

# A BIT OF ATTIC PHILOSOPHY

By VALERIA T. LYON

THE suggestion was really first made by Harvey Lewis, but inside of a minute everyone was discussing it with enthusiasm.

It was at the fortnightly meeting of the Attic Philosophers. The "Attic Philosophers," as everyone in Pentonville knew, was the name assumed by a club of some fifteen young people who loved books and reading, and who met every second Friday night, in a certain roomy attic, to discuss literary topics. The club was supposed to be very exclusive, and its members really were, perhaps, the intellectual cream of the village. There were in it: Mabel Eakins, who did such wonderful crayon sketches; and Helen Blair, who sang and had even city engagements; Wilbert Stone, who could read Hebrew and Arabic; and Rosalind herself, whose short stories and poems had already won her more than local reputation. These were the "stars"—but everyone of the club loved reading.

"I really begrudge paying thirty-five cents for a pound of butter," sighed one of the girls one day. "Just think of it—that thirty-five cents would buy me a copy of Marcus Amelius or the 'Divina Commedia'! Butter is so unnecessary anyway. But I can't make the rest of the family see it!"

This particular evening there had been a paper on Maeterlinck and the discussion had been unduly prolonged.

"Great Scott, it's 10.30," said Harvey Calvert, glancing at his watch. "It's time all we respectable people were in bed. By the way, does anybody know how Herb has been this week?"

"Better," said someone. And Maggie Robinson added, "When spring comes, he'll be able to go out in a wheel chair, the doctor says." "Good!"

There was a brief pause, for everyone's thoughts had reverted to the absent member, Herb Willcox. And then it was that Harvey had sat down suddenly on the arm of a chair and had said decidedly, "Well, say, look here! I think we folks ought to do something for Herb. Just something to let him know we miss him. What's the matter with our getting him that chair?"

"Bravo!" said Rosalind softly.

"Oh yes, let us do that!" said someone else. And then everybody was talking at once.

Harvey raised his voice so as to be heard. "Silence," he ordered. "Now, how many are in favor of our getting Herb the chair?"

Every person uplifted a hand, and some put up both.

"Carried. Now the question is, how are we to do it?"

"Have a social," suggested one. "Private subscription," came from another.

Harvey wheeled around so that he could see Rosalind. "Rose," he called, "speak up! You're the president of this inspired band of souls and a 'young and gifted authoress' besides—say something!"

Rose hesitated, then said: "Well, how would it do to give a benefit? Everybody's sick of socials, and I don't think Herb himself would be pleased much by private subscriptions being taken. Why not have some sort of a literary evening—invite our friends—"

"We'll give a Dickens affair," cried Maggie excitedly. "Browning and Ibsen and the rest are all right, but half the people don't know anything about them."

There was a confusion of voices. Everyone was suggesting something. Harvey finally settled matters by announcing that a special "business" meeting would be held next evening.

That was the beginning of it, but the end was not yet. The Philosophers worked with a will. "And people that you had never suspected had any ideas at all came out with such original ones," said Maggie.

Herb Willcox was a young man of brilliant talents and of fine character. He had worked himself through three years of his college course, and had money sufficient on hand for his final term, when a terrible accident had injured his spine. At first it was thought he could not live, and for many months he had lain in absolute helplessness. Then there had been an operation, and now he was able to sit up, though the lower part of his body was useless. He would never be able to walk a step.

"But I have my arms and my head yet," he had said with a brave smile only that very day to a friend who had called. "When it gets warm, I am to go out in a wheel chair—if I can get one." For Herb's people were not even fairly well-to-do.

He had been one of the cleverest as well as one of the best loved of the "Attic Philosophers." He was so good, so kind and helpful, yet so original, jolly and witty. "We seem fairly lost without him," Harvey had groaned. What wonder that everyone threw heart and soul into the plan for helping him a little.

Early in the following week, about seventy-five of the residents in Pentonville were much astonished to receive through the mail small envelopes containing the following extraordinary invitations:

*The Attic Philosophers  
have the honor of inviting you to  
a Dickens Evening,  
which will be held by them in  
the Attic  
(Mr. H. E. Robinson's residence)  
Walnut Street, Pentonville,  
at 8 o'clock sharp,  
Friday evening, February 26, 19—.*

*As this is a benefit, in aid of a worthy but secret cause, please  
bring your purse with plenty of small change, particularly coppers.  
Your exit fee will depend on your knowledge of Dickens.  
(From him that hath not will be taken away even that he  
hath.) Password—"Betsy Prig."  
Please come provided with a well-sharpened lead pencil.*

The result, naturally, was mystification, wonder, and curiosity, heightened by the fact that not a Philosopher would make the least reply to the most anxious enquiries. "Come and see," they said. So everybody went.

Mr. Robinson's was the largest house in Pentonville, a fine modern mansion in which even the attic was nicely finished, of a good height, and had windows. This attic, on account of its being near at hand, free of cost, and always unoccupied, had for several years been the meeting-place of the club. There were trunks galore to sit upon, some old chairs and a table had been mended, and altogether it had proved very satisfactory. "Far nicer, really, than Souvestre's Paris one, though his *was* so famous," said Maggie.

In response to the rings at the Robinson front door on Friday evening, Maggie herself opened it, took the wraps, and requested everybody to "go on upstairs and along the hall to where Helen Blair is."

This was simple. Helen, clothed in smiles and her best pink gown, stood upstairs in the hall in a doorway, the attic stairs behind her. Over the door a large placard bore the inscription, "This way to the Attic, where you're going to have the very Dickens of a time!"

"The password, please?" Helen enquired.

And everyone repeated the mystic phrase and tried to be serious. Whereupon, Helen pinned a slip of paper with a number marked on it to everyone's breast, and requested them to "go on up."

At the head of the attic stairs was a young man who pinned another paper, inscription unknown, on everyone's back.

"I've been labelled twice," said the young Methodist minister, comically. "In front I'm a convict, evidently, No. 21. Goodness knows what I may be behind!"

Glances at other backs, however, soon revealed the fact that each paper bore the name of some character in Dickens. The young minister, had he but known it, was for the nonce "no less a person than Mr. Richard Swiveller." A large pompous lady bore the fitting title, "The Marchioness," while Dolly Varden, Lady Dedlock, Nicholas Nickleby, Madame Mantalini and Little Dorrit were all walking about in unhappy ignorance of their own identity.

At eight fifteen practically everyone had arrived, so a bell was rung, and in the ensuing silence, Harvey Lewis mounted a trunk and said: "On the back of each of you is the name of one of Dickens' characters. You will be given fifteen minutes in which to solve your identity. Do this by asking questions. It's a case of 'know thyself.' At the end of that time all who haven't found out the name must please pay a fine of three cents."

Mild consternation reigned, and everyone began to fire questions at those nearby, only to be questioned in turn. At the end of fifteen minutes, not more than one-third had arrived at the right name. The coppers in Harvey's basket chinked merrily.

After this came the roll call, not by name but by number. As the number which each wore was called, each had to rise and reply by a quotation, however short, from some of Dickens' books. Then indeed was there a frantic search of memories, a wild endeavor to recollect some words or phrase! Of course there was a fine, one cent this time, imposed on the unlucky ignorant or forgetful ones. Some of the replies were—

"Toby beck, Toby beck, keep a good heart, Toby!"

"That *was* a turkey."

"Be true to your time in the morning."

"Barkis is willin'!"

"My friend, Mrs. Harris—"

"Please, sir, I want some more," said Oliver."

"The wind is in the east," said my guardian."

"I'm a lone, lone creetur—"

"Demnition!" said Mantilini."

"Something's sure to turn up sooner or later," said Mr. Micawber."

And one young girl not over long out of school who remembered freshly the old Fourth Reader, rose quietly in her place and recited the long and beautiful selection about Little Nell, which begins—"And now the bell—the bell she had so often heard by night and day, and listened to with solemn pleasure, almost as a living voice, rung its remorseless toll for her, so young, so beautiful, so good."

After the fines had been paid, long slips of paper were distributed. Once more Harvey got up and explained things. "This is a short examination, in three parts," said he. "Half an hour is the time allowed, then the papers will be collected, and examined, and the one who has done best wins a prize."

All were now interested.

"On the wall you see ten posters, each one representing some character from Dickens. Identify them if you can. Ten minutes allowed for this."

Everyone set to work. The "posters" were large crayon sketches, done by Mabel Eakins and copied from the illustrations in a well-known edition of Dickens' books. Most of them were quite easily recognized. A little girl leading an old man by the hand was "Little Nell and Her Grandfather." A young man with a black bird on his shoulder indicated Barnaby Rudge with his Raven. Miss Betsey Trotwood, chasing a donkey with a vindictive stick, and little Oliver, holding out his dish for "more," were both there; while a good-natured wench stooping to pick up a button off the floor, while several more, at the very moment, were bursting off the back of her dress, could be none other than dear old Peggotty.

For the second part, everyone was to write, so Harvey said, a full list of Dickens' novels, naming at least three characters in each.

Continued on page 46