THE MYSTERY OF EDWIN DROOD

CHARLES DICKENS

With an Introduction by C. DAY LEWIS,
an Essay by EDMUND WILSON, *and other*
informative appendices

COLLINS
LONDON AND GLASGOW

EDWIN DROOD

CHARLES DICKENS
1812-1870

First published, 1870
This edition, 1956
Latest reprint, 1961

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
COLLINS CLEAR-TYPE PRESS

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CHARLES DICKENS

CHARLES JOHN HUFFAM DICKENS was born at Portsea on February 7th, 1812, the second child of John Dickens, a minor clerk in the Navy Pay Office (then at Portsmouth) and of his wife Elizabeth, née Barrow.

Owing to his father's congenital incapacity to manage his financial affairs, Charles Dickens' childhood was spent under the shadow of economic insecurity, a shadow that grew darker year by year as the family moved, first to London, then to Chatham and from there back to London, and which at one time (early in 1824) threatened to blot out for ever all prospects the boy might have had of a successful career. At that time the steadily declining family fortunes had reached their nadir with the arrest of John Dickens and his removal to the debtors' prison of the Marshalsea. Mrs. Dickens with four of her children went to join her husband in prison, and young Charles was sent to work at a blacking factory, where for six shillings a week he had to stick labels on pots of paste-blacking. These few months were for Dickens a time of utter misery, humiliation and despair the memory of which, as he later confessed, he could never quite shake off. However, a timely legacy came to the rescue. It enabled John Dickens to leave prison and to send his son to a school at Hampstead —he had had some previous schooling at Chatham—where he remained for two or three years.

In 1827, at the age of fifteen, he entered a solicitor's office as a junior clerk. This position, though by no means well paid, enabled him to establish a certain independence for himself, to make his own friends and to indulge his taste for the theatre which he was to retain all his life.

Having taught himself shorthand, he became (in 1829) a reporter in one of the offices of "Doctors' Commons," advancing a year later to the position of a parliamentary reporter, and further still to that of a newspaper reporter on

the *Morning Chronicle* at the respectable salary of five guineas a week.

In 1833 he wrote his first sketch for the *Old Monthly Magazine;* other sketches followed quickly, and a year later the name of "Boz" was attached to them. In 1836 the first series of *Sketches by Boz* appeared in volume form. Their success was immediate. The same year Dickens married Catherine Hogarth. The same year also Chapman & Hall commissioned him to write the letterpress for a projected series of Cockney sporting plates by the caricature artist Seymour. Dickens "thought of Pickwick" and this was the origin of the *Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* by which Dickens established his fame for all time. They appeared first in twenty monthly instalments, beginning in April 1836, and were subsequently published in book form in 1837.

Dickens' rise from obscurity and relative poverty to a position of unique eminence and of wealth was spectacular and dramatic in its suddenness. Within a very few years of the appearance of *Pickwick* he had become the most popular novelist this country had yet known; more than that, he had become a public institution. Book followed book, and his literary activity was henceforth not to cease until the very eve of his death some thirty years later.

Oliver Twist came out in 1838; *Nicholas Nickleby* followed a year later. *Master Humphrey's Clock,* in three volumes containing *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge* appeared in 1841.

In 1842 Dickens, accompanied by his wife, made his first tour to the United States and Canada. After his return in 1842 he published *American Notes* and in 1843 *Martin Chuzzlewit,* both works reflecting in a not very complimentary manner some of the author's impressions of America. 1843 also saw the appearance of *A Christmas Carol,* the first of Dickens' Christmas books which he continued later with *The Chimes, The Cricket on the Hearth,* etc.

Dickens lived with his ever growing family—in all ten children were born to him during his married life which ended in 1858 by separation from his wife—at successive

residences in London, and finally at Gadshill near Gravesend which had been the dream place of his childhood.

He travelled a good deal abroad, staying at—among other places—Genoa (1844-45), Lausanne, Paris (1846) and Boulogne (during the summers of 1853-56).

He reached the height of his literary fame with *David Copperfield* in which he drew his father's caricatured portrait as Mr. Micawber. Shortly after its publication in 1849 Dickens re-entered journalism with the founding of the weekly magazine *Household Words* of which he was chief owner, editor and contributor. In 1859 he replaced the magazine by another almost identical one called *All the Year Round* which he continued to edit until his death.

His next main works after *David Copperfield* were *Bleak House* (1853), *Little Dorrit* (1857), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1860) and *Great Expectations* (1861).

In later years, under the relentless pressure of work and of the many activities which his restless nature imposed on him his health began to suffer. In 1858 he had instituted public readings of his own works on a professional basis, a venture which proved an immediate and outstanding success but which perhaps more than anything else undermined his constitution. His second American tour as reader of his own works was one long triumphal—and exhausting—march. His health broke down completely in 1869, and he died from a cerebral stroke at Gadshill Place on June 9th 1870, leaving behind unfinished his last work *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. He was buried in Westminster Abbey.

H. d. R.

CONTENTS

PAGE

CHARLES DICKENS 5

INTRODUCTION 11

CHAPTER

1. *The Dawn* 21
2. *A Dean, and a Chapter also* 25
3. *The Nuns' House* 37
4. *Mr. Sapsea* 50
5. *Mr. Durdles and Friend* 61
6. *Philanthropy in Minor Canon Corner* 68
7. *More Confidences Than One* 79
8. *Daggers Drawn* 89
9. *Birds in the Bush* 99
10. *Smoothing the Way* 116
11. *A Picture and a Ring* 132
12. *A Night with Durdles* 148
13. *Both at Their Best* 164
14. *When Shall These Three Meet Again?* 176
15. *Impeached* 191
16. *Devoted* 201
17. *Philanthropy, Professional and Unprofessional* 212
18. *A Settler in Cloisterham* 229
19. *Shadow on the Sun-Dial* 239
20. *A Flight* 247
21. *A Recognition* 259
22. *A Gritty State of Things Comes On* 266
23. *The Dawn Again* 285

APPENDIX I (*The Mystery of Edwin Drood*) 305

APPENDIX II (*John Forster on "Edwin Drood"*) 323

APPENDIX III ((*The Problem of Edwin Drood*) 337

BIBLIOGRAPHY : EDWIN DROOD 349

BIBLIOGRAPHY 351

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INTRODUCTION

EDWIN DROOD is a mystery within a mystery. When Dickens died on June 10th, 1870, he had written only six of the twelve parts in which the book had been planned. Edwin Drood disappears under mysterious circumstances. His watch and shirt-pin are found close to the weir of a river which he has visited with Neville Landless on the last night he is seen alive. Suspicion falls upon Neville, who has previously quarrelled with Edwin; but since the body cannot be found, Neville is set at liberty. Edwin's uncle, John Jasper, precentor of Cloisterham cathedral, is the real villain of the piece. We are left in no doubt that it is he who murdered, or at least attempted to murder Edwin: it is he who has so arranged things that the weight of suspicion falls upon Neville: he is madly in love with Rosa, his ward, who from childhood has been betrothed to Edwin—the motive for murdering his nephew is to prevent these two marrying and to get the girl for himself.

So much for the known facts, as they appear in the unfinished novel. Apart from these, there are certain clues, placed by Dickens with all the cunning of a master detection-novelist. We may confidently deduce from the long black silk scarf Jasper wears, from his interest in quicklime and the tomb of Mrs. Sapsea, from his nocturnal exploration of the cathedral with Durdles, how the crime was committed and the body disposed of. The obvious problems are—how was the story intended to continue, and how would Jasper be brought to justice. The theory that murder was only attempted, that Edwin escaped and would return at the end of the book to expose his uncle, appears untenable. In *The Problem of Edwin Drood* (1912), Sir W. Robertson Nicoll set out enough evidence to establish the fact of murder, beyond any reasonable doubt—Dickens' eldest son, [illegible] "positively declared that he had heard from his fathe[illegible]ps

that Edwin Drood was dead"—and incidentally listed over eighty books and articles written about the mystery up to that date.

On pp. 133-140 of his book, Nicoll discusses various theories about the murder, and his summing-up seems convincing. We can be fairly sure that Edwin's body, when discovered, was to be identified by a gold ring—perhaps also by his keys or metal buttons—which the quicklime could not destroy. But this identification would not of itself convict Jasper. In his chapter "Who Was Datchery?" Nicoll approves the conjecture that Datchery is Neville's sister, Helena, in disguise, and that it is she who will finally unmask Jasper. She will then marry Mr. Crisparkle, Neville's tutor; Rosa will marry Tartar, the retired naval officer; Neville, it is thought, may be killed in the attempt to apprehend Jasper. Such might well be a correct outline of the *dênouement*. But Jasper is a thoroughly wicked man, a monster: in chapter 20 Dickens speaks of "the criminal intellect" as "a horrible wonder apart", not to be reconciled with "the average intellect of average men." How could even a clever, determined and fearless girl like Helena extract a confession from such a man?

Jasper is an opium addict. Mr. Edmund Wilson dismisses the old theory that he will be made to confess under the influence of opium, on the grounds that Wilkie Collins had just used the same device in *The Moonstone*. He supports, instead, Mr. Aubrey Boyd's idea that a confession is to be extracted through hypnosis. Now there is no doubt about Dickens' interest in mesmerism; no doubt that Jasper exercises "mesmeric" influence over Rosa and some of the other characters; no doubt that Helena is capable of resisting this influence and even of imposing her own strong will upon Jasper. On the other hand, hypnosis is only effective if the subject to some degree co-operates wittingly or unwittingly. Can we imagine Jasper being co-operative under the circumstances? We may, of course, by-pass this obstacle by saying that Dickens knew nothing about modern scientific hypnosis, and that mesmerism as he understood it *could* break down a subject's resistence. Or, if we believe

that Jasper was a split personality, we might conceive it possible that under hypnosis the Jekyll in him would co-operate over the exposure of the Hyde.

When I first read *The Mystery of Edwin Drood,* I was at once arrested by the passage in chapter 3 which begins, "As, in some cases of drunkenness, and in others of animal magnetism, there are two states of consciousness which never clash, but each of which pursues its separate course as though it were continuous instead of broken," and I leapt to the conclusion that this was a hint of some schizophrenic tendency in Jasper. Edmund Wilson comes to the same conclusion. On the other hand, we must take note of Jasper's pathological irritability and his abnormal resentment against people who get in his way: both these characteristics are signs, not of a schizophrenic condition, but of a paranoiac; and so are the delusions from which at times he suffers, though these could be attributed also to the opium habit. However, the important thing is to distinguish between the character Dickens believed he was creating, and the character which in fact he created. The passage in chapter 20, from which I have quoted, speaks of Jasper as a criminal. Throughout the book, apart from his surface respectability, he is seen as a wicked man, doing and thinking evil: he is all Hyde and no Jekyll. The passage in his diary, which he shows to Mr. Crisparkle at the end of chapter 6, vowing to discover and destroy the person who has killed his "dear boy," may be interpreted no less satisfactorily as a criminal's deliberate device to cover his tracks than as the tragic irony of a Jekyll vowing himself in good faith to the avenging of a murder his own Hyde personality has committed. Edmund Wilson claims that in this novel Dickens "is to explore the deep entanglement and conflict of the bad and the good in one man:" but at what point of the book do we see "the good," any good, in Jasper?

There is another obstacle to the split-personality hypothesis.* Although in fact the schizophrenic does remember the actions of his *alter ego,* Dickens' own words—"two states

* In the previous paragraph I have used the schizophrenic theory; but there is great doubt among alienists whether Jekyll-Hyde is not rather an illustration of fugue or dissociation.

of consciousness *which never clash*"—suggest that he was unaware of this. At any rate, almost every time we meet Jasper after the crime, he behaves like a consciously guilty man. In the scene with Rosa by the sundial, for example, he very nearly comes out with the truth; and earlier, he has all but betrayed his guilt to Mr. Grewgious. If he is a Jekyll at any point, he is but thinly so, when he is singing the cathedral services: and of this Dickens wrote, "Constantly exercising an Art which brought him into mechanical harmony with others. . . it is curious to consider that the spirit of the man was in moral accordance or interchange with nothing around him." This suggests to me the conscienceless criminal and the hypocrite rather than the split personality. My own view is that Dickens intended Jasper to be an out-and-out bad hat (at times he talks and behaves like a villain of melodrama), but that certain characteristics both of the schizophrenic and the paranoiac, which Dickens had possibly observed in himself, crept in to confuse the picture and to enrich it.

We should, at any rate, pay careful attention to what Dickens actually wrote in *Edwin Drood*, and what he said about the book. This is particularly necessary when considering Mr. Duffield's ingenious and engaging theory, accepted by Edmund Wilson, that Jasper is a member of the Indian sect of Thugs, and commits the murder in accordance with their purpose and ritual. Now Dickens told Forster that "Discovery by the murderer of the utter needlessness of the murder for its object, was to follow hard upon the commission of the deed." This object was the winning of Rosa, not the performance of a ritual murder. But, unknown to Jasper, Rosa and Edwin had just previously decided that they would never marry. When Jasper is informed of this, after the murder, by Mr. Grewgious, he has a fit. These facts run counter to Mr. Duffield's theory: the Thugs, worshippers of Kali the goddess of destruction, strangled their victims both for gain and as a religious duty: one cannot quite envisage any convinced Thug being thrown into a fit by the discovery that his murder has been unnecessary. Jasper's behaviour after Mr. Grewgious'

revelation is less that of a devotee of Kali than that of an ordinary murderer who realises he may be hanged for removing an obstacle to his lust which in fact was not there at all.

Nevertheless, though neither the Thug motif nor the split-personality one can be reconciled with all the facts of the book, they are assuredly there, thickening the brew. The Thugs "were all in a sense divided personalities;" and conversely, even an amateur interest in the cult might aggravate a tendency to schizophrenia. We cannot avoid feeling an overwrought, hallucinatory atmosphere about certain scenes, especially those where Jasper is present or his "mesmeric" influence at work. We feel it in chapter 5, when Durdles is being stoned homeward by the imp, Deputy; in the first quarrel between Neville and Edwin—they seem to get worked up so suddenly over so little; in Jasper's reconnoitring expedition with Durdles; in the curiously somnambulistic episode of chapter 15, leading up to Neville's arrest; in Crisparkle's visit to the river, when he finds the watch. During these scenes—the first three of them are played under moonlight—the characters seem to be moving in a dream, to be moved by some inordinate compulsion. And the opium-den scenes set and clinch this hallucinatory mood. In chapter 23 Jasper, re-enacting under the drug's influence the crime itself and the many occasions on which he had pre-enacted it in his own mind, mutters, "What? I told you so. When it comes to be real at last, it is so short that it seems unreal for the first time." This is a terrible speech, and a key one. It reveals the delusionary nature of Jasper's mental life; and perhaps it resolves the question—finally a meaningless one—was he mad or bad? For it is the weakness both of the criminal and the madman that he has little or no grasp on reality.

Dickens, as Mr. Wilson says, was haunted all his life by the theme of the criminal. We can read *Edwin Drood* at a superficial level as a crime story brilliantly lit and articulated, noticing how, after the manner of the classic detection-novel, the characters are tightly worked in to the plot; noticing its closeness of texture, and the unobtrusive

way the clues are placed. "Dickens is supremely an artist," wrote Nicoll, "and he tries to insert nothing without a purpose. Sometimes his hints are intended to help. . . sometimes to mislead temporarily." The first scene between Edwin and Jasper is packed with clues both to character and to plot-development. The hints that Datchery is Helena Landless are most subtly given—her previous exploits in boy's dress, her need to conceal her woman's hands, and so on. There are pointers everywhere: Rosa's song, Edwin's ring, Jasper's scarf, Jasper's diary entries, Durdles' dream, Helena's gait and expression. We are sure that, could we read the finished book, we should find no loose ends.

But, Dickens being Dickens, *Edwin Drood* is much more than a mystery novel. Its characters include some of the liveliest he invented. Helena Landless (does she not suggest to us what Edith Dombey would have been but for her corruption?) is a fascinating creature, and we regret the unwritten chapters not least for the large part she would have played in them. Rosa, who at first threatens to be one of those abominable, sweet, meek Little Women and Child Brides whom Dickens had so readily purveyed to the avid Victorian public, turns out in chapter 13 to have a real hard centre beneath the fudge. Mr. Sapsea is one of Dickens' most baroque monuments to Absurdity; while in that admirable trio, Crisparkle, Grewgious and Tartar, he ably controlled the genius for caricature, for significant overstatement or simplification, which was always straining to bolt away with him. Grewgious, the eternal bachelor with a heart of gold; the alert, ship-shape, flower-growing Tartar; Crisparkle, with his shadow-boxing before breakfast: these are men lovable for their eccentricities as for their moral worth, men whose goodness is often revealed *through* their oddness.

The only unsatisfactory character in the book is, to me, Jasper himself. He is always sliding in and out of focus. It may well be, as Edmund Wilson so cogently argues in the last pages of his essay, that Dickens, unconsciously or half consciously, put into Jasper much of his own predicament

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