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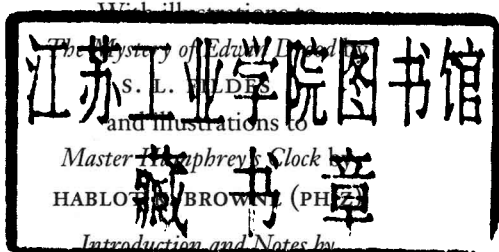
CHARLES DICKENS



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE MYSTERY  
EDWIN DROOD  
*and Other Stories*

Charles Dickens



PETER PRESTON



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*

What should you think of the idea of a story beginning in this way? – Two people, boy and girl, or very young, going apart from one another, pledged to be married after many years – at the end of the book. The interest to arise out of the tracing of their separate ways, and the impossibility of telling what will be done with that impending fate. [Letters, XII, 377]<sup>1</sup>

Dickens's letter to John Forster, written in mid-July 1869, gives the first written hint of his search for a subject for his new novel. *Our Mutual Friend* had finished publication in the autumn of 1865 and for Dickens an unusually long interval had elapsed between novels,

1 Full details of all books and articles quoted or cited in this Introduction may be found in the Bibliography.

during which he had been fully occupied with reading tours in Britain and the United States and the editing and management of his weekly periodical *All the Year Round*. Nonetheless, by the spring of 1869 he had begun to feel that it was time for him to begin a new full-length novel. By 6 August 1869, however, he had moved on from his original idea of a betrothed couple (although this motif was retained in *Edwin Drood*) and was describing to Forster another idea: 'I laid aside the fancy I told you of, and have a very curious and new idea for my new story. Not a communicable idea (or the interest of the book would be gone), but a very strong one, though difficult to work' (*Letters*, XII, pp. 389-90).

It was not until the autumn of 1869 that Dickens began any serious work on *Edwin Drood*. Exhausted by a demanding programme of work, he experienced a serious breakdown in health in the spring of 1869 and spent the summer and early autumn recuperating at Gad's Hill, his home in Kent. Early in October, accompanied by his American publisher J. T. Fields, his tour manager George Dolby and two police officers, he visited an opium den in Shadwell, by the Thames in London. At about the same time, Dolby and Fields went with him on a visit to the cathedral city of Canterbury, where Dickens was horrified to discover the apathetic attitude of many of the clergy towards their vocation. Material gained on these visits found its way into *Edwin Drood*, but some dimensions of the plot were planted in Dickens's mind as early as January 1867.

In that month Dickens was in Cambridge, Massachusetts where he visited the Harvard Medical School accompanied by the American writer Oliver Wendell Holmes.<sup>2</sup> Dickens had remembered that in 1849 John White Webster, Professor of Chemistry and Mineralogy at Harvard, had murdered a local physician, Dr George Parkman, and disposed of his body in his anatomy laboratory. The Medical School made a deep impression on Dickens, and he told his fellow novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton that he found the localities of the murder '... horribly grim, private. Cold and quiet; the identical furnace smelling fearfully (some anatomical broth in it I suppose) as if the body were still there; jars of pieces of mortality standing about . . . and bodies near us ready to be carried into the next morning's lecture. (13? January 1867; *Letters*, XII, p. 12). It was characteristic of Dickens to be fascinated by the macabre associations of rooms where bodies were

2 Holmes (1809-94) was a Harvard medical graduate and eventually became Professor of Anatomy and Physiology at the university (1847-82). He was one of America's best-known men of letters, celebrated as a poet and essayist.

dissected, preserved or cremated. Mr Krook in *Bleak House* (1854–56) is a victim of spontaneous combustion and is reduced to a kind of ‘anatomical broth’; while Silas Wegg in *Our Mutual Friend* asks about the welfare of his amputated leg every time he visits Mr Venus’s taxidermist’s shop, which is full of ‘pieces of mortality’, human and otherwise.

Dickens was also curious about the personality of Webster, a respectable academic transformed into a convicted murderer. From what he was told of Webster Dickens concluded that he ‘was always a secretly cruel man’ and that the murder revealed his true personality. This view was confirmed by an anecdote Dickens heard from Longfellow.<sup>3</sup> At a dinner party at Webster’s house about a year before the murder the host ordered the lights to be extinguished and a bowl of burning minerals placed on the table so that his guests could see how frightening they looked by this light:

. . . every man was looking, horror-stricken, at his neighbour, when Webster was seen bending over the bowl with a rope round his neck, holding up the end of the rope, with his head on one side and tongue lolled out, to represent a hanged man!

[*Letters*, XII, p. 13]<sup>4</sup>

Webster’s staging of this seemingly proleptic drama suggests a macabre sense of humour and the *mise en scène* with its distinctive stage lighting was bound to appeal to Dickens’s imagination. It revealed another, disturbing dimension of Webster’s character, usually concealed behind a mask of conventionality and professionalism. The Parkman-Webster story thus offered Dickens a model for a tale of divided personality, murder, body-disposal, detection and conviction.<sup>5</sup>

On 18 October 1869 he told William Macready that he was ‘in the preliminary agonies of a new book’ (*Letters*, XII, 423) and throughout

- 3 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–82) was perhaps the most revered poet in America in the mid-nineteenth century and was also extremely popular in England. From 1836–54 he was Professor of French and Spanish at Harvard and so, like Holmes, was a colleague of Webster.
- 4 There is an excellent account of the Parkman case in Simon Schama’s *Dead Certainties* and Robert Tracy has written a helpful article on the connections between the case and the novel.
- 5 Margaret Cardwell, in her 1972 edition of the novel, points out that in the months before he began work on *Edwin Drood*, two of the stories he accepted for *All the Year Round*, ‘Fatal Zero’ (1868–9) and *The Disappearance of John Acland* by Robert Lytton (1869), suggest Dickens’s interest in curious psychological states and mysterious disappearances (p. xx).

the winter of 1868–69 he worked steadily on *Edwin Drood*. Although there were reports that he was in difficulties with the novel, it is equally possible that Dickens was unwilling to reveal too much about the progress of a book that depended so much on the gradual revelation of character and motive. However, Dickens's work on the novel overlapped with his final series of public readings and the continuing obligations of *All the Year Round*, so that he was, as he told G. H. Lewes 'really hard put to it occasionally' (26 February 1870; *Letters*, XII, p. 472).

Dickens had contracted with Chapman for a comparatively short novel to be published in twelve monthly instalments, and the first part (dated April) appeared at the end of March 1870 and was an immediate success: 'We have been doing wonders with No. 1 of *Edwin Drood*', Dickens wrote enthusiastically to Fields. 'It has very, very far outstripped every one of its predecessors' (*Letters*, XII, p. 510). This was no exaggeration: 50,000 copies of the monthly numbers were printed, compared with 40,000 for *Our Mutual Friend*, its immediate predecessor, and 38,000 for *Little Dorrit* (1855–57). Meanwhile, Dickens was well ahead with the writing and on 14 January had told Fields that

Forster . . . thinks No. 2 [Chaps. 6–9] of the new book a clincher . . . There is a curious interest steadily working up to No. 5 [Chaps. 17–20] which requires a good deal of art and self-denial. I think also, apart from characters and picturesqueness, that the young people are placed in a very novel situation. – So I hope. – At Nos. 5 and 6 [Chaps. 21–3] the story will turn upon an interest suspended until the end. (*Letters*, XII, p. 465)

In the event, Numbers 2 and 3, issued in April and May, were the last that Dickens saw in print. He died at Gad's Hill on 9 June 1870,<sup>6</sup> and Numbers 4, 5 and 6, published at the end of June, July and August, were seen through the press by a grieving Forster.

\* \* \*

In a novel where much of the action takes place in and around a cathedral, it is not surprising that the language should be rich in religious associations. These are derived from three sources. The first

6 In the appendix to the Penguin reissue of *The Invisible Woman* Claire Tomalin raises the intriguing possibility that Dickens was actually taken ill while visiting his mistress Ellen Ternan at her house in Peckham, south London and was conveyed, unconscious, to Gad's Hill, where he died soon afterwards.

is the language of cathedral life, of dean and sacristan, canon and verger, aisle, nave, tomb and chancel. Then there are direct quotations from or allusions to biblical stories and texts, from both Old and New Testaments. Finally, there is Dickens's extensive use of the Book of Common Prayer, familiar to anybody who regularly attended Church of England Services. Indeed, in some instances what appear to be references to the Bible are actually to the Book of Common Prayer, identifiable by slight differences in the translation of biblical quotations used for liturgical purposes. This language adds appropriate colour to the narrative, giving a sense of the atmosphere and rhythm of cathedral life. But the choice of allusions is by no mean random and the stories and texts used by Dickens gather into some highly significant clusters that convey or emphasise the themes of the novel.

One such cluster concerns sin, guilt, repentance and punishment. An early evocation of sin occurs in the first scene in the opium den, with a reference to the 'unclean spirit' and Jesus's casting out of devils (p. 6). This central motif of the novel is also suggested by one of Dickens's notes for the first number: 'Touch the key note/ "When the Wicked Man"'. This quotation occurs at the end of Chapter 1 (see p. 6) and alludes to a text from Ezekiel – 'when the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive' – a text which occurs in both morning and evening prayers in *The Book of Common Prayer*, and is immediately followed by a quotation from Psalm 51: 'I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.' Readers have already witnessed Jasper's transgressive behaviour in the opium den, and as the narrative proceeds it becomes clear that he is planning further transgressions, for which some day he will have to answer. The use of these allusions raises the question of whether Jasper will acknowledge the reality of his wickedness, repent and accept his punishment.

The fact that the crime to be committed in the novel will be the murder of a close relative is suggested by a sequence of references to the story of Cain and Abel which begins after it becomes clear that Edwin Drood has disappeared. When Neville Landless is set upon by one of the parties searching for Edwin, he tells them ' "If eight men, or four men, or two men, or two men, set upon one . . . the one has no chance but to set his mark upon some of them" ' (p. 145), which alludes to Genesis 4:15: 'And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him'. A few minutes later Neville encounters Jasper with another search party: ' "Where is my nephew?" asked Mr



Jasper, wildly. 'Where is your nephew?' repeated Neville. 'Why do you ask me?' (p. 146). This echoes Genesis 4: 9: 'And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?'. When Neville, regarded as the chief suspect in Drood's disappearance, flees from Cloisterham he does so 'with a blight upon his name and fame' (p. 160), which refers to God's punishment of Cain: 'And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater that I can bear. Thou has driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face I shall be hid; and I shall be fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass; that every one that findeth me shall slay me' (Genesis 4: 13-14).' He later tells Mr Crisparkle, who remains convinced of his innocence, that he feels ' "marked and tainted" '. And the egregious Mr Honeythunder, equally convinced that Neville is the murderer, cries 'Abel! Cain! I hold no terms with Cain!' (p.163).

In the course of the same exchange, Mr Honeythunder reminds Crisparkle of the commandment, 'Thou shalt do no murder'; and Crisparkle, less willing to rush to judgement, reminds him of another: 'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour' (p. 163). Indeed, the energetic, practical and right-minded Crisparkle carries the message of a Christianity that is more understanding and forgiving than Jasper's despair or Honeythunder's punitive aggression. When he tells Honeythunder that he believes his first duty as a priest 'is towards those who are in necessity and tribulation, who are desolate and oppressed' (p. 164) his words derive from the Litany in *The Book of Common Prayer*: 'We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord. That it may please thee to succour, help, and comfort, all that are in danger, necessity, and tribulation.' Crisparkle's words also reflect Dickens's own preference for the New Testament message of love and redemption.

*Edwin Drood* also contains a large number of references to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, a tragedy in which the sense of guilt weighs heavily upon the protagonists. The first allusion to the play occurs in what might appear to be a neutral, even slightly comic passage about 'that sedate and clerical bird, the rook' and his behaviour 'when he wings homeward towards nightfall' (p.7). The analogous lines in *Macbeth* are: 'Light thickens, and the crow/ Makes wing to th' rooky wood' (3, 2, 50-1). The verbal echo is distant, but there is a striking similarity in atmosphere and time of day, and when we recall that Shakespeare's lines occur in the scene before Banquo's murder, Dickens's oblique allusion becomes more sinister. A similar sense of foreboding is evoked by means of an allusion to *Macbeth* on the night of Edwin's

disappearance. A strong wind rises and '[c]himneys topple in the streets' (p. 143), just as on the night of Duncan's murder 'The night has been unruly. Where we lay,/ Our chimneys were blown down, (and, as they say)/ Lamentings heard i' th' air; strange screams of death' (2, 3, 54-56).

*Macbeth* also helps Dickens to create the novel's sense of guilt. In Chapter X, Crisparkle is described as going for a swim 'as confident in the sweetening powers of Cloisterham Weir and a wholesome mind, as Lady Macbeth was hopeless of all the seas that roll' (pp. 86-7). There is no obvious likeness between Crisparkle and Lady Macbeth, but these words clearly direct readers to well-known locations in *Macbeth*: 'Will all great Neptune's oceans wash this blood/ Clean from my hand? No: this hand will rather/ The multitudinous seas incarnadine,/ Making the green one red' and 'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand' (2, 2, 57-60; 5, 1, 50-2). The apparently unlikely coupling of Crisparkle with Lady Macbeth draws attention to an allusion that is anticipatory in terms of the plot, since it is in Cloisterham Weir that some of Edwin's belongings are found, apparently providing proof that he has been murdered. At the same time, it powerfully evokes the idea of an ineradicable blood-stain and thus intensifies the effect of the allusions to the mark of guilt carried by Cain. Similarly, when Crisparkle visits Jasper to tell him about Neville's promise to apologise to Edwin and keep silent about his feelings for Rosa, he comes upon Jasper asleep. Suddenly woken, Jasper cries out ' "What is the matter? Who did it?" ' (p. 92), echoing Macbeth's words when he first sees Banquo's ghost: 'Which of you have done this?' (3, 4, 47). Again Dickens appears to place in his text a hint that points towards murder, even before Edwin's disappearance; and just as Banquo's ghost is a projection of Macbeth's guilt, invisible to everyone except the murderer, so the reader might assume that Jasper is similarly haunted by his own actions.

In the last chapter he completed, Dickens returns Jasper to the opium den in Shadwell where, in his delirium, he tells Princess Puffer, ' "I did it so often, and through such vast expanses of time, that when it was really done, it seemed not worth the doing, it was done so soon" ' (p. 226). This apparent confession echoes and recasts Macbeth's words: 'If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well/ It were done quickly' (1, 7, 1-2). When he goes on to say that ' "time and place are both at hand" ' (p. 227), he echoes Lady Macbeth's lines from the same scene in the play: 'Nor time, nor place,/ Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:/ They have made themselves, and that their fitness now/ Does unmake you' (1, 7, 51-54). In this

manner, by drawing on another and very familiar text, Dickens suggests, rather than narrates, what may have happened to Edwin.

\* \* \*

The narrative of *Edwin Drood* exhibits a persistent pull to the east, more so than in any other of Dickens's novels. The opening scene, with its references to Lascars and Chinamen and Jasper's drug-induced Arabian Nights visions of scimitars, dancing girls and white elephants, introduces the motif and establishes some of the terms by which it will be developed. Jasper's visions relate to a European view of the east that is both imaginary and political, composed of orientalist fantasies and the hard facts of colonialism.<sup>7</sup> Britain's active role in the opium trade in India and China ensured a continuing supply of the drugs for British addicts, and this truth lies beneath Jasper's regular escapes from his increasingly irksome and meaningless duties in Cloisterham.

Egypt is the most significant eastern country in *Edwin Drood*. Edwin tells Jasper that he plans to go 'engineering into the East' (p. 16), to participate in the technological colonialism that during the nineteenth century saw British engineers undertake numerous major projects in the Middle East and Asia. Edwin later specifies that he plans to go to Egypt, and in the course of a playful conversation with Rosa he strikes a serious note when he speaks of Rosa's need to take "a sensible interest in triumphs of engineering skill: especially when they are to change the whole condition of an undeveloped country" (p. 24). Rosa's response – "Lor!" – is a deflating reaction to Edwin's solemnity, but her fiancé has an earnest belief in his civilising mission. For Rosa, Egypt is a less enticing prospect: she is wary of "Arabs, and Turks, and fellahs, and people"; and at Miss Twinkleton's she has been fed with the new knowledge of Egyptology that has become available as a result of recent excavations and is bored by "Tiresome old burying-grounds! Isises, and Ibises, and Cheopses, and Pharaohses" (p. 25). By the end of the conversation, however, the Egyptian motif takes on a more sinister note:

'Why, I thought you Egyptian boys could look into a hand and see all sorts of phantoms. Can't you see a happy Future?'

For certain, neither of them sees a happy Present, and the gate opens and closes, and one goes in, and the other goes away.

[p. 28]

7 Edward Said's *Orientalism* is the pioneering work on this subject. See also Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky's extremely interesting chapter on the novel.

At the beginning of Chapter VIII, just before he quarrels with Neville, Edwin says that he plans ‘to wake up Egypt a little’ by ‘[d]oing, working, engineering’ (p. 101). This further expression of Edwin’s sense of colonial mission, like his remarks to Rosa, is founded on a sense that Egypt is in a somnolent, underdeveloped state in need of European knowledge and energy. But the chapter also takes up Rosa’s remark about the alleged Egyptian power of reading the future, and contains other references to Edwin’s destiny, spoken by Jasper, which appear to articulate both his pride in Edwin’s abilities and his observation of the offhand ease with which his nephew approaches life, but which might also be a revelation of the uncle’s true feelings about their respective positions. Further, Jasper appears to cloak any application of these remarks solely to himself by enlisting Neville as sharing his situation rather than Edwin’s:

‘See where he lounges so easily, Mr Neville! The world is all before him where to choose. A life of stirring work and interest, a life of change and excitement, a life of domestic ease and love! Look at him! . . . See how little he heeds it all!’ Jasper proceeds in a bantering vein. ‘It is hardly worth his while to pluck the golden fruit that hangs ripe on the tree for him. And yet consider the contrast, Mr Neville . . . You and I have no prospect . . . but the tedious unchanging round of this dull place.’ [p. 64]

Jasper’s comments, supposedly intended to ease the atmosphere, actually incite the two young men to further conflict, and their quarrel reaches its climax when Edwin throws at Neville a pointedly racist insult in response to the other’s remark that he is ‘a common fellow and a common boaster’: ‘You may know a black common fellow, or a black common boaster, when you see him (and no doubt you have a large acquaintance that way); but you are no judge of white men’ (p. 66). This grossly insensitive remark is what we might expect of Edwin, who is emerging as an unsympathetic character, but his comments highlight what Neville and Helena Landless contribute to the novel’s eastern motif. They have been brought up in Ceylon and their lengthy residence overseas makes them outsiders in England. They represent a threatening otherness and a puzzling uncertainty of both racial and social assignment. Colonialism is acceptable when practised in distant lands, but reminders of its existence in an English cathedral city are more troubling and unsettling. Furthermore, Helena and Neville seem to carry with them what Cloisterham perceives as an alien fluidity of temperament and behaviour, a dangerous doubleness – intensified by their twinship – and a wavering sense of identity: they

might not only disguise themselves as strangers, but also, potentially, as each other.<sup>8</sup>

\* \* \*

In his biography of Dickens, after quoting the writer's new plan for his next novel (see p. vi above), John Forster goes on to outline the development of the plot:

... The story ... was to be that of the murder of a nephew by his uncle; the originality of which was to consist in the review of the murderer's career by himself at the close, when its temptations were to be dwelt upon as if, not he the culprit, but some other man were the tempted. [Forster, Book XI, Chap II]

Forster gives further details of how the body of the victim will be discovered and identified and the murderer hunted down and unmasked, as well as of who will marry whom and who will die heroically in the pursuit of the villain. By using phrases like 'I learnt immediately afterwards' and 'So much was told to me before any of the book was written', Forster claims privileged access to information about how the plot would develop. He and Dickens were close friends who saw each other almost daily, and it is highly probable that Dickens shared with his principal literary confidant his ideas about the novel. At the same time, however, Forster admits that there is no written evidence that this is exactly how the plot of the novel would have worked out, since Dickens wrote nothing of *Edwin Drood* beyond what was published, and nor did he leave any notes of his intentions. Forster's outline of the plot may have as much to do with his own perception of desirable and appropriate outcomes in terms of punishment, marriage and the necessary sacrifice of sympathetic characters, as with anything that might have developed in the writing of the novel.

Yet readerly desire and curiosity are always at play as we make our way through a narrative and construct ever-changing possible futures for the characters. In this sense reading is an intensely active experience, engaging readers' judgement and imagination as well as their stock of expectations derived from the reading of other stories. This collaboration between reader and writer, or reader and text becomes problematic, however, when the text is unfinished. Writerly co-operation is withdrawn, the collaborative endeavour is abruptly

8 For a brilliant general discussion of the ideas of twinning and doubling in literature, see Karl Miller's *Doubles* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1987).

halted and further information is withheld, so that readers are no longer able to check their guesses, hopes and fears against 'real' outcomes. Therefore, as Stephen Connor writes, '[t]he fragmentary condition of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* can never be self-sufficient, will always call for the reconstructive participation of its future readers . . . the dead hand of narrative finality lies more clammy upon an unfinished novel than on a finished one. An unfinished novel seems everywhere, and insistently, to broach the question of its closure, seems at every point held in the detention of its absent, withheld ending' (Connor, p. 86). G. K. Chesterton touches on another consequence of the permanent suspension of closure when he remarks that 'a finished tale may give a man immortality in the light and literary sense; but an unfinished tale suggests another immortality more essential and more strange' (Chesterton, p. 223). Inevitably, therefore, much writing about the novel has concentrated on its absent ending and speculated about the likely outcome of the plot. By 1912 J. Cuming Walters was able to publish *The Complete Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which contain the text of the novel together with an extensive survey (complete with fold-out table summarising the various 'solutions' proposed) of speculations, continuations and sequels. Walters's bibliography lists almost 100 items, most of them from the years 1905-12: even a symposium in the *Dickensian* for April 1908, hopefully (or perhaps despairingly) entitled 'Last Words on the Drood Mystery', failed to stem the flow.<sup>9</sup> Writers were fairly evenly divided between Edwin being dead or alive – the most popular murderer in the former case being Jasper, the most popular explanation in the latter being that he has gone to Egypt, whence he eventually returns to confront Jasper. Bazzard, Drood, Grewgious, Helena and Neville Landless, Tartar and 'a detective' are all suggested as the real identity of Mr Datchery. Most commentators expect Neville Landless to die, Rosa to marry Tartar and Helena, Crisparkle. Jasper is variously redeemed, hanged, commits suicide and dies of shock when Edwin reappears. Chesterton, perhaps wisely, is of the view that with Dickens's death, the mysteries of the novel are forever insoluble.

Even if we think we have 'solved' the mystery, more mysteries will remain. A plausible and not particularly ingenious version of events might be that Jasper, driven by jealousy of Edwin's position and his

9 In 1912 Walters himself published *Clues to the Mystery of Edwin Drood* which occasioned a considerable press controversy and animated a whole new generation of literary detectives.

love for Rosa, plots to kill his nephew and conceal his remains in the cathedral. Somehow this plot misfires and he throws an unconscious Edwin into Cloisterham Weir. Edwin escapes but leaves his watch and shirtpin so that people will assume that he is dead. He then returns in disguise as Mr Datchery, to expose Jasper and clear Neville's name. However, this version of events immediately gives rise to a number of questions. Why doesn't Edwin struggle out of the water, go to the authorities in Cloisterham, have Jasper arrested before he can do any more damage and save everybody a great deal of trouble and heartbreak? Perhaps Edwin, like John Harmon with Bella in *Our Mutual Friend*, is *testing* Rosa, to see how she will react to his death. But this would presuppose that Edwin *cared* how Rosa felt about him; that he is really in love with her all along, and seizes on his disappearance as an opportunity for Rosa to discover her real feelings for him. A more cynical reader would no doubt suggest that for Edwin to have exposed Jasper so early in the plot would not have given Dickens the full-length story he required. But by 1870 Dickens was a highly experienced novelist who would not have embarked on a full-length novel if he did not believe that he had enough material to complete it. If Datchery is Edwin in disguise (and that he is *someone* in disguise seems to be one of the few things agreed on by most readers) then there is a good reason for his decision to adopt a false identity and watch and wait by his open door. And there is a more intriguing possibility to consider: that the greatest mysteries, unrevealed even to the author at the midway point in his narrative, lie forever locked in the tortured mind of John Jasper.

### *Master Humphrey's Clock*

It would be easy to dismiss *Master Humphrey's Clock* as a frame lacking its canvas, and the history of this short-lived periodical appears to support such a view. But Dickens never undertook literary projects lightly, especially when they offered full control over his medium, and a fresh challenge always roused his energies and stimulated his imagination. After the enormous success of his first three novels, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37), *Oliver Twist* (1837–39) and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–39), all published in monthly numbers, Dickens was concerned that his public had tired of this mode of publication and wanted something new. Drawing on his experience as editor (1837–1839) of the monthly *Bentley's Miscellany*, in which *Oliver Twist* was serialised, Dickens suggested to his publishers Chapman and Hall a weekly miscellany whose contents would be

framed in the setting of a club. Dickens would at first be editor and sole author, and would receive £50 from each issue, as well as a half-share of profits. He calculated that, assuming weekly sales of 50,000 copies, a two-year run would bring Chapman and Hall a profit of £5000, while Dickens himself would earn £11000.<sup>10</sup>

Sales of the first number, in April 1840, exceeded even Dickens's optimistic projections: 60,000 copies were printed and sold and another 10,000 were ordered. After this brilliant start, however, sales for the second and third numbers dropped sharply. Dickens kept his head, but prudently revised the proofs of the 'little child-story' (*Letters*, II, p. 50) in Number 4 in such a way that it could be extended if necessary. In the event, the second instalment of *The Old Curiosity Shop* did not appear until Number 7, and while the novel entirely occupied Numbers 8 and 10, the miscellany format returned for Numbers 9 and 11. The convention of Master Humphrey as narrator of Little Nell's story was abandoned by the end of Chapter 3 (Number 8), however, and numbers 12 to 45 were wholly devoted to *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The rise in sales, which at one time reached 100,000 a week, suggests that readers did not regret the absence of Master Humphrey and his friends. They returned briefly to introduce *Barnaby Rudge*, and once again when that novel was completed. In the final number of the periodical Master Humphrey dies: his clock 'has stopped for ever' (p. 350).

What, then, do these remainders of a long-defunct literary periodical offer the modern reader? The overall device of a club of elderly gentlemen telling one another stories, mostly set in the past, now seems at best quaint and at worst artificial. The resurrection, presumably in response to uncertain sales figures, of Pickwick, Sam Weller and his father, even smacks of desperation. But the nature of Dickens's imagination is such that even in the slightest stories, which we might think were created simply to fill a required space each week, the author's characteristic preoccupations are likely to emerge. Childhood, London, the dangers of idealising the past – these are motifs that run through the tales narrated by the club members. And in the revelation of Master Humphrey's identity as the single gentleman of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, or in the further revelation, in the penultimate paragraph, that Jack Redburn's past may have made its way into *Barnaby Rudge*, there is a fascinating rupture of the fictional frame, as material from the novels leaks into a setting that claims reality but is itself fictive.

10 The cover price was 3d, with collected monthly parts at 1/-.



*'Hunted Down', 'Holiday Romance' and  
'George Silverman's Explanation'*

All three of these stories were written to commission for American periodicals, and they demonstrate Dickens's fame and literary standing as well as the payments he could command for even a comparatively short piece of writing. Indeed, so considerable were the financial rewards that in the case of 'Hunted Down' Dickens was persuaded to interrupt work on *A Tale of Two Cities*. 'I thought that I could not have been tempted at this time', Dickens wrote to Robert Bonner, proprietor of the magazine the *New York Ledger*, 'to engage in any undertaking, however short, but the literary project which will come into existence next month'. This letter is dated 29 March 1859 and *A Tale of Two Cities* began to appear in *All the Year Round* in April. 'But', Dickens continued, 'your proposal is so handsome that it changes my resolution, and I cannot refuse it' (*Letters*, IX, pp. 44-45). Bonner had offered the substantial sum of £1000, and was delighted to have pulled off a coup, proudly announcing in a newspaper advertisement that 'this is the first time that a tale has been written expressly and solely for an American periodical by such an eminent author' (*Letters*, IX, p. 44n). The story appeared in the *New York Ledger* in three weekly parts in August-September 1859, and in two parts, in *All the Year Round* in August 1860.

For the plot and main character of 'Hunted Down', Dickens went back over twenty years, to June 1837, when he and the actor William Macready, visited in Newgate prison the forger and poisoner Thomas Wainwright. Born in 1794, Wainwright had been an art critic and a painter who exhibited at the Royal Academy in the 1820s, but began a criminal career in 1826 when he forged a Bank of England money order, and went on to poison a number of relatives for monetary gain. He was convicted of forgery, transported to Tasmania and died there in 1847. Dickens was always fascinated by what drives apparently respectable individuals to commit criminal acts, so it is not surprising that he should have been interested in seeing Wainwright. He left no contemporary account of this visit, but Macready's diary contains an interesting glimpse of what took place, describing Wainwright as a 'wretched man overlaid with crime', apparently cheerful 'but in the pride of our nature . . . eradicated or trodden down—it was a most depressing sight' (27 June 1837; Macready, pp. 401-2)

Much of the interest of 'Hunted Down' lies in the uncovering of Slinkton's true character by the narrator, Mr Sampson. At first sight,