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## Darkness and a Little Hyperbole

by Garf Collins

Darkness is cheap but not always bearable. It brings to mind the *Invictus* poem by William Henley;

*Out of the night that covers me  
Black as the pit from pole to pole...*

This suggests we can never describe darkness without a comparator. Another example is 'black as Newgate's knocker.'

Here, I must confess to a secret hobbyhorse (well, secret until now) which is to avoid using a saying such as that if I don't know its origin. Consequently, I know that there was a black knocker on the gate of Newgate prison in times gone by. There are also many sayings about light.

One which intrigued me was 'to candle it.' I came across this when I was negotiating with an American businessman. If I said something like, 'We have a lot of business in the USA which must be of value to the joint venture.' He would say, "We'll have to candle that." His meaning was to examine it closely.

I thought that this must relate to the expression, 'It's not worth the candle.' This stems from a time when candles were the only form of illumination and were expensive. So you didn't waste their light on something worthless. However, on closer enquiry, I now believe that it comes from the process of examining eggs which were intended to hatch.

It's now done with artificial light, but long ago, it was done by holding an egg close to a candle in a dark room. Apparently, it was possible to see shapes within the shell and discern whether an egg was fertilised. If so, it was worth leaving in the incubator.

Having established that to my satisfaction, meetings with my American collaborator became a lot less tedious. Every time he used the expression, I would imagine him, standing in a barn dressed as a peasant, peering closely at an egg with just a single candle's light.

'It's not worth the candle,' implied that light was costly and, consequently, darkness cost nothing. But 'to candle an egg,' had the opposite implication. Darkness was expensive since an unfertilised egg in the incubator would rot and explode - unless detected by the investigative candlelight.

But wasn't this piece supposed to involve hyperbole? I'm coming to that little by little albeit at the pace of a tortoise. Even the horses of the apocalypse couldn't drag me faster to this objective. The task is akin to the rolling of a boulder uphill by Sisyphus.

Whenever I think of a nice piece of hyperbole, it seems to overwhelm me, and I have to begin over again. Believe me, I am moving heaven and earth to accomplish the objective, but cruel fate is against me. And all the time I sit here the lights are blazing and causing me an astronomical bill. So I'll turn them off because darkness is cheap.