

It is Samuel Johnson the conversationalist that we remember, not Johnson the writer. "A tavern chair," he said, "is the throne of human felicity"—and during the last third of his life, he sat enthroned, talking. His faithful recorder was James Boswell, and in the story below, Robert F. Young draws upon one of their first meetings to give us another fine variation on a classic fantasy theme.

MINUTES OF A MEETING AT THE MITRE

by Robert F. Young

THE ORIGINAL OF THE FOLLOWING literary fragment was among the batch of Boswelliana recently found in the west tower of the castle of Cernach, County Cork, Ireland, and every indication points to its having been included in an earlier version of *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. Although the biographer's reasons for excluding it from the final manuscript were buried with him and cannot be dug up again, we are, nevertheless, justified in drawing the following tentative conclusions: (1) that upon rereading the passage in question, Boswell realized that Dr. Dickens had not specified exactly what kind of immortality he had in mind; (2) that Boswell simultaneously realized that there was a quality about Dr. Johnson's role in the affair that did not quite meet the eye; and (3) that Boswell concluded it would be better for all parties concerned if the public were to consider Johnson as owing that to a Biographer, which Providence had enabled him to obtain for himself.

Connaught on the Snithe
January 17, 1988

On Saturday, the 2nd of July, 1763, I again supped at the *Mitre* with Dr. Johnson and Dr. Goldsmith. It happening to be a very rainy night, with a pronounced chill in the air, we chose a table next to the hearth, wherein a small fire was being maintained on the grate for the physical comfort of the patrons, few of which, owing to the unfavourable disposition of the weather, were present.

As he had done on the preceding evening, Dr. Goldsmith attempted to maintain that knowledge was undesirable on its own account because it is frequently a source of unhappiness. Johnson, who, as we have already seen, disdained this attitude, countered with a smile of ridicule. "Sir (said he), is it your contention that the scullery maid who plucks the chicken is less happy than the cook who prepares it for the table because the cook is better acquainted with the fowl's physical properties?" GOLDSMITH: "No, sir, I do not contend such to be the truth, for unhappiness resulting from knowledge comes only in the higher spheres, where knowledge elevates the traveller to lofty plateaus from which he views the world in all its petty imperfections. Faust was not a happy man." JOHNSON: "He was unhappy not because of his lore, but because of the manner in which he came by it."

This preliminary parley introduced a good supper, of which Johnson partook as enormously as he did of the wine which followed. Gradually, the veins which, during the repast, had swelled out on his forehead, subsided; and the perspiration, which the intensity of his appetite had brought into being, dwindled to a faint film of moisture. A tall, grey-suited man of indeterminate age, narrow of countenance, pale of skin, and with dark, glowing eyes, had in the meantime taken up a position before the hearth. He apologized for his proximity, saying that he was extremely susceptible to the chill and was seeking to ward it off by the only means available. He introduced himself as Dr. Dickens, whereupon Johnson bade him join us at our table.

JOHNSON (after our guest had seated himself): "Sir, the influence of a moist atmosphere upon the human frame is much overemphasized in the world. London is not the worse for its climate, but the better." DICKENS: "In that, I fear I cannot concur." JOHNSON: "London, sir, is a state of mind." DICKENS: "A most melancholy one."

Johnson ordered the serving maid to bring more wine. Dr. Dickens, however, declined a glass when

It is Samuel Johnson the conversationalist that we remember, not Johnson the

writer. "A tavern chair," he said, "is the throne of human felicity"—and during the last third of his life, he sat enthroned, talking. His faithful recorder was James

Boswell, and in the story below, Robert F. Young draws upon one of their first

meetings to give us another fine variation on a classic fantasy theme.

MINUTES OF A MEETING AT THE

MITRE

by Robert F. Young

THE ORIGINAL OF THE FOLLOWING literary fragment was among the batch of Boswelliana

recently found in the west tower of the castle of Cernach, County Cork, Ireland, and every indication points to its having been included in an earlier version of *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. Although the biographer's reasons for excluding it from the final manuscript were buried with him and cannot be dug up again, we are, nevertheless, justified in drawing the following tentative conclusions: (1) that upon rereading the passage in question, Boswell realized that Dr.

Dickens had not specified exactly what kind of immortality he had in mind; (2) that Boswell simultaneously realized that there was a quality about Dr. Johnson's role in the affair that did not quite meet the eye; and (3) that Boswell concluded it would be better for all parties concerned if the public were to consider Johnson as owing that to a Biographer, which Providence had enabled him to obtain for himself.

Connaught on the Snithe

January 17, 1988

On Saturday, the 2nd of July, 1763, I again supped at the *Mitre* with Dr. Johnson and Dr. Goldsmith. It happening to be a very rainy night, with a pronounced chill in the air, we chose a

table next to the hearth, wherein a small fire was being maintained on the grate for the physickal comfort of the patrons, few of which, owing to the unfavourable disposition of the weather, were present.

As he had done on the preceding evening, Dr. Goldsmith attempted to maintain that knowledge was undesirable on its own account because it is frequently a source of unhappiness. Johnson, who, as we have already seen, disdained this attitude, countered with a smile of ridicule. "Sir (said he), is it your contention that the scullery maid who plucks the chicken is less happy than the cook who prepares it for the table because the cook is better acquainted with the fowl's physickal

properties?" GOLDSMITH:

"No, sir, I do not contend such to be the truth, for unhappiness resulting from knowledge comes only in the higher spheres, where knowledge elevates the traveller to lofty plateaus from which he views the world in all its petty imperfections. Faust was not a happy man." JOHNSON: "He was unhappy not because of his lore, but because of the manner in which he came by it."

This preliminary parley introduced a good supper, of which Johnson partook as enormously as he did of the wine which followed. Gradually, the veins which, during the repast, had swelled out on his forehead, subsided; and the perspiration, which the intensity of his

appetite had brought into being, dwindled to a faint film of moisture. A tall, grey-suited man of indeterminate age, narrow of countenance, pale of skin, and with dark, glowing eyes, had in the meantime taken up a position before the hearth. He apologized for his proximity, saying that he was extremely susceptible to the chill and was seeking to ward it off by the only means available. He introduced himself as Dr. Dickens, whereupon Johnson bade him join us at our table.

JOHNSON (after our guest had seated himself): "Sir, the influence of a moist atmosphere upon the human frame is much overemphasized in the world. London is not the worse for its climate,

but the better." DICKENS: "In that, I fear I cannot concur." JOHNSON: "London, sir, is a state of mind." DICKENS: "A most melancholy one."

Johnson ordered the serving maid to bring more wine. Dr. Dickens, however, declined a glass when it was proffered him, although he of all those present seemed most in need of it. Indeed, there was an intense pallor present in his face, a pallor made to seem all the more acute by the thinness of his cheeks and the burning quality of his eyes. I could not forbear commenting, however indirectly, upon his unhealthy appearance. "Can it be, sir (said I), that you are used to a warmer and more consistent climate and have not as yet become accustomed to

the idiosyncrasies of London weather?"

"I shall never become accustomed to the idiosyncrasies of London weather (said he), no more than I shall ever become accustomed to the idiosyncrasies of London lexicographers."

Although it was toward myself that this observation was addressed, it was toward Dr. Johnson that the pale man's burning gaze was directed. Johnson returned the gaze, if not in kind, then in spirit. "Why, sir (said he), I consider the idiosyncrasies of both to be beyond reproach; but, although you endeavoured to cloak your scurrilous remark in ambiguity, I perceive that I alone inspired it; and I must conclude,

therefore, that I am the lexicographer to whom you specifically refer." DICKENS: "There is none other to whom I could be referring, there being in the British Isles at this time none of comparable reknown or of comparable asininity."

My indignation was of such magnitude that it was beyond my ability to repress it. BOSWELL: "Sir, how dare you address Dr. Johnson in so disrespectful a manner?" GOLDSMITH: "How dare you, sir, indeed!" DICKENS: "I both dare to and have done so."

Johnson blew out his breath like a whale and swallowed three glasses of port. "Sir (said he), I perceive you are a vile Whig." DICKENS; Sir, I am more

than that: I am the first Whig."

JOHNSON:

"Then, sir, you are the Devil."

DICKENS: "Precisely."

Johnson blinked one of his eyes. Then, unexpectedly, he smiled. "Can it be then, sir (said he), that you have come to bargain for my soul? If so, have you not presumed too much? I did not invoke you." DICKENS: "You invoked me deliberately, and you know it, when you imputed Faust's *Weltschmerz* to the pact he made with me. But that would not have been sufficient, *per se*, to have caused me to forsake my warm and cheerful fireside for this dismal fog bank you call London and this wretched grotto of gluttony you call the *Mitre*. Only

because your remark culminated your affronts to me was I forced to come. I overlooked your writing 'Hell' off in your spiteful lexicon as 'the place into which the taylor throws his shreds' and I overlooked your writing *me* off in the same outrageous lucubration as à

ludicrous term for mischief'. But I cannot and I will not overlook three examples of your cynical asperity in a row. Yes: I have come to bargain for your soul, sir; and you are going to sell it to me." JOHNSON:

"And what shall I receive in return?"

DICKENS: "Immortality, of course."

JOHNSON (with a smile of triumph):

"Very well, sir, I will sell it to you. And afterward, sir, I suggest that you do

myself and my companions the courtesy of unburdening our good company with your uncivil presence."

From the interior of his grey coat, Dickens produced a document with a bright-red border and spread it out on the table before Dr. Johnson. He next called the serving maid, and bade her bring quill and ink. JOHNSON (with a roar of mocking laughter): "What—you do not want it signed in blood?" DICKENS: "Sir, you would do well to pay less attention to old wives' tales and more to the world around you. When signed in ink, one of my contracts is as binding as one of yours is. That line right there at the bottom, please. Where it says 'signature of litterateur'."

Both my legal instincts and my awareness of Dr. Johnson's notoriously poor eyesight caused me to lean forward in an attempt to discern what was written on the paper. In this, I was thwarted by none other than Johnson himself, who, almost as though he did not want me to see the contents of the document, turned sideways so that his massive shoulder intervened between my eyes and the page. "Sir (said I), might it not be the better part of wisdom to permit me to act as your representative in this matter?" JOHNSON (signing his name with a flourish): "No, no, Boswell. Let us be rid of this blockhead once and for all. What court of law would ever uphold such a

ludicrous negotiation?" DICKENS: "One of mine."

I did not like the expression of self-satisfaction on the man's countenance; but Dr. Johnson was right, and he had signed his name for no other reason than to get rid of this demented dolt who fancied himself to be none other than Old Nick himself; and as for the contract, Johnson was right about that too: no court of law would ever uphold such a ridiculous agreement; and even were a court to do so, the paradox inherent in the terms would invalidate them, for a man who has been rendered immortal retains his soul forever, and could not part with it even if he wanted to.

Dickens, seemingly divining my thoughts, had fixed me with a gaze of such intensity that when I met his burning eyes, my mind reeled. I felt as though hot, invisible fingers were digging into my brain, arranging this pattern of thought and re-arranging that. The sensation did not last long (indeed, in retrospect, I am not certain that I experienced it at all), and after a moment, Dickens lowered his gaze, returned the document to the interior of his coat, and stood up. He stepped over to the hearth and resumed his position before the grate, and when next I looked, he was gone.

Dr. Johnson, meanwhile, had resumed his conversation with Goldsmith, who,

as usual, was

endeavouring to *shine*. JOHNSON:

"Why, sir, in making such a prognostication, you are assuming Fielding to have been a literary giant. This is manifestly untrue."

GOLDSMITH: "But in *Tom Jones* he penned a masterpiece that virtually ensures his immortality." JOHNSON:

"Pish. It is not for what they write during their lifetimes that literary men are remembered by posterity, but for what they *say*." GOLDSMITH: "But sir, who

will ever know what they said if they were too indolent to write it down?"

JOHNSON: "The wise man sees to it that it *is* written down."

It was shortly following this meeting

at the *Mitre* that my mind began to be impregnated with what I have already referred to, for lack of a more scientifick term, as *the Johnsonian aether*, and soon afterward I began committing to paper the exuberant variety of Dr. Johnson's wisdom and wit. I have since had no cause to regret my assiduousness in this matter, for it, together with the various letters, papers, &c. which I have collected, has enabled me to execute my labors with a facility which would otherwise have been impossible.

On Sunday, the 3rd of July, it was my pleasure to attend one of the *levees* for which Dr. Johnson was so famous at the time. I found him sur—

(Here the fragment ends.)