

# Mrs Dickens

*Also by Emily Howes*

The Painter's Daughters

Mrs Dickens

EMILY HOWES



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*For Kit and Rose*



‘A page in my life, which once had writing on it, has become absolutely blank, and . . . it is not in my power to pretend that it has a single word upon it.’

*Charles Dickens on his twenty-two-year marriage, in a letter to his friend Angela Burdett-Coutts*

‘Once a woman has had ten children, she ceases to have a biography.’

*Hilary Mantel*



# ANNE

I have never been much interested in love.

It always seemed to me to be good for nothing much, and to lead to a great deal of problems a person might do well to live without.

When I was small and in the slums, the boys would chase us, tearing at us from behind doors and round corners, planting their wet mouths on ours or as near as they could get.

I'd slap them off me with the flat of my hand, hard as I could, and shin up a wall or a tree, quick as a cat. I would watch them braying and grabbing down below me, and hear the girls squeal. You wouldn't know if those boys were trying to give love or harm. It didn't make me warm much to the idea of love then, and it has taken a great deal to make me change my mind about it since.

They were rough, those Bow boys, pissing in the alleys between the houses, seeing who could leave the biggest stain spreading dark up the wall, until their mothers, if they had them, came out and clobbered them. I have also never much taken to the idea of beating children because of what I saw at that time. Little ones with their skinny arms and faces like bruised fruit. The boys got it worst, until they grew up into men who gave it out worst themselves. And so it went on, with a brutal hit upon yourself returned upon another later. I suppose this has been the case since God was a boy, and there is not much that anyone can do about

it, whatever books they might write upon the subject.

Of course, if any of them caught sight of me now in my house-keeper's silk, my keys at my waist, those ragged boys would run all right. They'd call me ma'am with a sort of fear in their eyes I never thought to see there, and oh how they'd toady, bowing and scraping at my skirts for the chance of a penny. They'd never recognise one of their own, the dirty, thin little thing they'd pin against the wall, trying to stick their hot, wet tongues down her childish throat till she retched. It is funny how life takes you in strange ways, and pulls you so far apart from where you began that you no longer belong there and could never go back to it, not for any money, not even if you wanted to.

When I am moving silently about the big house now, I pause sometimes at the door and watch him. My employer. Lost in his work, as lost as a child in a crowd, expressions passing over his face like shadows. They are his characters, slipping like ghosts out of his head and into the world, as they always have done all these long years that I have known him. He has always liked ghosts. Of present, past and future, of shadow children, of brides who vanish into thin air. I have read all those stories, or heard them read, clutching his children on my knee. I have sat with them when they woke in the night, sweating, and bade Mr Dickens tell them in the morning that there is nothing to fear. That ghosts are not real. That stories cannot hurt you.

I stay in my place in the doorway, half in and half out, as he scratches his pen across the paper, and stops to rest, his tongue peeping from his mouth in concentration. His eyes look past me. There is nobody else there for him at such times, except the world as he wishes to see it. And if he does not wish to see you, he will make you vanish. That, I do know.

Sometimes if I stand there for long enough unseen, I reach and touch my own arm to be sure I still exist. I am a ghost myself, now. Just as much as she. Perhaps I have always been one, flitting in and out, invisible. In the marriage, and outside it. A shadow.

Upstairs in the best bedroom, there is a small heart made of

stone. It was hers, given to her when she was still young and rosy in the face, before everything that happened afterwards. It never seemed fitting for Mrs Dickens, being as she was, to have a heart made of stone about her neck, and in many ways I am glad it got forgotten and left behind in the rush. It seems to me that if it were to be on anyone's neck now, sitting cold and heavy against their chest, it ought to be on mine.

All my life, I have thought it best not to think about things I do not like to remember. I have cleaned out the thoughts as soon as they come to me, as if with carbolic. There is not much carbolic cannot get rid of, in my experience. I scrub at the corners of my mind, getting right into the crevices. But it seems that carbolic has not quite worked to clean everything away, and I must have some other form of absolution.

I suppose it is like the confession we used to see in the Italian churches on our travels. I scoffed at it, then, the way the people would gather in their line, short and tall and thin and fat and old and young. Sitting under the gilded saints, waiting their turn to whisper their sins softly through the grille. As if talking about it will make them feel any better, I'd say, and tut, and Mr Dickens would laugh, and say with a kind of glee that no matter what wonders of the world he presented me with, I never would be moved to anything. Which shows how little he knew of me, and how much I managed to keep hidden, so that he, with all his love of keeping things within his control, might not have control of me.

Words are funny things. They spin you about. His words would draw you in so tight that you could not remember after what was your thought and what was his. But I will try to show you, if I can, some of what has not been said, because it was not put into the right words by the right people. Of what has been kept hidden, because it does not fit the story.

