Chapter 11

EDWIN LANDSEER

Edwin Landseer, as popular in Victorian art of the nineteenth century as Dickens was in its literature, contributed a single illustration to one of the author's Christmas books. Especially famous for his animal paintings, the artist agreed to portray the Peerybingle’s dog, Boxer, in The Cricket on the Hearth. The mere fact of collaboration between these two celebrities is of greater interest than importance. Indeed, a wealth of anecdotes, here brought together for the first time, surrounds many of their meetings, revealing something of the men, if not their work together. By the time Landseer met Dickens in the late 1830’s, according to one such legend, he already admired his works, and had even incurred the wrath of his old, deaf father by reading Dickens’s fiction to his life class at the Royal Academy. “What’s that book?” the aged Landseer is supposed to have rasped through his speaking trumpet one evening in 1839.

“Oliver Twist,” said Edwin Landseer, in a voice loud enough to reach Trafalgar Square.

“No, it’s about art?”

“No, it’s about Oliver Twist.”

“Let me look at it. Ha! It’s some of Dickens’s nonsense, I see. You’d much better draw than waste your time upon such stuff as that.”

Whether because of such paternal watchfulness, or in spite of it, until 1967 Landseer held the record as the youngest artist ever to have exhibited at the Royal Academy. This early recognition proved well-founded, for Landseer subsequently became one of the most notable painters of his era. Indeed, Dickens felt about Landseer as he did about Maclise; that he could have risen to the top of whatever profession he chose, including that of a writer. Despite his success and his father’s disapproval, the painter not only continued to read Dickens avidly, but befriended him, and, on the one occasion, even illustrated his “nonsense.”

Dickens probably met the painter through the Shakespeare Society, which included in its membership the three Landseer brothers as well as the author’s close artist friends, Cattermole, Maclise, Stanfield, and Frank Stone. Both Dickens and Edwin Landseer were frequent guests at Cattermole’s elegant dinner parties at Clapham Rise. The host’s son long recalled the two Portwiners descending to the studio after dinner to see his father’s canvases. Dickens, his legs wide apart, would gaze at Cattermole’s latest painting with admiration while Landseer stood “slowly oscillating his head with his eyes nearly closed, like a physician over a patient he despairs of,” trying to impress onlookers with his transcendent, if mute, appreciation. The author, his family and friends enjoyed the company of the short but handsome painter (fig. 160), who was, as Forster put it, “all the world’s favorite.” His impeccable manners, talent for mimicry, and the confidence born of early success concealed his bouts of mental instability and preference for genteel society better than they did later on. Dickens also liked Landseer’s brothers: Tom, an artist and an engraver like his father (and also deaf, but far better tempered); and Charles, a less eminent painter than his brother, who eventually became the Keeper of the Royal Academy. The Landseer family was equally attracted to Dickens. Even the father capitulated to his charm, providing him with interesting, if unsolicited, comments based on his first-hand youthful memories of the Gordon Riots while Dickens was composing Barnaby Rudge.

Edwin Landseer’s unprecedented success, both professional and personal, was undoubtedly due in part to the fact that he was an early and abiding favorite of Queen Victoria. He painted pictures of her pets, gave her and Prince Albert lessons in drawing and etching, and contributed, along with Maclise and Stanfield, one of the frescoes on the walls of their summer house at Buckingham Palace. “He certainly is the cleverest artist there is,” asserted the young sovereign,
Fig. 160. Carl Vogel von Vogelstein, Unpublished Portrait of Landseer, July 5, 1834. Graphite. 7½” × 9½” (18 × 24 cm). By permission of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.
who, by the time of Landseer's death, owned "thirty-nine oil paintings of his, sixteen chalk drawings (framed), two frescoes and many sketches." Indeed, the tastes of the House of Hanover may have accounted in part for the continued prominence of animals in Landseer's work; though certainly he displayed a sound first-hand anatomical knowledge of many animals and an unusual empathy in portraying them as, Dickens observed, "every modern picture-gallery, and every print-shop, at home and abroad bears witness" (CP, 1: 634).

Although Landseer probably found it politic to laugh only from afar at Dickens's pretense of demented, frustrated passion for the queen upon her marriage in 1840, he felt no scruples about mocking the author's involvement with his raven, Grip, about whom the author talked as ceaselessly as he once had about his sovereign. Inquiring about Dickens from a mutual friend, according to legend, Landseer remarked, "Alas! He's raven mad!" His pun apparently spread and was distorted, until serious rumors began to circulate that Dickens was out of his mind. The author exhibited mock indignation, but received unexpected amends from the artist within the year. Grip died in 1841 and was replaced by an eagle, as well as a new raven. Dickens needed someone to care for them both in 1844 while he went to the Continent with his family after the financial embarrassments of Martin Chuzzlewit and A Christmas Carol. Landseer volunteered to give the pets "house-room." Dickens's birds could hardly have found a more congenial refuge than the home of an artist whose sympathy with all animals found such constant expression in his works. "O Landseer, who from year to year/ Delight in beasts and birds, and dogs and deer./ And seldom give us any human vermin," Dickens teased the painter in one of his squibs after the manner of Peter Pindar (CP, 2: 305).

Landseer, nicknamed the "little dog boy" by Henry Fuseli because of his precocious ability to paint dogs, later specialized in canine subjects. When Dickens decided to feature the Peerybingles' pet, Boxer, in The Cricket on the Hearth, he naturally approached his friend to portray him, at least once. Landseer, despite or because of the fact he had not attended Dickens's private reading of The Chimes the year before, which apparently hurt the author, agreed to delineate the dog. Initially undecided as to whether he should make a full-page illustration or just a vignette of Boxer alone, the artist ultimately produced a vignette showing a snarling Boxer poised among some packages (one of which, perhaps taking a hint from the initialed parcel in Doyle's scene (I, 184) (fig. 161), is playfully labeled with the author's surname) (II, 230) (fig. 162). Dickens passed the drawing on to Leech, who was eager to follow Landseer's characterization of the dog for his own concluding illustration, which featured the dog dancing with the Peerybingle cat in unusual harmony (III, 276) (fig. 163). Ironically, although the Royal Academician was often faulted for being too sentimental, he made the explicitly "good-natured" dog too savage. In fact, Leech's Boxer (I, 194) (fig. 163), and earlier Boxers by Doyle (I, 184) (fig. 161) and Stanfield (I, 190) (fig. 164), were far better suited to the genial holiday text than Landseer's. Altogether, the picture was "not in this painter's happiest vein," as the Times remarked in an aside. Yet, as far as Dickens and his first common readers were concerned, Landseer's prestigious signature alone justified its presence in this Christmas book.

This collaboration was actually only a brief working interlude in the ongoing social relationship between Dickens and Landseer. Though a frequent theater companion of Dickens, a mutually close friend of the actor Macready, and an occasional singer at private parties, Landseer could not be persuaded to participate actively in any of the author's benefit theatricals. He preferred to lend his name to the Honorary Committee and attend the benefit performances with his aristocratic friends. He particularly relished the memory of a legendary episode that occurred after a Tavistock House performance of Fortunio. Douglas Jerrold, a Punch writer, picked up the mask of the hero's horse, left behind by the property man and, holding it up before him, remarked, "Looks as if it knew you, Edwin!"

The author saw more of the artist on private occasions, some immortalized in anecdotes. There was an uproarious April Fool's Day dinner at Devonshire Terrace at which Landseer joined the other guests, all of whom pretended to fall ill and then protested the host's lack of care for the growing number of invalids. At Landseer's, on another evening, Dickens, aware of the artist's passion for drawing lions, was neither surprised nor frightened when the corpse of one of his favorite models arrived at the door in a cart and was solemnly announced by the servant. This gift to the painter from the secretary of the Zoological Gardens, the author observed to the company, was certainly worthy of its destination. Dickens would more seriously compliment his friend's sympathies in "The Friend of the Lions," the proofs for which he had Landseer look over in advance of its publication in Household Words in 1856 (CP, 1: 634–38).

Meetings between Landseer and Dickens, as both grew older, however, were not always so hilarious. Despite the painter's advance from one success to another, he became increasingly nervous, staid, and affected. Once, according to yet another legend, when Dickens invited Landseer to dinner for an early hour, knowing his tendency to be late, the artist was so shy he still could not bring himself to enter
voice of a man, the tearing in and out of an excited dog, and the surprising and mysterious appearance of a Baby, there was soon the very What’s-his-name to pay.

Where the Baby came from, or how Mrs. Peerybingle got hold of it in that flash of time, I don’t know. But a live Baby there was, in Mrs. Peerybingle’s arms; and
the house until dinner had been served and was halfway over. In 1850 Landseer accepted a knighthood; at the 1855 Paris Exposition, he and Cattermole received the two *grandes médailles d'honneur* for English painters; and in 1865 he, like Maclise, declined the presidency of the Royal Academy. Yet even as his reputation widened at home and abroad, Landseer narrowed his activities. He began to drift away from Dickens's circle, doubtless put off by the author's separation from his wife and the public manner in which it was broadcast in 1858, and preferring the admiration of politer society to that of the boisterous Forster, Maclise, and Stanfield.

Dickens and Landseer, however, always remained friends, bound by shared memories and an appreciation for each other's sense of humor. Another legend has it, for example, that after returning from an Italian trip in the late 1850's, Landseer sent his card up to Dickens, who was sitting for a portrait by William Frith that had been commissioned by Forster. "Let's have him up," reportedly urged the author, curious to see the artist's reaction to his newly grown beard and moustache. To Dickens's chagrin, Landseer ignored his appearance. "Well, Lanny," he asked at last, "what about all this? Do you like it? Think it an improvement?" "Oh, a great improvement," Landseer replied soberly; "it hides so much more of your face." Such manifestations of affectionate humor became rarer, however, as Landseer sought peace through alcohol while Dickens sought excitement through public readings. When Frith's portrait of Dickens was hung at the Royal Academy in 1859, Landseer's reported reaction suggests the basic incompatibility between the men. "I wish he looked less eager and busy, and not so much out of himself, or beyond himself. I should like to catch him asleep and quiet now and then," commented the artist, whose own deterioration apparently made him appear twice his age. Since Dickens slept little, due to insomnia, and, when awake, was rarely quiet, the two men, despite their mutual respect and even affection, now saw little of one another. Yet there was no doubting the sincerity of Landseer's pain on learning of the author's death in 1870, just three years before his own.