

## Remembering D. Jacques Benoliel

By Peter A. Benoliel

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I first entered the world of Charles Dickens in my pre-adolescence with a reading of *Oliver Twist*. Fagan, the Artful Dodger, Bill Sikes and Nancy remain, to this day, unforgettable characters. It may have been my father's enthusiasm for Dickens that prompted his suggestion I read the book.

I was dimly aware that my father collected books, and his concentration up to that time had been on James Branch Cabell. With Mabel Zahn of Charles Sessler the Bookseller as his mentor, he had put together a complete collection of that author's first editions. He then turned his attention to Dickens. I was fascinated when he showed me his acquisition, through Ms. Zahn, of *Our Mutual Friend* in the original parts.

Being a member of the Library's Rare Book Committee, he was undoubtedly aware of the William Elkins Collection as he sought a focus for collecting works of Charles Dickens. Enthusiastic about the theatre, Dickens had attempted his hand at drama (what could be more dramatic than the novels themselves?!), organized and participated with friends in theatrical evenings and ultimately satisfied his thespian ambitions by presenting, on tour, readings from his own works. If memory serves correctly, Emlen Williams, the noted Welsh actor, replicated those readings on an American tour in the early 1950s. I have a clear recollection of the actor visiting our home to view my father's collection.

With the guidance and expertise of Mabel Zahn, my father zealously purchased, principally through auction, all of the Dickens letters he could put his hands on relating to the theatre. Among my fondest memories were wintry Saturday afternoons spent in the inner sanctum of Sessler's, where Ms. Zahn would show material to my father, as well as review upcoming auctions. It was heady stuff for a young teenager in love with literature.

In the '50s, there was a scholar, Professor Humphrey House, at Cambridge University who was working on what he hoped would be a definitive edition of Dickens' works, including his many letters. Naturally, my father was eager to cooperate, and I remember well his having his collection microfilmed and sent to Professor House, a procedure that continued as each new letter was added to the collection. In the summer of 1952, my family traveled to England, where we enjoyed a memorable luncheon at Cambridge with Professor House and the world-famed physicist Professor Paul Dirac.

Following my father's death in 1954, my mother and I decided to continue supporting and increasing the collection, which he had bequeathed to the Free Library. We were encouraged and assisted in this endeavor by Ellen Shaffer, then head of the Rare Books Department, and Ms. Zahn at Sessler's. In turn, upon her death in 1982, my mother

created an endowment for this effort, and over the past 30 years I have had the pleasure of being involved, with the succeeding heads of the Rare Books Department, in the augmentation of the D. J. Benoliel Collection.

As I recount the origins of my father's collection and his infectious enthusiasm for Charles Dickens, I recognize how profoundly blessed and enriched I have been to bear witness and share the joys of collecting and giving.