opening extract from

Awful End

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Episode 1

Crinkly Around the Edges

In which Eddie Dickens is sent away for his own good

When Eddie Dickens was eleven years old, both his parents caught some awful disease that made them turn yellow, go a bit crinkly round the edges, and smell of old hot-water bottles.

There were lots of diseases like that in those days. Perhaps it had something to do with all that thick fog, those knobbly cobbled streets and the fact that everyone went everywhere by horse . . . even to the bathroom. Who knows?

'It's very contagious,' said his father.

'And catching,' said his mother, sucking on an ice cube shaped like a famous general.

They were in Eddie's parents' bedroom, which was very dark and dingy and had no furniture in it

except for a large double bed, an even larger wardrobe, and thirty-two different types of chair designed to make you sit up straight even if your wrists were handcuffed to your ankles.

'Why are you sucking an ice cube shaped like a famous general?' Eddie asked his parents, who were propped up against piles of pillows in their impressively ugly double bed.

'Doctor Muffin says that it helps with the swelling,' said his mother. In fact, because she had a famous-general-shaped ice cube in her mouth, what she actually said was, 'Dotter Muffin schez va it hewlpz wiva schwelln,' but Eddie managed to translate.

'What swelling?' he asked politely.

His mother shrugged, then suddenly looked even more yellow and even more crinkly round the edges.

'And why do they have to be famous-general-shaped?' asked Eddie. He always asked lots of questions and whenever he asked lots of questions his father would say: 'Questions! Questions!'

'Questions! Questions!' said his father.

Told you.

'But why a famous general?' Eddie repeated. 'Surely the shape of the ice cube can't make any difference?'

'Schows sow muck chew no,' muttered his

mother, which meant (and still means), 'Shows how much you know.'

His father rustled the bedclothes. 'One does not question the good doctor,' he said. 'Especially when one is a child.' He was a small man except for when he was sitting up in bed. In this position, he looked extremely tall.

Then Eddie's mother rustled the bedclothes. It was easy to make them rustle because they were made entirely from brown paper bags glued together with those extra strips of gummed paper you sometimes get if you buy more than one stamp at the post office.

Postage stamps were a pretty new idea back then, and everyone – except for a great-great-great-aunt on my mother's side of the family – was excited about them.

One good thing about there being so few stamps in those days was that no one had yet come up with the idea of collecting them and sticking them in albums and being really boring about them. Stamp collectors didn't exist. Another good thing about there being no stamp collectors was that English teachers couldn't sneak up on some defenceless child and ask it* how to spell 'philatelist'.

* Teachers even thought of a child as 'it' back then. Some things never change.

Anyhow, even for those days, having brown paper bedclothes wasn't exactly usual. Quite the opposite, in fact. Bedclothes used to be an even grander affair then than they are now.

There were no polyester-filled duvets with separate washable covers. Oh, no. Back then there were underblankets and undersheets and top sheets and middle sheets and seven different kinds of overblankets. These ranged from ones thicker than a plank of wood (but not so soft) to ones which had holes in them that were supposed to be there.

To make a bed properly, the average chambermaid went through six to eight weeks' training at a special camp. Even then, not all of them finished the course and those that didn't finish spent the rest of their working lives living in cupboards under stairs.

The cupboard under the stairs of the Dickens household was occupied by Gibbering Jane. She spent her days in the darkness, alongside a variety of mops, buckets and brooms, mumbling about 'hospital corners' and 'ruckled chenille'. She never came out, and was fed slices of ham and any other food that was thin enough to slip under the bottom of the door.

The reason why Mr and Mrs Dickens had rustling brown paper sheets and blankets was that this was a part of the Treatment. Dr Muffin was

always giving very strict instructions about the Treatment.

The smell of old hot-water bottles had almost reached 'unbearable' on Eddie's what-I'm-prepared-to-breathe scale, and he held his hanky up to his face.

'You'll have to leave the room, my boy,' said his father.

'You'll have to leave the house,' said his mother. 'We can't risk you going all yellow and crinkly and smelling horrible. It would be a terrible waste of all that money we spent on turning you into a little gentleman.'

'Which is why we're sending you to stay with Mad Uncle Jack,' his father explained.

'I didn't know I had a Mad Uncle Jack,' gasped Eddie. He'd never heard of him. He sounded rather an exciting relative to have.

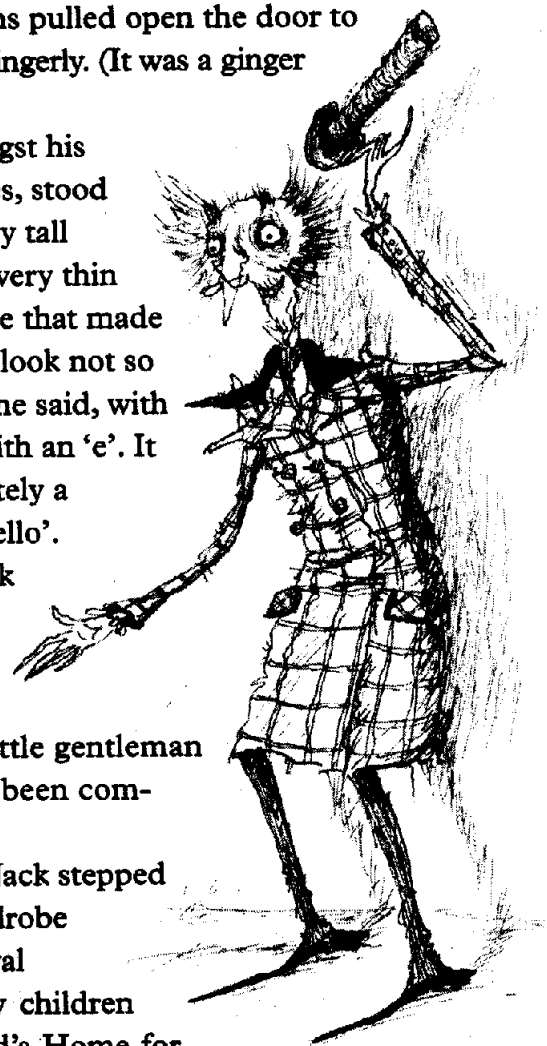
'I didn't say *your* Mad Uncle Jack. He's *my* Mad Uncle Jack,' said his father. 'I do wish you'd listen. That makes him your great-uncle.'

'Oh,' said Eddie disappointed. 'You mean Mad *Great*-uncle Jack.' Then he realised that he hadn't heard of him either and he sounded just as exciting as the other one. 'When will I meet him?'

'He's in the wardrobe,' said his mother, pointing at the huge wardrobe at the foot of the bed, in case her son had forgotten what a wardrobe looked like.

Eddie Dickens pulled open the door to the wardrobe, gingerly. (It was a ginger wardrobe.)

Inside, amongst his mother's dresses, stood a very, very, very tall and very, very, very thin man with a nose that made a parrot's beak look not so beaky. 'Hullo,' he said, with a 'u' and not with an 'e'. It was very definitely a 'hullo' not a 'hello'. Mad Uncle Jack put out his hand.



Eddie shook it. His little gentleman lessons hadn't been completely wasted.

Mad Uncle Jack stepped out of the wardrobe and onto an oval mat knitted by children from St Horrid's Home for Grateful Orphans. Remember that place: St Horrid's Home for Grateful Orphans. There. I've written it out for you a second time. Never let it be

said that I don't do anything for you. Remember the name. You'll come across it again one day, and probably between the covers of this book.

'So you are Edmund Dickens,' said Mad Uncle Jack, studying the boy.

'Yes, sir,' said Eddie, because his first name really was Edmund.

Eddie Dickens's father cleared his throat. He used a miniature version of the sort of brush the local sweep used to clear blocked chimneys. This was all a part of Dr Muffin's Treatment.

'Edmund,' said Mr Dickens, 'you are to go with my uncle and live with him until your dear, sweet mother and I –' he paused and kissed Mrs Dickens on the part of her face that was the least yellow and the least crinkly at the edges (a small section just behind her left ear) '– are well again. You must never wear anything green in his presence, you must always drink at least five glasses of lukewarm water a day, and you must always do as he says. Is that clear?'

'Yes, Father,' said Eddie.

'And, Jonathan,' added his mother, for Jonathan was the pet name she called Eddie when she couldn't remember his real one.

'Yes, Mother?'

'Do be careful to make sure that you're not mistaken for a runaway orphan and taken to the

orphanage where you will then suffer cruelty, hardship and misery.'

'Don't worry, Mother. That'll never happen,' said Eddie Dickens, dismissing the idea as ridiculous.

If only he'd listened.

Mad Uncle Jack wanted to use the bathroom before he went and, being unfamiliar with the house, he found it difficult to get his horse up the stairs without knocking one or two family portraits off the wall.

The fact that he'd only nailed the portraits up there himself minutes before made it all the more annoying. He took the paintings with him whenever he strayed more than eleven miles from his house. Because his house was actually twelve miles from the nearest place, that meant he always had them with him.

A key part of the Treatment was that neither Mr Dickens nor his wife Mrs Dickens should leave their bed more than three times a day. Because they had both already been up twice that day, and both planned to get up later for an arm-wrestling competition against their friends and neighbours Mr and Mrs Thackery, who lived over at The Grange, neither of Eddie's parents could get up to see him off.

Instead, the bed was lowered from their window

on a winch constructed from the sheets that were no longer in use since the Treatment began.

'Good luck, my boy,' said Eddie's father. 'Under such extreme circumstances, I would kiss you, but I don't want you catching this.'

'Get well, Father,' said Eddie.

'Be good, Simon,' said his mother. Simon was the name Mrs Dickens used when she couldn't remember that his real name was Edmund or that his pet name was Jonathan. 'Be good.'

'I will,' said Eddie. 'Get well, Mother.'

It had started to rain and the raindrops mixed with the tears that poured down his mother's face. She was busy peeling an onion.