipped away and Catherine was drowning in grief. Her mental health was at risk and Charles, as always, worked harder.

TAVISTOCK HOUSE

He bought a big London home, Tavistock House, with space for his Christmas theatricals. He supervised the renovations and chose the furniture, curtains and carpets. He uprooted plants from his previous garden and had them replanted in the new one.

He chose the decorating colours. Poor Catherine tried to help but finished up with paint on her clothes prompting Charles to say that his wife was “...falling into fits of imbecility”. Was Mrs Dickens a real life Mrs Rochester? Did Charles plan to lock *her* in some attic?

Here was a true yet unknown drama of Dickensian proportions. The world famous author was, according to him, married to an imbecile.

CATHERINE HAS TEN

So Charles was busy, I was busy and Catherine was busy having her tenth baby and seventh son, Edward, known as The Plornishgenter.

Catherine had now equalled her mother’s score of 10 babies. I helped lower the family average.

Aunt Georgy – 17

Charles wanted his sons to do well and his daughters to be happy. I remember child number 5, Francis Jeffrey Dickens, had a stammer and every morning would enter his father's study for a lesson with Doctor Dickens. I would hear ...

[Imitates young son]

*This r r royal throne of k k kings, this s s scepter'd isle,
This earth of m m majesty, this seat of M M Mars*

Which, eventually became

*This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars*

And like Shakespeare, Charles was a prolific writer.

GEORGINA IN THE NOVELS

[She picks up one or two novels] He finished *David Copperfield* and began *Bleak House* and as I read those novels I had an eerie feeling. Was that me in his books?

The kind things he said about me, he said about Agnes Wickfield. And then Esther Summerson was a hard-working, kind-hearted young woman who had been a constant companion to young children. Was that me? Then Esther's guardian told her to try and find love and not spend her whole life looking after others.

Was that Charles telling me to stop being nanny, housekeeper, bookkeeper, confidant and friend? Did he want me to marry and leave?

I was flattered but confused. I dared not ask and he never said a word. It seemed the whole world was reading novels about me.

FX *Christmas music*

CHRISTMAS THEATRICALS

But I had little time to ponder such matters because Charles had me performing in his latest Christmas show.

The novelist became playwright, performer, director, stage manager and entrepreneur *[Fade FX]* with the theatre programme announcing, "Miss Hogarth will preside in the orchestra". 'Twas me and the piano.

Aunt Georgy – 18

The show went on for days. With the world's most famous novelist in charge, you can imagine the publicity. It was family and friends on stage but backstage was genuine theatre royalty.

[She counts them off on her fingers]

Dresses by Nathan of Titchbourne Street, wigs by Wilson of the Strand, props from Mr. Ireland of the Adelphi Theatre and you should have seen the scenery.

Clarkson Stanfield designed for Drury Lane. He was a member of the Royal Academy, his maritime paintings are universally admired and this great artist designed and painted *our* scenery.

FX *Sounds of the sea*

But there was no standing on ceremony. *[She moves to one side imitating the stagehand's actions]* In one scene, the script called for sea spray so there in the wings stood the hugely talented Clarkson Stanfield, R.A., tossing sea salt through his own scenery. *[Fade FX]*

We had proper stage lighting and sound effects, music composed especially and the theatre programmes were more flamboyant than many books.

The audiences were all hand-picked and included London's leading poets, publishers, authors, critics, barristers, judges, members of parliament, ambassadors, ladies of high society and equerries to Queen Victoria. The plays were an enormous success with admission by hand-written invitation and *[Wringing her hand]* no prize for guessing who penned the lot.

The fun was extraordinary, the love between Charles, his children and friends overflowed but *[Sombre]* just beneath the surface bubbled the troubled marriage. I knew the real story.

HOGARTHS FIGHT CHARLES

Catherine fell into deep despair wanting to leave the family home. I begged her to stay. *[Acts out the scene]* "Oh Catherine, please, you cannot go. Imagine the public scandal." *[Serious thinking]* But was I more interested in saving my own position?

Charles was *always* a walker but now made even longer journeys to escape the unhappy house. Sooner or later things would come to a head and they did when we went abroad and my parents stayed at Tavistock House.

Aunt Georgy – 19

[Shaking her head] The dust took root with accounts unpaid. Upon his return Charles was furious. His fastidious ways had been trampled. He immediately settled the accounts and he and the butler scrubbed the house from top to bottom. My mother was livid.

The joy in my life was banished by the Dickens Hogarth hatred. We needed a major distraction.

THE FROZEN DEEP

And it came in the form of a play by Charles's friend Wilkie Collins. We performed *The Frozen Deep* and I played the role of Lucy Crayford.

Charles wrote a stirring solo speech for himself. Did I tell you he loved to act?

The marriage woes were put aside as rehearsals dominated. We even had set builders and actors move in as boarders. It was bedlam.

The Frozen Deep told of an ill-fated voyage to the Arctic where two men are lost in the wintery wilderness. Both men love Clara who made her choice. Charles played the rejected lover, a noble man who sacrificed his life for love.

I watched him at rehearsals. Was he playing himself? Was he an honourable man enduring a loveless marriage? Was art imitating life?

We performed for those lofty London citizens and *The Frozen Deep* was a triumph. Next thing we were summoned – a royal command performance.

FX God Save the Queen *played under the next speech*

There I was, the unknown nanny performing for Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Anonymous Aunt Georgy acting for the crown heads of Britain, Belgium and Prussia. And more amazing still, they loved us.

After the performance, the monarch requested an audience with Charles who refused until he had removed his makeup and changed his costume. The Queen of England was kept waiting by the boy from the blacking warehouse.

Now some people say that Dickens never did anything unless it was for his own benefit. *[Shaking her head]* That is tosh!

Aunt Georgy – 20

His friend, the writer Douglas Jerrold, died leaving a widow and children. Charles immediately arranged for additional performances of *The Frozen Deep* with all money given to the widow. Sadly the funds were not enough.

So, never-say-die Dickens chose the massive Manchester Free Trade Hall where vast crowds saw him perform as the doomed hero. I remember it well.

FX *Lights change to suggest scene of play, appropriate music plays. Icy wind effects. GEORGINA enacts the ending of the play.*

[As Narrator] *The Frozen Deep* ends on the icy coast of Newfoundland. Clara has sailed to Canada to find Frank, her true love. But Frank and his rival Richard are missing. Richard hates his rival and alone in the frozen deep, has the opportunity to murder him. Has he? *[Build tension]* Suddenly a wild madman bursts into the hut. It is the deranged Richard played by Charles Dickens.

[As Richard] “I am a starving man. Pray throw me some bones from the table. Give me my share along with the dogs. *[He makes wild gesture]* I can't get the wash of the sea out of my ears. Let me eat!”

[Looks around and sees women] “Women among you! Are they English? Are they young?” *[Moves to inspect them]*

“I seek a young woman, with a fair sad face, with kind tender eyes, with a soft clear voice. I must wander -- restless, sleepless, homeless -- till I find her!”

[As Narrator] Then Clara realises the wild man is Richard, the man who swore to kill her Frank. Oh no! He's killed her lover! *[Pointing at the imaginary Frank]* Clara accuses Richard of murder than collapses. Richard leaves but returns carrying his rival. Frank is alive thanks solely to the courage and sacrifice of Richard.

Clara and Frank are reunited as Richard is about to die.

[As RICHARD, dying] “I have saved him -- I have saved him for you! I may rest now.”

“I may lay down my weary head on the mother earth. My eyes are dim -- I have lost all memories, but the memory of her.”

[Props himself up for one last time] “My mind clears. *[Beckons]* Nearer, Clara -- I want to look my last at you. Clara! -- Kiss me, kiss me before I die!”

FX *Ship's gun*

Aunt Georgy – 21

[As NARRATOR] The ship's gun signaled the return to England.

[LIGHTS RESUME. She steps out of character and is GEORGINA]

[As herself] And as Charles performed his death scene, he held the audience of three thousand in the palm of his hand. Sobbing was clearly heard. A large sum was raised and given to the widow and her children.

The press was effusive. *[Announcing]* “Mr. DICKENS shows that he is not only a great Novelist, but also a great Actor.”

But I was not on stage in Manchester. My voice was considered too soft for such a vast arena. I was replaced by a professional actress, Ellen Lawless Ternan. Now there's quite a lot I can tell you about young Nelly Ternan. She was definitely a ...

FX *Door knock*

[GEORGINA is interrupted. She looks around and calls]

Come in. *[Silence. Nothing. Calling to offstage]* Is that you, Mary? *[Silence. Nothing]*
[To audience] Do please excuse me.

[She goes to door and speaks to maid who is offstage. GEORGINA returns to audience]

I'm afraid being new she's somewhat shy. But my friends, tea is served. *[They hesitate to move]* We shall take it in the *[Indicates direction]* dining-room, so if you'd please follow me.

[She starts to exit and stops at door]

Do come along, your tea's getting cold.

[She exits. House lights come up and music begins]

End of Act One

Act Two

[House lights dim and pre-act music fades. The same lighting returns and GEORGINA enters with a small plate of biscuits – the same as were served during interval. This business will only work if there is no or little barrier between the stage and the audience]

ELLEN TERNAN

There are still some of Mary's biscuits and we don't want them to go to waste.

[She offers plate to various patrons then places plate somewhere safe and sits]

Now I'm coming to another tricky part in my life with Charles. It involves the actress Nelly Ternan who replaced me when *The Frozen Deep* moved to Manchester. That was how Nelly met Charles.

[Pause] She was not the first young lady he befriended but they did become close; very close.

And in some ways she was just like me. We both were young when we met Mr Dickens and couldn't believe he would take such interest in unknowns.

But *I* knew why Charles lavished time and money on Nelly. His marriage was in turmoil and she helped him forget his woes. As did another new house.

GAD'S HILL

As a wee boy Charles admired Gad's Hill Place and nearly 40 years later he bought it. My did we have some wonderful times in that house.

In summer and at Christmas, Gad's Hill was bursting with cricket-mad boys and friends who came to stay. But what a paradox.

Charles came alive in the Kent countryside yet in that house he worked himself to death. He became a busy actor when at Gad's Hill and when he did, it killed him.

He performed emotional scenes from his novels. He travelled far, at a punishing pace in atrocious weather and acted till he dropped. At Gad's Hill, Catherine and I lived quietly at home.

THE MARRIAGE SPLIT

[This section has a long crescendo as GEORGINA moves from storyteller to re-living what was a powerful emotional experience]

The house had wonderful gardens but Catherine remained indoors. She brooded and bottled up her anger. Something had to give and it did.

[She stands and moves to one side remembering the pain of the incident]

Charles gave a gift to all the actors in his plays and chose a bracelet for Nelly. The jeweller repaired it, thought it was Catherine's and sent it to Gad's Hill. *[Shakes her head]* Catherine collapsed.

She felt betrayed; that her husband was unfaithful. And how could she, a woman who had endured more than 20 years of bearing children compete with a charming and slim, young actress? Catherine accused Charles of adultery and cruelty.

Battle lines were drawn. Charles had his dressing-room door sealed creating a separate bedroom. As enormous crowds flocked to hear the great novelist read his novels on stage, his home life was falling apart.

[Indicating herself] And this humble housekeeper was caught in the crossfire.

From his travels, Charles sent letters. Imagine how I felt when he wrote, "*Love to Mamie, Katey, Charley, Harry and the darling Plorn*" with no mention of their mother. She was my sister, his wife!

Next he was praising me to the heavens.

[Picks up letter and reads]

"Were it not for Georgina, the girls and I could not have managed. She is the active spirit of the house and the children dote upon her."

[Indicates letter] Do you think I could share this with Catherine?

My mother was incensed. She and Charles were never close and he *always* called her 'Mrs. Hogarth'.

Then she attacked *me*. *[As her mother]* "Why are you not doing more for Catherine? Why are you not critical of that monstrous man?" And as the fame, success and wealth of Charles flourished, my life became a living hell.

Aunt Georgy – 24

The bracelet for Nelly was the last straw and my mother attacked Charles.

[Imitates her enraged mother] “Give my daughter her freedom.”

My sister Helen fired poisonous darts at me.

[Repeats the questions and comments made at the time]

[As her sister] “You are still in his confidence, we are despised. You have deserted your family. Why have you taken his side?”

These were some of the saddest days of my life. Little did I know it would soon get far, far worse.

WHY DID THE MARRIAGE FAIL?

Over the years I’ve thought about why the marriage failed. At first Catherine was a lively, attentive and a willing hostess. But she was never fastidious like Charles and probably deserved her nickname of Lady Clutterbuck!

As Charles became famous he attracted leading men in the arts, politics and public life and socially Catherine seemed more provincial than worldly. At one dinner party Charles told how he got up during the night to make notes of an idea buzzing inside his head. Catherine interrupted, giggled and said, *[Imitates Catherine] “Oh yes, and he always has cold feet when he comes back to bed.” [Giggles]*

Of course Charles was far from perfect. Did he not realise that, with so many babies and miscarriages, Catherine was almost always eating for two? After 20 years she was forty, fat and florid – hardly her fault. Had Charles forgotten his wedding day promise of “For better or worse”?

So I faced a choice.

WILL GEORGINA STAY?

Should I should stay at Gad’s Hill? *[She lists the facts]* I listed my thoughts.

I’d been there for 16 years, the children loved me, no-one could be better at my job and I loved it.

And what would I do if I left? Live with my mother? Hardly.

Then the money; Charles provided well for me whereas my father was poor. I'd turned down marriage proposals and at 31, was without suitors.

I just couldn't bring myself to live with Catherine. We were never really close and now she was Mrs. Misery-Guts. It was a deeply sad time for all and the pot of Hogarth hatred began to boil.

A separation agreement was drawn up. Charles would provide his wife with a house and £600 a year for life. Charley would live with his mother and the other children would stay with me and their father at Gad's Hill.

At last. Finally. Peace. Charles stayed in London, Catherine moved to Brighton while I remained at Gad's Hill with the children. The public would never know and life would return to normal. Normal? [*Scoffs*] Ha!

MY MOTHER'S LETTER

[She is emotional and tense as she recalls her darkest hour. Picks up letter]

More like disaster. My mother and my sister Helen wrote Charles a letter making horrendous claims about his intimacy with an actress. No mention of Nelly but we all knew. But that wasn't the half of it.

My mother threatened Charles with action in the Divorce Court. At the time, a wife could seek a divorce on the grounds of incest which then included sexual relations with a sister-in-law.

My own family was accusing Charles of being intimate with me! Imagine my shame.

I was in shock with Charles infuriated. And to think these scurrilous lies emanated from my own flesh and blood. Charles demanded a written retraction for what he called those 'smashing slanders'.

My dear father wrote saying there was no substance to any of the alleged claims. Charles rejected the letter and demanded a retraction. [*As DICKENS*] "It must arrive by Monday or I will not pay Catherine a penny. And the retraction must not mention any sordid details."

MEDICAL EXAMINATION

Sordid details? According to Mr Dickens there was a way to discredit my family's appalling claims. I was to be medically examined. *[Shocked]* I beg your pardon?

According to the world famous novelist, my mother and sister would be damned forever if I were declared *virgo intacta*.

[Sarcastic] Oh well that's all right then. Never mind *my* feelings, *my* indignity. And how appallingly ironic that Charles had a pet nickname for me – the Virgin.

[She recovers – a little]

Suffice to say, the medical examination confirmed my nickname.

My family backed down. My shame and distress were in part relieved. The retraction was written and, thank God, the whole wretched affair was kept secret. Now we could return to a reasonable and peaceful life.

[Emotional and distressed. It's as if someone has just interrupted her with massive news. The memories of the time jolt GEORGINA out of her storytelling mode and transport her back to the time when it happened. She addresses Dickens]

THE DISASTER OF PUBLICITY

You're doing what, Charles? You're writing an article about your marital troubles? *[Aghast]* And you're sending it to *The Times*!

[Returns to storytelling mode but is still emotional]

This was too much. The allegations about Charles and me being lovers were soul-destroying with the one saving grace their secrecy. Now the man who was passionate about privacy, who described his problems as 'sacredly private' was proclaiming his predicament. He was hanging out the dirty Dickens' linen in the middle of Trafalgar Square.

The article could not have been worse. Charles did not name names but referred to 'monstrous lies' and 'innocent persons' so naturally people asked, "What monstrous lies?" "Which innocent persons?"

I could have told them. I was the innocent person and the monstrous lies were all about me!

Before this ... publicity campaign, very few people knew of our domestic woes. Now, thanks to Charles, it became universal gossip.

Suddenly, overnight, my life faced ruin.

The unknown housekeeper, the unheard of nanny, the anonymous walking companion was the star of the scandal. I was too scared to be angry and too angry to be scared.

I needed Charles to stop this appalling publicity but instead, he made it worse.

THE VIOLATED LETTER

He wrote a revealing letter about the events, gave it to his manager asking that it be shown “to any one who wishes to do me right”.

His manager showed the letter to a reporter from the New York *Tribune*.

Soon my humiliation became *international* news. British newspapers joined in. Charles was furious claiming he never wanted this publicity. Well what did he expect? Why tell *anyone* let alone the Press?

He dubbed it the ‘Violated Letter’ and well-named it was. But the only person truly violated in this whole sorry saga was his little housekeeper, Miss Hogarth!

London was awash with salacious tales. Published stories bore no resemblance to the truth.

[Picks up notepad] This from America in *Harpers’ Weekly*. *[Reading]* “To make the affair still more notorious, a young lady, Mrs. Dickens’s sister, has undertaken to ‘keep home’ for Dickens and his daughters.”

[Puts notepad down and explodes]

I’d been there for 16 years. I’d been ‘keeping home’ for Mr. and Mrs. Dickens for half my life!

Of course the American press hated Charles for daring to criticize their country and the evils of slavery.

[Picks up notepad and flicks pages to find article]

Aunt Georgy – 28

But *this* was too much. From the country of my birth, in Glasgow's *Daily Bulletin* appeared an astonishing article. *[Reads]*

"Charles Dickens is the outcry of London. His sister-in-law has given birth to three of his children."

[Sarcastic and angry. It still hurts after all these years]

Only three? I'm sure I had the whole jolly ten! *[Throws down notepad]*

The much-loved Aunt Georgy had gone from wonderful housekeeper and adorable nanny to an incestuous adulteress and the mother of illegitimate children. And there it was in black and white. But that was all right because only *[Louder and despairing]* the whole world knew!

I fell into a trance. I wondered if it were true. Surely I'd remember giving birth.

I was living in a novel by Charles Dickens of harsh, cruel reality with lives and reputations in ruin. Was I one of his fallen women? Lady Dedlock or Martha Endell? And if so, how would my story end?

I despaired over my family's lies, the universal gossip and the shame of being medically examined. But it was bad too for Charles who had a long, long way to fall. Victorian society was adept at condemnation.

LIFE AFTER THE SCANDAL

We took life a day at a time. Would I be shunned and Charles destroyed? He replaced his marital mayhem with work.

He became wildly enthusiastic about reading his novels in public. With no copyright law, these performances meant a new form of income.

But would people want the man who wrote lovingly of family and forgiveness yet who had apparently abandoned his wife and committed incest with his sister-in-law?

Charles set off to perform. I was too nervous to travel. I longed for news and when it came I was dumbfounded.

FX *Tumultuous crowds, clapping, cheering – start soft and build*

He was feted as never before. People offered to pay double the ticket price.

In Glasgow the thunderous applause was staggering. In Dublin men wept openly at the death of young Paul Dombey and women rushed the stage for a petal from the writer's geranium. In Manchester, officials demanded more tickets. In Liverpool they crammed them in with masses turned away. Business boomed in Belfast.

His fame mushroomed as did his bank balance. Life picked up. *[FADE FX]*

HAPPINESS AT HOME AGAIN

[Her previous distress evaporates and her happy demeanour returns]

Gad's Hill took on a life of its own. The backdrops from the London plays were hung in the hallway. A well was dug, the garden developed, we had a croquet lawn, 20 acres of fields and a Swiss Chalet was erected with an access tunnel under the road.

The family came alive. The girls were happy and the house was overrun with boys who seemed to be everywhere in fourteen pairs of creaking boots. We held a sports day and 2000 people came with not one farthing's-worth of damage.

And all of this – the house, garden, indoor and outdoor staff, guests, dinner parties, house parties and more were all under my control. I was working my fingers to the bone and loving every minute.

Charles said I was brilliant and I was now his nanny, housekeeper, bookkeeper, secretary, valet and right hand woman. And he was now a single man.

THE SECRET SCANDAL

Now he was free to pursue female friendships but would he find happiness with young Nelly Ternan? Was he leaving one failed relationship to begin another?

Nelly was uncertain. Here was the world's most feted novelist giving her his undivided attention and affection. How far could she allow their friendship to develop? He was 45, she 18. Victorians believed a man in adultery was displaying his masculinity but an adulterous woman was perverted and likely insane.

Charles craved the love of a woman who would share his passion for literature, theatre and life. But Victorian society would never approve.

Charles was a generous benefactor of the Ternans. He paid for Nelly's sister to study in Italy and provided a house for Nelly and her mother. They spent time in France and Charles even considered taking Nelly on his second trip to America. Fear of the American press put paid to that.

In his letters, Charles gave Nelly a code name and few ever knew about the novelist and the actress. This was the great Dickensian cover-up. Even a fatal train crash in which Charles and Nelly survived brought no news of the couple's relationship.

After Charles died, his friend John Forster wrote the first biography. Nelly Ternan was never mentioned. Then I helped publish hundreds of Charles's letters with nary a mention of Miss Ternan. It was as if she never existed.

His secret love affair has remained a secret. As have many of his good works.

CHARITY OF CHARLES

I could tell dozens of stories about the unknown kindness and generosity of Charles Dickens. You know of Douglas Jerrold and the money raised for his widow and children. Then there was the actor Edward Elston who drowned leaving six daughters and a son. Few know it was Charles Dickens who arranged funds for their upkeep and training for their future careers.

His parents, siblings, children, wife, sister-in-law, friends and servants all enjoyed his abundant generosity with barely a word of publicity.

With the wealthy Miss Burdett-Coutts he created and ran a refuge for fallen women. He spoke at fund-raising events for the poor and destitute. With compassion and love, he rescued and gave new life to many a wretched soul.

And he never slowed down. His constant writing, walking, acting, entertaining and charity continued with alarming speed. But danger lurked in the shadows.

COLLAPSE OF CHARLES

Charles had many aches and pains yet suffered in silence; inflamed kidneys, high blood pressure, heart problems and gout.

His writing never stopped. "Slow down," I said, as did family and friends. His doctors joined the chorus and how did Charles respond? By leaving on another arduous tour of America.

Performing excerpts from his novels consumed him. He adored the huge crowds and their rapturous approval. His bank manager loved it. His rising blood pressure loved it and he had trouble reading the left side of shop signs. He flirted with disaster.

And just as his health worsened, he added spectacular realism to his acting and pushed himself as never before.

FX *Eerie music in preparation for a performance*

He'd rehearse in the grounds at Gad's Hill. There was the world famous novelist striding the meadows, snarling and screaming as the murderous Bill Sikes. What must anyone have thought of this bloodcurdling behavior? He put so much into being Bill Sikes that the stage manager would half-carry Charles to his dressing-room. His performance was truly remarkable.

BILL SIKES

[LIGHTING CHANGES to that of a stage where Dickens is performing. GEORGINA repeats the performance given by Dickens and enacts the fateful scene with as much of the novelist's demonic energy and drama as she can muster]

The girl was lying, half-dressed, upon the bed. He had roused her from her sleep, for she raised herself with a hurried and startled look.

'Get up!' said the man.

'It is you, Bill!' said the girl, with an expression of pleasure at his return.

'It is. Get up.'

There was a candle burning, but the man hastily drew it from the candlestick, and hurled it under the grate. [FX Appropriate CRASH] Seeing the faint light of early day without, the girl rose to undraw the curtain.

'Let it be,' said Sikes, thrusting his hand before her. 'There's enough light for wot I've got to do.'

'Bill,' said the girl, in the low voice of alarm, 'why do you look like that at me!'

PREVIEW ENDS

Performing Rights

If you wish to stage *Aunt Georgy*, you must obtain permission in writing before you commence rehearsals. A show application form can be obtained from FOX PLAYS.

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