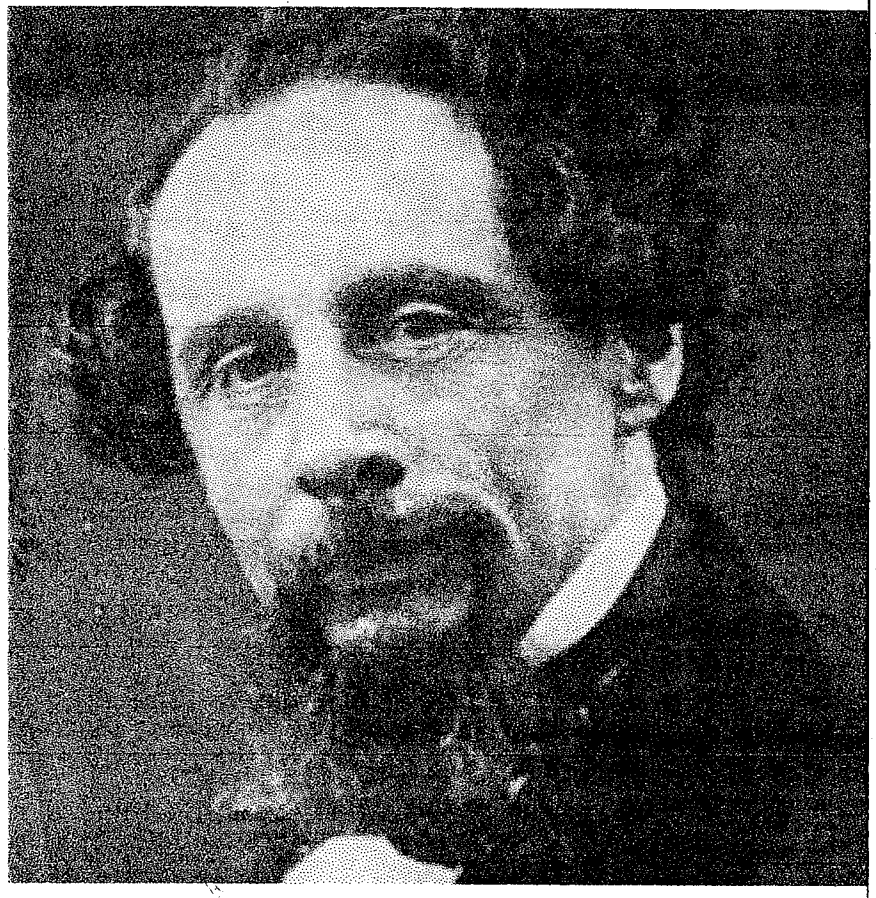

The Mystery of Edwin Drood

The Mystery of Edwin Drood was Charles Dickens's last work. He started tentatively to work upon it some time in 1868 – or, rather, he drafted a short interlude (which has since become known as the 'Sapsea Fragment') which anticipates certain aspects of the later novel. But it remained simply that, a fragment; Dickens could not work in any sustained or concentrated way and he found, too, that he was quite unable to write anything for the customary Christmas Number of his periodical. The fact is that now, in his fifty-sixth year, he had lost some of his once unwearying energy; he looked older than his years and his friend and biographer, John Forster, noticed a '. . . manifest abatement of his natural force'. Dickens was also suffering the slowly gathering effects of vascular degeneration and on one occasion during this period 'could read only the halves of the letters over the shop doors'; as Forster went on to say '. . . absolute and pressing danger did positively exist'. But Dickens, true to his usual form, chose to ignore or underestimate the severity of his symptoms.

Indeed in the autumn of 1868 he went back relentlessly to yet another series of public readings all over the country, a projected one hundred in all, exhausting himself each night with a performance lasting some two hours, travelling by trains which after the Staplehurst disaster left him close to panic and to sudden 'rushes of terror', unable to sleep, unable to eat, all the time wearing himself down in the vivid dramatisation of his fiction. These readings also throw an incidental light on *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, for it was in the same period that he perfected an episode from *Oliver Twist* which

concentrated upon the terrifying performance of the murder of Nancy by Bill Sikes. Dickens believed that the audience had a 'horror of me after seeing the murderer' and there were times when he restlessly wandered the streets afterwards, himself feeling 'wanted' for murder; there could have been no better preparation for a novel in which he would effortlessly enter the consciousness of another murderer, John Jasper, and explore the recesses of a thwarted and obsessive man.

He had to stop his readings: his doctors insisted upon it, since it was clear to them (and perhaps also to him) that he was close to killing himself with fatigue and over-excitement. So he went back to Gad's Hill Place and tried to recapture his strength; but he was not completely at rest – he never was – and in the spring of 1869 certain incidents began pointing the way towards the novel which he would soon begin. Two American friends, James and Annie Fields, came to visit him and one evening he took James Fields to an opium den situated in New Court off Bluegate Fields. Here, in the East End of London, Fields wrote later '. . . we found the miserable old woman blowing at a kind of pipe made of an old penny ink-bottle'. She was to enter *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which itself opens in just such a place. It has sometimes been suggested that Dickens himself was something of an 'addict' towards the end of his life, but this is most unlikely. He took laudanum to help him sleep, and also to combat the effects of seasickness when he travelled, but his usage did not stretch beyond that point: that should be obvious from the opium dream with which the novel so curiously begins, since it is not a very convincing simulacrum of such an experience. For the real thing, it is necessary to turn to Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. Dickens was merely imagining what it might be like. But he did not lead his American friends only into the darker areas of London life, although those were the aspects which always most appealed to him; he also took the Fields on a visit to Canterbury, where he was

dismayed by what he considered to be the listlessness and emptiness of a service he witnessed in the cathedral there: that image would also enter the novel directly. And what of the man himself in this, the last full year of his life? Annie Fields wrote in her diary '. . . it is wonderful the fun and flow of spirits C.D. has for he is a sad man . . .' Sadness: perhaps we may ascribe something of the atmosphere of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* to that detectable mood.

For even now he was about to begin work upon it. Certain stories were occurring to him, among them one which concerned an engaged couple who do not marry until the end of the book. But then in August 1869, just after he had begun to plot and scheme, he was surprised by '. . . a very curious and new idea for my new story'. Almost at once he began to write down various titles in his memoranda to himself, and at the same time he wrote to his publishers, Chapman and Hall, broaching the idea of a new story in twelve monthly parts – his usual pattern was of course to work within the framework of twenty such monthly numbers but clearly Dickens's sense of his now more easily exhausted powers made him more cautious. Even in the contract which he eventually signed, he insisted upon a clause being added to the effect that, in the event of his death or incapacity, arbitrators would determine what sum ought to be repaid to Chapman and Hall. Mortal sickness, or even death, was clearly on his mind at this juncture in his life – how strange a mood with which to begin a new novel in which death plays a significant part.

He began his real planning in September, at which point he elaborated upon the 'curious' idea which had previously occurred to him; this would be the story of a young man murdered by his uncle, although the nature of the crime and the identity of the criminal would not be revealed until the very end of the book. The murderer would strike while under the influence of opium, and might perhaps only remember what he had done in a similar state of consciousness. It was at this point, too, that he began to meditate upon the character

of his proposed murderer, John Jasper, a man so self-divided and obsessive, so solitary and estranged, that he is like some culmination of all those mournful and anxious male characters who dominate Dickens's later novels. This is a man who is also '. . . troubled with some stray sort of ambition, aspiration, restlessness, dissatisfaction, what shall we call it . . .' and in that respect, if in no other, he resembles Dickens himself whose own restlessness and dissatisfaction had provoked exactly that sadness which Annie Fields had noticed. In his notes for the first monthly instalment Dickens wrote down 'Opium-Smoking' and then, a little later, '*Cathedral town running throughout*'; the first memorandum obviously referred to his experiences in the East End of London, while the 'Cathedral town', known as Cloisterham in the novel, is explicitly based upon Rochester. London and Rochester: in his last novel Dickens was returning to the twin sites of his inspiration; he had spent his childhood near Rochester, and had helplessly experienced its betrayal in London. And how apt, then, that at the opening of the novel both places should overlay each other: for in the fevered opium dream of John Jasper, it is not clear where one ends and the other begins. Both have been merged into a grotesque but enchanted place, part fairy-tale and part nightmare, the source, the origin.

Dickens had finished the first instalment by the end of October, and then worked on through the autumn and the winter. It is written in a spare, almost elliptical, prose and there is an economy or constraint about the whole narrative which suggests that he was consciously harbouring his strength. Nevertheless none of his imaginative power has diminished and, indeed, he was creating quite a new thing in his own fiction. It begins with a fevered hallucination, as we have seen, which unveils a world of death and ruins and obscure passions. It is a book about doubles, about unmotivated aggression, about murderous impulses, and there is such an atmosphere of dread and fate around it that it must rank as Dickens's strangest achievement. The dialogue is different

here, also, and is at once so precise and so complex that it bears all the marks of Dickens's constant, meticulous attention to the effects of his story.

He was not free from anxieties, however, during the course of its writing. One concerned a sudden change in his illustrator: he had asked his son-in-law, Charles Collins, to arrange the pictorial aspects of the novel but Collins became too ill to continue. Dickens had to choose another artist very quickly – and he found Luke Fildes, a young man whose 'modern' naturalistic style offers an oblique commentary on Dickens's more 'timeless' preoccupations. Then Dickens himself once more began to suffer the effects of vascular degeneration; he was in great pain, and his foot was so swollen that he could not walk. Yet none of this prevented him from giving a series of 'Farewell' public readings. This was the first time in his career that he had tried to combine public readings with the composition of a novel, but he was now so used to the work of the reader that it did not seem materially to affect his progress on the story. In any case this short series of readings soon came to an end, and it was in March 1870 that he appeared for the final time in public – '. . . but from these garish lights I vanish now for ever more,' he said to his audience on that last night, 'with a heartfelt, grateful, respectful, and affectionate farewell.'

In the following month the first episode of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* appeared (Dickens had been writing well ahead of publication in case his strength should ebb), and it was an immediate success. More than fifty thousand copies were sold and the newspaper reviewers hailed it as a reversion to his 'old' manner. In particular they noticed the comedy of the novel, even though at this late date it is not the comedy that seems its most significant aspect. Indeed for Dickens himself during this period it must sometimes have seemed to be laughter in the dark, for even as he worked on a narrative concerned with death, his old friends began to die around him: Mark Lemon, the editor of *Punch*; Daniel Maclise, the painter who had been

a close friend of the novelist since the days of *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. Life was closing in upon Dickens, too, and it was in this period that he had a conversation with a friend about the novel he was even then writing. 'Well you, or we,' he said to Dickens, 'are approaching the mystery –' by which he meant death. And Dickens '. . . who had been, and was at the moment, all vivacity, extinguished his gaiety, and fell into a long and silent reverie, from which he never broke during the remainder of the walk.'

Yet he worked on, while it was still day. There are occasions when he seems to be spinning out the narrative a little, as if fearful of using up too much material in too short a space, but even if there is some loss of variety there is a fresh access of power and atmosphere as the novel moves towards the disappearance of Edwin Drood: the story takes place against a dead and barren landscape, but as a result its human figures seem to become all the more striking and fervent. They seem to be treading on ashes while the fire remains within them, like '. . . that mysterious fire which lurks in everything'. Dickens came up regularly to London while engaged on the novel, and at the beginning of June he was staying in the capital in order to superintend some amateur theatricals. Then he went back to Gad's Hill Place on the following weekend, intent upon pursuing his work upon the novel. On Wednesday, June 8, he went across the road to his chalet, as usual, where he continued with his work. He was now describing the light of a 'brilliant morning', and in that invocation we might recall the first sentence of *The Pickwick Papers* – 'The first ray of light which illumines the gloom . . .': so in his first novel, and in his last. In *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* that light reaches the cathedral and manages to 'subdue its earthy odour'; in *The Pickwick Papers* he had described this same cathedral through the words of Alfred Jingle – 'Old cathedral too – earthy smell'. It is as if his creative life had come full circle, returning to its origins in Rochester itself. He wrote on a little, and then ended with his customary flourish.

He was to write no more of the novel, and its unfinished state has prompted many commentators to speculate about the conclusion to the plot. Was Edwin Drood actually murdered, or does he return? Was John Jasper the real killer, or might it be someone else? These questions are of course unanswerable, but in any case Dickens was not wholly preoccupied with the machinations of the plot: he was just as concerned with creating the strange, divided nature of Jasper and in recreating a world in which all of his own preoccupations with fate and mortality could assume their true dimension.

He came back from the chalet that evening, and sat down to dinner with his sister-in-law, Georgina Hogarth. But he became very ill, and fell upon the ground. He never regained consciousness, and died just after six on the following evening. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* was abruptly curtailed – the strangest novel which he ever wrote, and one so filled with all of his concerns that it might truly act as his last testament. It is appropriate, also, to quote some words from it which in their serenity might also act as his epitaph: it is a vision of Cloisterham, or Rochester, with '. . . its river winding down from the mist on the horizon, as though that were its source, and already heaving with a restless knowledge of its approach towards the sea'.