CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Moral Lesson at Horsemonger Lane

But, after all, what is it? A tumble and a kick!
And, anyhow, 'tis seemingly all over precious quick,
And shows that some, no matter for what they've done, dies game!
Ho, ho! if ever my time comes, I hope to do the same!

—"The Lesson of the Scaffold,"
from Punch

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, England's "Bloody Code" prescribed the death penalty for over two hundred crimes, but a wave of reform reduced this number to eight by 1838. As Victoria took the throne, demands were being increasingly heard for the abolition of capital punishment even for murder. As early as 1830 this position had been put forward by the social philosopher Jeremy Bentham, and in 1840 William Ewart introduced a parliamentary motion for the "entire Abolition of the Punishment of Death." The motion was defeated by nearly two to one, but more than ninety votes were cast in favor of its passage. Subsequently, alternative proposals were made to retain the death penalty for murder but to reduce the number of other capital crimes.

These legislative efforts were paralleled by a literary campaign against capital punishment. In the year of Victoria's accession, 1837, R. H. Barham, author of The Ingoldsby Legends, published a poem inspired by the hanging of Greenacre, "The Execution: A Sporting Anecdote." Lord Tomnoddy, who finds the opera season at low ebb, asks his coachman what a nobleman may find to do and is taken to a hanging. He soon drinks
himself into a stupor on gin toddy and misses the tragedy of the
condemned man’s despair:

God! ’tis a fearsome thing to see
That pale wan man’s mute agony,—
The glare of that wild, despairing eye,
Now bent on the crowd, now turn’d to the sky.

The poet’s vision of the man on the brink of the gallows
anticipated the experience that Oscar Wilde at the end of the
century recorded in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*:

I never saw sad men who looked
With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue
We prisoners called the sky.

But Lord Tomnoddy saw none of this and in fact slept through
the execution:

Why, Captain!—my Lord!—Here’s the devil to pay!
The fellow’s been cut down and taken away!—
What’s to be done?
We’ve miss’d all the fun!

The nobleman philosophically went home to bed, for it “was
perfectly plain that they could not well hang the man over
again.”

*Punch*, on page one of its very first issue in 1841, announced
its intention to attack and ridicule capital punishment. Taking
its cue from its namesake, the puppet Punch who hangs the
executioner Jack Ketch at the end of the traditional Punch and
Judy show, the magazine proclaimed its enmity to the hangman
in its manifesto “The Moral of Punch”: “We now come to the
last great lesson of our motley teacher—the gallows! that
accursed tree which has its root in injuries. How clearly PUNCH
exposes the fallacy of that dreadful law which authorises the
destruction of life! PUNCH sometimes destroys the hangman:
and why not? Where is the divine injunction against the shedder
of man’s blood to rest? None can answer! To us there is but
ONE disposer of life.” *Punch*’s crusade against the hangman was
led by one of its greatest satirists, Douglas Jerrold. Writing
under his pen-name, "Q," Jerrold, in a column in 1842, trained his savage wit on a newspaper account of a hanging that had attracted a huge crowd, which came and went in a holiday mood; the last religious service for the condemned man at Newgate chapel had been observed by the Lady Mayoress and her invited friends from the prison governor’s pew. But Jerrold’s emotions were engaged beyond the reaches of satire; he believed deeply that the use of death as a punishment was a sacrilegious distortion of the process through which God ordained that all must pass, regardless of the quality of their lives. In Jerrold’s story, “The Lesson of Life,” a hangman expresses the view that no death on the gallows can arouse as much horror as the sight of a good man dying in his bed. To Jerrold capital punishment was not only a crime against life; it was a sin against death.

None of the Victorian writers has left a richer or more complex legacy of writings on capital punishment than Charles Dickens. In “A Visit to Newgate” (1836), an article that the twenty-three-year-old Dickens wrote for inclusion in Sketches by Boz, his tour of the prison ends in the condemned cell, where he reconstructs in imagination the convict’s thoughts in the night before the last dawn—the hope of reprieve, memories of his wife “before misery and ill-treatment had altered her looks, and vice had changed his nature,” recollections of the trial, wild dreams of escape, a long tract of unconsciousness, and then the all too real form of the turnkey in the “dull grey light of morning.” This theme is reproduced and its treatment deepened in the chapter “Fagin’s Last Night Alive,” in Oliver Twist (1837–39). Execution is one of the principal subjects of Dickens’s early novel Barnaby Rudge (1841), whose preface invokes the memory of Mary Jones, a nineteen-year-old mother of two who was hanged in the eighteenth century for attempted shoplifting after the impressing of her husband into military service and seizure of his goods for debt had reduced her to begging in the streets. Barnaby Rudge provides another wrenching description of the hours of waiting for execution, though Dickens passes over the hanging in merciful silence. Earlier in the novel, in the scene of the storming of Newgate prison by the
Gordon rioters, the youthful Dickens presented the pleas of the condemned prisoners for liberation in terms that marked out plainly his opposition to the death penalty: “The terrible energy with which they spoke, would have moved any person, no matter how good or just (if any good or just person could have strayed into that sad place that night), to have them set at liberty: and, while he would have left any other punishment to its free course, to have saved them from this last dreadful and repulsive penalty; which never turned a man inclined to evil, and has hardened thousands who were half inclined to good.”

In 1840 Dickens attended the execution of Courvoisier. He and William Makepeace Thackeray saw each other in the crowd but neither could catch the other’s eye. Thackeray felt, to his surprise, such a strong personal empathy with Courvoisier that he could not bring himself to watch the hanging. He expressed his feelings in his article “On Going to See a Man Hanged” (1840), in which he wrote that he was left with “an extraordinary feeling of terror and shame,” springing from his partaking with forty thousand others in “this hideous debauchery, which is more exciting than sleep, or than wine, or the last new ballet.”

Dickens did not react to the sight with the emotional immediacy of Thackeray. Indeed, public executions continued to exert on him what he called the “attraction of repulsion.” Philip Collins, in his admirable work *Dickens and Crime*, has defended Dickens against the charge of being a “masculine Madame Defarge,” but the fact is that he attended three or possibly four executions. Thackeray, so far as we know, gave up death as a spectator sport after the Courvoisier execution, and once turned down an invitation to a foreign beheading, commenting, “j’y ai été [I’ve been there already], as the Frenchman said of hunting.”

Despite the ambivalence of the emotions that were stirred in him by the observation of executions, the Courvoisier hanging undoubtedly had a great impact on Dickens’s conscience. He recalled the scene vividly six years later in the first of a series of four long articles to the *Daily News* in which he advocated the total abolition of capital punishment. He wrote of the effect of
the execution on the crowd in attendance: "No sorrow, no salutary terror, no abhorrence, no seriousness; nothing but ribaldry, debauchery, levity, drunkenness, and flaunting vice in fifty other shapes. I should have deemed it impossible that I could have ever felt any large assemblage of my fellow-creatures to be so odious." In his arguments against capital punishment, Dickens emphasized as had Thackeray its tendency to barbarize and desensitize the community. He also quoted several examples of hangings in error (including a Report of a New York Select Committee) and cited statistics that abolition of the death penalty in certain foreign countries had not led to increases in their murder rates. As an additional blow to the deterrence theory, he cited a favorite statistic of abolitionists: that according to a prison chaplain in Bristol, only 3 of the 167 prisoners he had attended under sentence of death had not been spectators at public executions.

The uniqueness of Dickens's letters, however, lies not in his assembling of these arguments but in the application of his novelist's imagination to the potentially harmful role of the gallows in shaping the evil resolves of the would-be murderer. He noted that for the murderer with exhibitionistic instincts the death penalty and its attendant notoriety, far from acting as a deterrent, in fact provide an incentive. The "ill-regulated mind" of the murderer actuated by revenge, Dickens argued further, might impel him to kill on the basis of the mechanistic calculation that capital punishment, by demanding life as the price of a life, had removed the "base and cowardly character of murder" and that society, by hanging him, would receive its just bargain. Pursuing this line of thought, Dickens feared that the prospect of hanging might also incite the wife-murderer who could feel that his crime was not the cowardly slaughter of a woman but a heroic challenge to the shadow of the gallows and a response to its dark fascination: "Present this black idea of violence to a bad mind contemplating violence; hold up before a man remotely compassing the death of another person, the spectacle of his own ghastly and untimely death by man's hands; and out of the depths of his own nature you shall assuredly raise up that which lures and tempts him on."
Feeling once again “attraction of repulsion,” Dickens was tempted to attend the hanging of the Mannings, but he had difficulty making up his mind to go. On 7 November, a week before the date set for the execution, he wrote his friend John Leech, who was a cartoonist on the *Punch* staff: “I give in, about the Mannings. The doleful weather, the beastly nature of the scene, the having no excuse for going (after seeing Courvoisier) and the constantly recurring desire to avoid another such horrible and odious impression, decide me to cry off.” But by the following Monday, Dickens had reversed his decision and engaged a rooftop opposite the jail. He sent a letter to Leech by messenger inviting him to join him, John Forster, and two other friends: “We have taken the whole of the roof (and the back kitchen) for the extremely moderate sum of Ten Guineas, or two guineas each. The passage would clearly have been a dismal failure, and I am not sure but that even this arrangement may turn out a [ditto].” Dickens suggested that the group begin the night’s festivities by meeting for supper at the Piazza Coffee House in Covent Garden “at 11 exactly.” According to the recollections of Henry Manistre, Dickens did not pass the night resting on his rooftop but conceived the idea of taking a walk through working-class neighborhoods for the purpose of gathering the residents’ impressions of the coming execution. Manistre recalled their nocturnal wandering: “We started from Horsemonger Jail—Mr. D., Mr. William Twelle, a wealthy coppersmith; Mr. Cinton, proprietor of a glass factory establishment; John Grant, the London representative of a great Manchester house, myself, and one other. We crossed London Bridge, then through Cheapside, Fleet Street, Strand, clear out to Sterge Lane. We dropped into gin palaces—among filth and vile vapour—a long weary tramp to daybreak, and so back to Horsemonger Jail again.”

Dickens went to the execution with the avowed intention of “observing the crowd gathered to behold it.” As he looked on with his friends from their rented observation post, he was horrified by the crowd’s callous and riotous behavior, and the disgust it aroused in him appeared to obliterate any response he may have felt to the hangings or to the last moments of the
criminals on the scaffold. He immediately composed a letter to the *Times*, in which he set aside "the abstract question of capital punishment" and argued instead that hangings so long as they continued should be conducted privately within prison walls. He reported the terrible scene he had witnessed:

I believe that a sight so inconceivably awful as the wickedness and levity of the immense crowd collected at that execution this morning could be imagined by no man, and could be presented in no heathen land under the sun. The horrors of the gibbet and of the crime which brought the wretched murderers to it faded in my mind before the atrocious bearing, looks, and language of the assembled spectators. When I came upon the scene at midnight, the *shriiliness* of the cries and howls that were raised from time to time, denoting that they came from a concourse of boys and girls already assembled in the best places, made my blood run cold. As the night went on, screeching, and laughing, and yelling in strong chorus of parodies on negro melodies, with substitutions of "Mrs. Manning" for "Susannah," and the like, were added to these. When the day dawned, thieves, low prostitutes, ruffians and vagabonds of every kind, flocked on to the ground, with every variety of offensive and foul behaviour. Fightings, faintings, whistlings, imitations of Punch, brutal jokes, tumultuous demonstrations of indecent delight when swooning women were dragged out of the crowd by the police, with their dresses disordered, gave a new zest to the general entertainment. When the sun rose brightly—as it did—it gilded thousands upon thousands of upturned faces, so inexpressibly odious in their brutal mirth or callousness, that a man had cause to feel ashamed of the shape he wore, and to shrink from himself, as fashioned in the image of the Devil. When the two miserable creatures who attracted all this ghastly sight about them were turned quivering into the air, there was no more emotion, no more pity, no more thought that two immortal souls had gone to judgment, no more restraint in any of the previous obscenities, than if the name of Christ had never been heard in this world, and there were no beliefs among men but that they perished like the beasts.

In conclusion, Dickens wrote that he did not believe that "any community can prosper where such a scene of horror and demoralisation as was enacted this morning outside Horse-
monger Lane Gaol is presented at the very doors of good citizens, and is passed by unknown or forgotten.”

Dickens’s companion John Leech had not come to Horse-monger Lane as an idle spectator; sharing his friend’s condemnation of public hanging, he planned to sketch the scene for *Punch*. Leech had already done an execution scene in one of his illustrations for Albert Smith’s 1846 novel based on the career of the seventeenth-century poisoner, the Marquise de Brinvilliers, to whom Marie Manning had been compared. The print shows the marquise being carted to the stake through a crowded square; surrounded by the black-garbed coachman and priest, the ghostly white figure of the marquise cowers and gazes timorously at the jeering mob. Leech’s illustration of the execution of the Mannings appeared in *Punch*’s issue for the following week above the mocking caption, “The Great Moral Lesson at Horsemonger Lane Gaol, Nov. 13.” The Mannings do not appear, for the subject of Leech’s satirical vision was the merrymaking of the crowd. In the background two children dance at the foot of the prison wall; another hoists himself on a playmate’s shoulders to grasp the knocker of the prison entrance while others peep beneath the gate. In the middle ground stern-faced policemen guard a barrier restraining a grinning, brutish crowd, and on the near side of the barrier other spectators smoke and drink at a public house as they await the hour of the hanging.

Under Leech’s drawing *Punch* published a poem for the occasion, “The Lesson of the Scaffold; or, The Ruffian’s Holiday.” Written in the vernacular of the mob, the poem points out the only “moral lesson” that was apparently drawn from the hanging:

...that some, no matter for what they’ve done, dies game!
Ho, ho! if ever my time comes, I hope to do the same!

But the impressionable thirty-seven-year-old bachelor John Forster, who viewed the execution with Dickens and Leech, only had eyes for Marie Manning. In a gushing letter to the novelist Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton written shortly afterward, he
wrote of her in terms that, he admitted, expressed nothing short of "heroine-worship":

You should have seen this woman ascend the drop, blindfold, and with a black lace veil over her face—with a step as firm as if she had been walking to a feast. She was beautifully dressed, every part of her noble figure finely and fully expressed by close fitting black satin, spotless white collar round her neck loose enough to allow the rope without its removal, and gloves on her manicured hands. She stood while the rope was adjusted as steadily as the scaffold itself, and when flung off, seemed to die at once. But there was nothing hideous in her as she flung to and fro afterwards. The wretch beside her was as a filthy shapeless scarecrow—she had lost nothing of her graceful aspect. This is heroine-worship, I think!

Bulwer Lytton may have been puzzled as to how Forster's vision could have been so penetrating that he could see Marie's "manicured hands" within her gloves, but a second letter from Forster a month later made it obvious that Marie's last admirer had obtained from prison officials the most intimate details about his heroine:

After I wrote to you about that executed criminal—the woman Manning, I heard what fell from her as she stood on the drop. "Mind you do your work well!" she said to the hangman as he adjusted the rope. . . . Then—when the [parson] had retired—she called to the surgeon, who had led her (blindfold) up the scaffold, and said these words, the last she spoke on this earth. "I am poorly, at present; I trust to you that it shall not be made known." It was true—and she had obtained a clean napkin not ten minutes before she ascended the drop. A sensitive cleanliness of body seems to have been her passion—and the doctor who examined the bodies after death, and who said he had never seen so beautiful a figure, compared her feet to those of a marble statue.

Bulwer Lytton must have smiled at the effusions of his susceptible friend, and readers of Punch no doubt nodded with approval at Leech's sketch of Horsemonger Lane, but it was Dickens's letter to the Times that was destined to become the most lasting memorial of the Mannings' hanging. The letter
drew a large number of responses from readers of the newspaper, both supporting and opposing his position. One reader supplemented Dicken's condemnation of the crowd by reporting on the equally contemptible behavior of the upper classes; he was afraid that Dickens was not so placed that he could look into the rooms of the Winter Terrace, "where the outfall of the moral sewerage of what is called respectable society found its vent—where respectable (?) persons used opera-glasses to assist their sight in watching the agonies of a man and wife strangled a few yards from them—where champagne and cigars helped to while away the hours. The letter concluded that "there may be a moral to such people in a woman hung in satin for a crime to which she was led by profligacy and the coveting of scrip." But others disagreed. One reader, while referring to Dicken's letter as striking and of much interest, submitted that he carried his deductions too far and did not sufficiently explain himself. Dickens, according to the correspondent who signed his name "Milo," seemed to imply that public executions were a leading cause of the depravity he described, but in fact the real causes were far too constant and deep-seated to be affected by such rare occurrences as public hangings. Milo suggested that the Home Secretary and Mr. Dickens "investigate the causes and suggest the means of eradicating the many real sources of the evil." Another reader rejected what he called the two principal deductions to be drawn from Dickens's letter and from the subsequent reader's letter criticizing the behavior of the upper classes, namely, that it was a disgraceful action to go to see a murderer hanged and that it was doubly disgraceful to look at the process of hanging through an opera glass. The writer asserted on the contrary that "in going to see the murderer hung we go to see the earth cleansed from the foul stain of his being, and, more than this, to assure ourselves that it is really done." He added in conclusion that he wrote disinterestedly, since he had not seen the Mannings or any other criminals hanged.

On 14 November the Times itself entered the fray with its own editorial. In contrast with Dickens and most of its other readers who wrote on the execution, the Times remained obsessed with
Mrs. Manning. She was a “Lady Macbeth on the Bermondsey stage . . . Jezebel the daring foreigner, the profane unbeliever . . . the ready arguer, the greedy aggrandizer, the forger, the intriguer, the resolute, the painted and attired even unto death.” Turning to Dickens’s letter, the Times praised his “knowledge of the human heart and its workings under the infinite varieties and accidents of modern life” but was not prepared to follow him to his conclusion. It appeared to the Times that “so tremendous an act as a national homicide should be publicly as well as solemnly done. Popular jealousy demands it. Were it otherwise, the mass of the people would never be sure that great offenders were really executed, or that the humbler class of criminals were not executed in greater numbers than the State chose to confess. The mystery of the prison walls would be “intolerable.” The Times thought it “altogether fair” to attribute the mirth of the crowd to the night’s exposure, a long suspended expectation, and the common human tendency to “hide the deepest feeling with the wildest excesses of manner and of language.” The Manchester Guardian, however, took issue with the Times and sided with Dickens in urging private executions. Its editorial maintained that the sight of executions, instead of acting as a deterrent, might engender a feeling of familiarity that robbed the punishment of half its terrors; private execution, on the other hand, would produce the positive benefit of ending the hero worship of condemned criminals. The Guardian could not believe that the mass of the people would trust only their own eyes for assurance that great offenders had actually been put to death.

Meanwhile, Dickens was becoming overwhelmed by personal letters relating to the position he had taken in his letter to the Times; in fact, as he wrote in a letter to Reverend Edward Tagart, he was soon “in the midst of such a roaring sea of correspondence . . . that I seem to have no hope of land.” On 15 November Dickens responded to a letter from Henry Christy, a rich philanthropist who proposed to reproduce Dickens’s letter as a pamphlet and enclose it in some widely circulated publication. Dickens said that the only publication in which his influence could assist Christy in carrying out his plan
was *David Copperfield*, which was then being serialized, but that in such case "considerably more than double the number you propose to print would be required." In the evening Dickens replied to a letter from another quarter. Charles Gilpin, founder of the Society for Promoting the Abolition of Capital Punishment, had invited Dickens to attend a meeting sponsored by the society on the following Monday. In his response Dickens declined the invitation, explaining that in his view "the general mind is not in that state in which the total abolition of capital punishment can be advantageously advocated by Public meetings." Dickens believed that "the enormous crimes which have been committed within the last year or two, and are fresh, unhappily, in the public memory, have indisposed many good people to share in the responsibility of abandoning the last punishment of the Law." But he thought that "there are many such who would lend their utmost aid to an effort for the suppression of public executions for evermore, though they cannot conscientiously abrogate capital punishment in extreme cases." He had therefore "resolved to limit my endeavours to the bringing about of that improvement as one greatly to be desired, certain to be supported by a very general concurrence, and irresistible (as I think) if temperately urged, by any Government."

Gilpin's letter had quoted a recent letter from Douglas Jerrold in which that staunch opponent of capital punishment had ridiculed the "Mystery" of private hanging. On 17 November Dickens wrote to Jerrold, arguing that there was no punishment, except death, to which mystery did not attach; the prison vans were mysterious vehicles, he wrote, and was there no mystery about transportation of criminals to penal colonies and the anonymous lives of convicts in prison? At the same time, Dickens composed a second letter to the *Times* making the same points and setting forth detailed arguments in support of his proposal of private hanging. He suggested a number of procedures for assuring that private hangings would be carried out faithfully: required attendance by the prison governor, other officers, and a "witness jury" of twenty-four citizens; official certification of the hanging and burial; and "during the
hour of the body's hanging I would have the bells of all the churches in that town or city tolled, and all the shops shut up, that all might be reminded of what was being done.” At the end of his letter, Dickens showed that the inflexibility of Gilpin, Jerrold, and their fellow abolitionists was getting under his skin; he wrote that of those who desired total abolition of capital punishment he would “say nothing, considering them, however good and pure in intention, unreasonable, and not to be argued with.” Dickens’s estrangement from the abolitionists was deepened by a reply he received from Douglas Jerrold branding Dickens’s advocacy of private executions as a mischievous compromise tending to “continue the hangman among us.”

When abolitionists wrote to him in more measured terms, Dickens still was willing to assure them that his heart was with them. In response to a letter from a woman named Miss Joll inquiring how he now stood on the question of capital punishment, he wrote: “He is, on principle, opposed to capital punishment, but believing that many earnest and sincere people who are favourable to its retention in extreme cases would unite in any temperate effort to abolish the evils of public executions, and that the consequences of public executions are disgraceful and horrible, he has taken the course with which Miss Joll is acquainted as most hopeful, and as one undoubtedly calculated to benefit society at large.” But to his friend W. F. de Cerjat he wrote in unflattering terms about the total abolitionists. He first recalled the horror of the experience that had led him to mount his campaign for private hanging: “You have no idea what that hanging of the Mannings really was. The conduct of the people was so indescribably frightful, that I felt for some time afterwards almost as if I were living in a city of devils. I feel, at this hour, as if I never could go near the place again.” His letters had made a “great to-do” and had “led to a great agitation of the subject,” but he had no confidence that any change would be made, mainly because “the total abolitionists are utterly reckless and dishonest (generally speaking), and would play the deuce with any such proposition in Parliament.”

But although Dickens’s letters had made a “great to-do,” not everyone was impressed. Many years later J. Ashby-Sterry was
chatting with an ex-policeman who had been on duty at Horsemonger Lane on the day of the Mannings' execution and the whole night before and gave a "very graphic and thrilling account of the whole proceedings." Ashby-Sterry observed that the policeman doubtless remembered Mr. Dickens's celebrated letter on the subject that appeared in the *Times* the next morning and was thunderstruck by the response: "Mr. who, sir? Can't say as I ever heerd on the gent!"

On Monday evening, 19 November 1849, the public meeting in favor of total abolition of the death penalty, which Dickens had declined to attend, was held at the Bridge House Hotel in Southwark with about three hundred people in the audience. The meeting was chaired by Charles Gilpin, and among the dignitaries on the platform was William Ewart, who had introduced the parliamentary motion for abolition in 1840. In his introductory address, Gilpin attacked the behavior of the spectators at Horsemonger Lane, not only the multitudes but West End people, and highborn ladies who behaved in such a manner that for his own part "he confessed there was too much of the Maria Manning in such conduct for him to make him feel very comfortable in such company." He also castigated the press for reporting the particulars of the Mannings' last hours—that Manning ate an indifferent breakfast and his wife a little better; he thought that such things were calculated to stimulate in criminals a morbid desire for public approval or even for public execution.

Gilpin asserted to cheers that the late execution and the "horrible abominations attendant upon it" had "shaken the gibbet to the foundation." Referring then to Dickens's letter to the *Times*, Gilpin spoke of the great writer with respect and, though differing with his position, told the meeting he felt sure that Dickens still shared their principles but considered secret executions a step in the right direction. However, he said that they had not come to the meeting, and indeed were not at liberty, "to substitute one kind of strangling for another—the strangling in prison, for that of a public execution on the scaffold." Gilpin exhibited a letter from Douglas Jerrold (whom he called a man not second to Charles Dickens for his hold on
the public mind) that expressed the opinion that “the genius of English society will never permit private hanging” and that “the brutality of the mob even is preferable to the darkness of secrecy.” But the chairman then proceeded to read other communications that responded to Dickens’s compromise with more asperity: Richard Cobden was quoted as warning, “Take heed of the new dodge—private executions,” and a letter was read from John Bright that suggested that the proposal for private hanging “seems to be dictated by the mere liking to put somebody to death.”

Mr. Ewart then proposed the principal resolution to be laid before the meeting, to the effect that the punishment of death is opposed to the spirit of Christianity; that it does not repress crime but has grossly demoralizing effects; that it sometimes causes the destruction of the innocent by judicial process and at other times favors the escape of the guilty; and that it ought to be immediately and totally abolished. Ewart spoke of his continued dedication to total abolition of the death penalty and declared his utter repugnance to private executions as an evasion of the main question. He told the meeting that by inflicting capital punishment, the government shifted public attention from the crime to the punishment and “invested the scaffold with a false dignity, and raised the convict to a martyr.” The audience laughed when he recalled having seen newspapers refer to Manning’s wife as a Clytemnestra or Lady Macbeth. He thought all that exaltation of a criminal would be lost if the death penalty was abolished.

So far the meeting appeared to have been conducted with dignity, but a minister named Henry Christmas, of Zion College, seemed to feel it was his role to provide comic relief. He certainly had not been put on the program as a stand-up comedian, for Reverend Christmas had acquired some reputation in abolitionist circles for his writings arguing the absence of biblical authority for capital punishment and had been quoted with approval by Dickens in one of his letters to the Daily News in 1846. But tonight Christmas was in a facetious mood. He began by telling the audience that those who would retain capital punishment argued that it was commanded by the Holy Scrip-
tures. But how could this be so? Cain was a murderer, yet
Reverend Christmas had never heard of Cain being hanged.
Moses killed an Egyptian and hid him in the sands, looking
cautiously about him the while, for fear the policeman might be
watching him, but he never heard of Moses being hanged.

Ewart’s principal motion was put to the meeting and carried
unanimously, and then Reverend H. Richard moved that a
petition based on the resolution be presented to Parliament by
the representatives of the Borough of Southwark. Whoever saw
the spectacle lately exhibited in Southwark, he said, must have
felt that it was a disgrace to civilized and Christian England. We
were accustomed, he told the audience, to look down on the
games of ancient Rome in which gladiators were butchered to
make a Roman holiday, but what should be said of “the
bringing forward of two helpless wretches, pinioned and blind-
folded, to make an English holiday?” One of the few dissenting
voices was then heard from the audience protesting that that was
a misrepresentation of the intention. But Richard maintained
that it did not misrepresent the effect.

John Robertson, in seconding the motion of Reverend
Richard, argued that the gallows, far from deterring crime,
“taught murder, and this was the evil of it.” He reminded the
audience that at the very time that Mrs. Manning and her
husband were first entertaining the notion of murdering
O’Connor, Rush had just been executed; and that the evidence
of Massey had been that considerations respecting the execu-
tion of Rush were mixed up with conversations with Manning as
to the most vulnerable part of the human head. Mr. Scoble, in
supporting the same resolution, commented on the failure of
the Mannings to be brought to repentance by the prospect of
hanging. Up to a short time before the execution they had some
hopes of a reprieve, and the speaker thought they were right to
have been optimistic since the Home Secretary had “just re-
spited a man who had been guilty of as cruel and as cowardly an
act as even that for which the Mannings suffered, only that the
intended victim recovered.” He submitted that the vacillation
on the part of the government took away from the supposed
influence that capital punishments were thought to have on
criminals. To the end Mrs. Manning seemed to him to be
oblrious of the rope: "What influence had the gallows on the
wretched woman Maria Manning, when it would appear that her
only desire at the last moment was, that she should appear
respectable on the scaffold? This was shown by her needlework,
by her attiring herself in a silk dress, and by her having on silk
instead of cotton stockings."

The second resolution was then put by Chairman Gilpin and
agreed to, and the meeting adjourned. Despite the moments of
humor, the meeting had been unaccountably tense. The audi­
ence "evidently heard with considerable uneasiness a tinkling
noise which was audible at intervals towards the doors of the
room." The chairman had quieted their nerves by assuring
them that the noise was one quite common at public gather­
ings—it was "caused by the collection of a subscription to defray
the expenses of the meeting."

The Times, in an editorial of 21 November, rebuked the levy
of the speakers and audience at the abolitionist meeting; this
gathering "showed quite as little disposition to view [capital
punishment] in its own proper light as the less pretentious
rabble" at Horsemonger Lane. The chairman and Bright were
scolded for implying that Dickens's advocacy of private hanging
was dishonest or bloodthirsty. However, the editorial reserved
most of its criticism for the biblical quips of Reverend Christ­
mas. The Morning Post seconded the attack on Christmas,
quoting a joke of the "reverend, but not very reverent gentle­
man—a joke which told with such amazing effect on the risible
faculties of the audience that we have no doubt the worthy
parson, encouraged by this essay, is even now agonizingly
labouring at a Comic Pentateuch, to be published in due course
at the Punch office." Now the journalists had touched off a fight
within their own ranks for Punch, unsmiling for the moment,
claimed angrily that it had been charged falsely with "impiety."
As for Dickens, who was beginning to tire of the controversy, he
was able to throw off the abolitionists' attacks on him by a brief
humorous reference in an address on 21 November to an
appropriate audience, the Newsvendors' Benovolent Institu­
tion: "... yesterday an afflicted wife and family heard from [the
newsvendor] that a husband and father was roaming about the world with an unsatiated thirst for human blood.”

The dispute of Dickens with the advocates of outright abolition of capital punishment was like an internal family quarrel, in which emotions run high but are soon calmed by the claims of kinship. But England also heard other voices about capital punishment, voices that were harsher and not easily stilled. One such outcry was heard from Thomas Carlyle in his bitterly polemical essay, “Model Prisons,” which appeared on 1 March 1850 as one of his Latter-Day Pamphlets. The main force of Carlyle’s attack was directed against reformers who seemed to him to show more interest in improving prison conditions than in bettering the lot of the vastly larger number of law-abiding citizens. But scattering his shot in all directions, Carlyle angrily rejected the notion that punishment could only be justified on the basis of its deterrent effect. His asserted the existence of a religious right and obligation to take revenge on murderers as enemies of God: “The soul of every god-created man flames wholly into one divine blaze of sacred wrath at sight of such a Devil’s-messenger; authentic first-hand monition from the Eternal Maker himself as to what is next to be done. Do it, or be thyself an ally of Devil’s-messengers; a sheep for two-legged human wolves, well deserving to be eaten, as thou soon wilt be!” Many reviewers were shocked by Carlyle’s lack of moderation, both in thought and language. Punch referred to the essay as “barking and froth” and wondered whether Carlyle was developing rabid symptoms. Anticipating that readers would have difficulty making sense of the turgid writing of the Latter-Day Pamphlets, Punch also published a bilingual edition of a characteristic Carlylean passage, one column in the author’s original version, and the other in English.

A point of view similar to Carlyle’s was espoused, though in more restrained language, by an editorial of the Times on 20 November rejecting the arguments advanced by Dickens in his second letter of 17 November and upholding both capital punishment and public attendance at hangings. The Times did not admit that “a man is . . . hanged in the sight of day in order simply that those who witness his death may be deterred from
imitating his crime”; instead, the editorial held that “such death was the due wages of his sin. . . . He is hanged publicly because the visible self-investiture of a community with this awful power is, in its nature, one of the most solemn public acts which that community could perform.”

The English loved Dickens but they listened to Carlyle. Public hanging was not abolished until 1868, Parliament being stirred to that action by the disgraceful behavior of the crowd at the execution of Franz Müller four years before. Capital punishment was abolished in England about a century after Dickens's death.