A cautionary tale


The narrator in all the stories is a magazine editor. 'We' is editorial rather than plural. 'The spotted dog' opens with a letter he receives, imploring literary employment. The writer, Julius Mackenzie, gives his full life story. He is a scholar, a poet, multilingual, now living in poverty with a wife — 'not a lady' — and four children. He is 'employed on the staff of two or three of the 'Penny Dreadfuls' ... I write for them matter, which we among ourselves call 'blood and nastiness'."

'It so happened', the narrator continues, 'that at that time we had been asked to provide an index to a certain learned manuscript in three volumes. The intended publisher of the work had already procured an index from a professional compiler of such matters; but the thing had been so badly done that it could not be used. Some knowledge of the classics was required ... the gentleman who had had the task in hand had failed conspicuously, and I had been told by my enterprising friend Mr X——, the publisher, that £25 would be freely paid on the proper accomplishment of the undertaking. The work, apparently so trifling in its nature, demanded a scholar's acquirements, and could hardly be completed in less than two months. We had snubbed the offer, saying that we should be ashamed to ask an educated man to give his time and labour for so small a remuneration; — but to Mr Julius Mackenzie £25 for two months' work would manifestly be a godsend. ... We certainly knew no one else who could and would do the work promptly for that money. ...'

Mackenzie comes for interview and is obviously a drunkard. Asked to give a reference, 'Mr Grimes of the Spotted Dog knows me better than anyone else,' said he. The editor duly visits the pub, where the landlord's wife, Mrs Grimes, assures him, 'As for book learning, sir; — it doesn't matter what language it is, it's all as one to him. He knows 'em all round ... he knows off by heart whole books full of learning.' However, he also learns, 'He's got a bad wife, sir; the worst as ever was. Talk of drink — there's nothing that woman wouldn't do for it.'

The narrator also visits the "Penny Dreadful" office, where he finds their editor 'sitting in a dark cupboard', and is told that if Mackenzie takes up the new job offer, he can no longer write for the periodicals. The narrator reflects: 'Should Mr Mackenzie abandon his present engagement for the sake of the job which we proposed to put in his hands, might he not thereby injure rather than improve his prospects? We were acquainted with only one learned doctor desirous of having his manuscript codified and indexed at his own expense.'

The Doctor, the author of the work, 'was charmed with our account of the man, and saw with his mind's eye the work, for the performance of which he was pining, perfected in a manner that would be a blessing to the scholars of all future ages.... He was full of a dream of future friendship with a man who would be able to discuss the digamma with him, who would have studied Greek metres, and have an opinion of his own as to Porson's canon.' The editor engages him and 'the manuscript was produced upon the table. If he would undertake the work and perform it, he should be paid £8:6s:8d for each of the three volumes as they were completed. ... At first he was in ecstasies, and as we explained to him the way in which the index should be brought out and the codification performed, he turned over the pages rapidly, and showed us that he understood at any rate the nature of the work to be done. But when we came to details he was less happy.'

He wants to work on the index in the pub. The narrator visits Mrs Grimes again to arrange a room for him to work in — in fact, the Grimes's bedroom. Mrs Grimes confirms 'that the papers would not be safe in the rooms inhabited by Mackenzie and his wife ... "a wretched place" they are all huddled together any ways; and how he manages to do a thing at all there, — in the way of author-work, — is a wonder to everybody'.

The prospective indexer meets the author. 'The volumes of the ms were displayed upon the table. The compiler of them, as he lifted here a page and there a page, handled them with the gentleness of a lover. They had been exquisitely arranged, and were very fair. The pagings, and the margins, and the chapterings, and all the complementary paraphernalia of authorship, were perfect.' The Doctor acknowledged that the sum proposed for the aid which he required was inconsiderable; — but it had in fact been fixed by the proposed publisher. Should Mr Mackenzie find that the labour was long he would willingly increase it. ... When it was suggested that references would be required, it seemed that [Mackenzie] did know his way into the library of the British Museum.

'Before the end of the first month the index of the first volume, nearly completed, had been sent down for the inspection of the Doctor [the author], and had been returned with ample eulogium and some little criticism. The criticisms Mackenzie answered by letter, with true scholarly spirit, and the Doctor was delighted. ... When he found that the work was really in industrious hands, he ceased to be clamorous for early publication, and gave us to understand privately that Mr Mackenzie was not to be limited to the sum named. The matter of remuneration was, indeed, left very much to ourselves, and Mackenzie had certainly found a most efficient friend in the author whose works had been confided to his hands.' Nevertheless, there was a terrible skeleton in the cupboard ... 'a certain portion of his prosperity reached the hands of his wife, and she was behaving herself worse than ever. ... She came in a state of furious intoxication to the Spotted Dog, and was removed by the police under the express order of the landlord'.

Ultimately, drunkenness and despair prevail. Mackenzie threatens suicide; the editor suggests Mackenzie comes for a walk with him, and has to put away the papers in the pub bedroom, with Mrs Grimes's assistance. 'We were astonished to find how much she had come to know about the work. Added to the Doctor's manuscript there were now the pages of Mackenzie's indexes, — and there were other pages of references, for use in making future indexes, — as to all of which Mrs Grimes seemed to be quite at home.'

Alas, Mackenzie's wife burns the ms, and he cuts his throat. The author comments, 'If Newton bore it, surely I can'.

Hazel K Bell