Charles Dickens and Rochester

Robert Langton

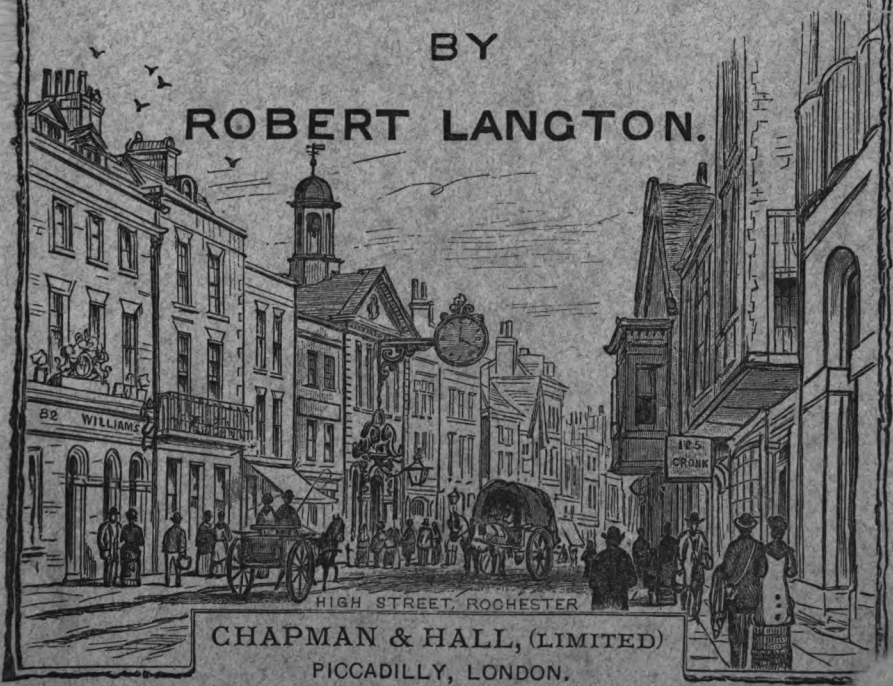
CHARLES DICKENS

AND

ROCHESTER

BY

ROBERT LANGTON.



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PRICE ONE SHILLING.

CHARLES DICKENS

AND

ROCHESTER.

BY ROBERT LANGTON.

WITH NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIONS
From Original Drawings by the late William Hull and the Author.

SECOND THOUSAND.

LONDON:
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1880.

ROCHESTER CASTLE.

Showing Graveyard in the remains of Castle Moat. Here Charles Dickens wished to be buried.

[The following essay was, most of it, written in August and September, 1879, and was read before the Manchester Literary Club, on the evening of the 16th February, 1880. The drawings were made in August, 1879.]

CHARLES DICKENS

AND

ROCHESTER.

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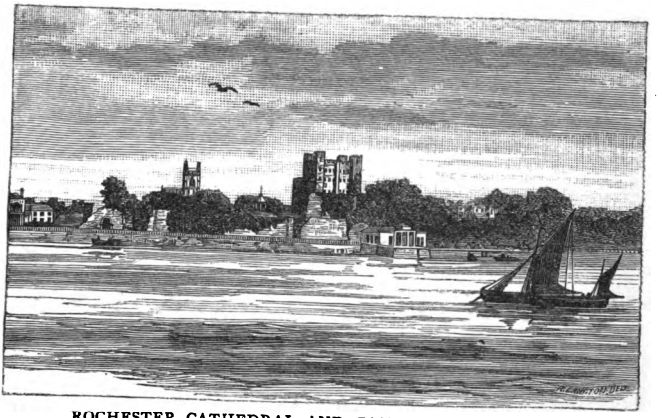
Writing to the Hon. Mrs. Watson in 1856, Charles Dickens says:—

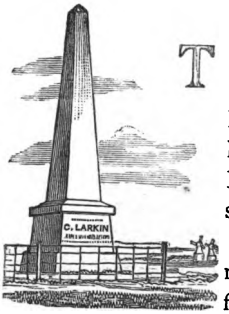
"I have always observed within my experience that the men who have left home young have, many long years afterwards, had the tenderest love for it. That's a pleasant thing to think of, as one of the wise adjustments of this life of ours."



ROCHESTER CATHEDRAL AND CASTLE FROM STROOD.

CHARLES DICKENS AND ROCHESTER.

BY ROBERT LANGTON.



It has no doubt been observed by all careful readers of the works of Charles Dickens how very frequently in his earliest and his latest books he introduces the city of Rochester as the scene of portions of his stories.

I now propose to bring together such references to this locality as are to be found in the entire works of Dickens, and where possible, to let the great master himself do the descriptive part in his own language.

In adding some explanatory notes of my own, I may say that, having passed perhaps the most impressionable part of my childhood at a school in Rochester, and having been familiar with the neighbourhood all through my life, I am able to testify to the wonderful accuracy and realism of the many sketches of life and scene in that part of Kent, which are to be found in some of the works of Charles Dickens.

Though not a man of Kent by birth, Charles Dickens was at the tender age of four years removed with his father's family to Chatham, where they lived near the parish church of St. Mary. Forster truly says that "the associations that were around him when he died were those which, at the outset of his life, had affected him most strongly."

He was, we are told, a very small boy for his age, and very delicate, insomuch that he could not engage in the ordinary sports of boys, but sat apart and watched them at their play, or read such works of Defoe, Smollett, Fielding, and Goldsmith as he had access to.

All this and a great deal more we have from his own sketch of his early days in *David Copperfield.* When a very little fellow he had made several attempts at dramatic writing, or, as he says in his preface to a later edition of the *Sketches by Boz*, "They (the sketches) comprise my first attempts at authorship—with the exception of certain tragedies achieved at the mature age of eight or ten, and represented with great applause to overflowing nurseries." He had already become famous in his own childish circle as a good teller of a story, and an especially good singer of comic songs. Writing to Wilkie Collins in 1856, in answer to some enquiries as to his early years, he says: "I had been a writer when I was a mere baby, and always an actor from the same age."

That his childhood at this time was a happy, innocent enjoyment of life, is certain. We can gather this from some of his autobiographical characters, for we may now be quite sure that besides David Copperfield, Pip in *Great Expectations*, little Paul Dombey, and to some extent little Oliver Twist, there are other children, boys and girls too, here and there in his writings, who more or less reflect his own quaintly beautiful child-life. During the last two years of his residence at Chatham he was sent to school to a Mr. William Giles, in Clover Lane, or Clover Street as it is now. Here, too, he distinguished himself by his happy way of reciting pieces, and once obtained a double encore for a piece out of the *Humourist's Miscellany* called "Dr. Bolus." Mr. Giles appears to have had a very early and pronounced opinion of the sterling abilities of his little scholar, and it will,

perhaps, be remembered that when about half the parts of *Pickwick* had been published, he, Mr. Giles, sent Dickens a silver snuff box with this inscription: "To the inimitable Boz;" and accordingly, he was known among his more intimate friends as "the inimitable" for the rest of his life.

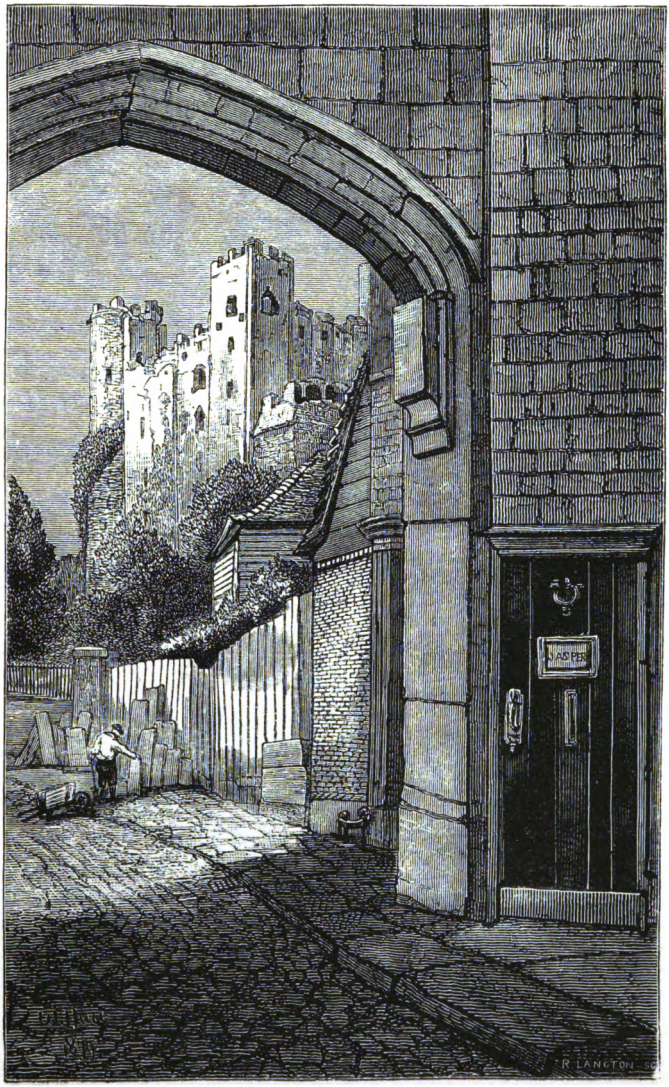
The school of Mr. Giles is still remembered by many middle-aged people in these towns, as is also a schoolboy's doggrel rhyme which embraces the four principal schools of Rochester and Chatham of fifty years ago. It ran thus:—

Baker's Bull Dogs,
Giles's Cats,
New-road Scrubbers,
Troy-Town Rats.*

It was in the year 1821, at the age of nine years, that these happy days of childhood were to terminate. "I have often heard him say," says Forster, "that in leaving the neighbourhood of Rochester he was leaving everything that had given his ailing little life its picturesqueness or sunshine. He was to be taken to London inside the stage coach, and Kentish woods and fields, Cobham Park and Hall, Rochester Cathedral and Castle, and all the wonderful romance together, including the red-cheeked baby he had been wildly in love with, were to vanish like a dream." Arrived in London we find the bright, genial, tender-hearted boy falling into utter poverty and neglect; his father was in difficulties, and soon afterwards was removed to the Marshalsea Prison, and the boy Dickens was sent to do the veriest drudgery at a blacking manufactory at Hungerford Stairs. What such a boy must have suffered in his neglect it would be difficult to estimate. He was not only getting no book-learning whatever, but he was fast losing what little he had learned at Chatham. He was not even properly fed, and had to associate with very different people to those he had been used to in Kent.

The subject of his neglect at this time was so painful to him that for twenty-five years afterwards he could not bring himself to mention it, even to his dearest friends. I find, however, that he mentions the blacking manufactory incidentally in two of his works. In the *Pickwick Papers*, chap. xxxiii., Mr. Weller, senior,

* The Troy-Town School at the top of Star-Hill was kept for many years by Mr. Geo. E. Shirley. The origin of the term "Scrubbers" is rather obscure.



"JASPER'S GATEHOUSE."

Vide "Edwin Drood."

says: "Poetry's unnat'ral; no man ever talked poetry 'cept a beadle on boxin' day, or Warren's blackin', or Rowland's oil, or some o' them low fellows." In *Great expectations*, chap. xxvii., in answer to a question as to whether he had seen London yet, Joe Gargery, the blacksmith, replies: "Why, yes, sir, me and Wopsle went off straight to look at the blackin' ware'us—but we didn't find that it come up to its likeness in the red bills at the shop doors; which I meantersay," added Joe, in an explanatory manner, "as it is there drawed too architectooralooral."

For a full account of the almost incredible hardships and neglect that Dickens experienced at this time, see *David Copperfield*. The only difference in the actual sordid drudgery he was put to is that in the novel he makes a wine and spirit warehouse pass for the blacking manufactory. I will merely quote here the last paragraph of the dismal story. "I know that I lounged about the streets, insufficiently and unsatisfactorily fed—I know that, but for the mercy of God, I might easily have been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond."

After another brief period of schooling, Charles Dickens went, at the age of fifteen, to a solicitor's office, as junior clerk or office-boy, for that was what he really was; and after being there some eighteen months he, by the force of his own strong will, set himself to master the difficulties of stenography, and to qualify himself to take a situation as a reporter. Having succeeded in this in no ordinary degree, and having been in the gallery of the House of Commons for some years as a parliamentary reporter, Dickens suddenly startled the reading world of 1834 and 1835 by his *Sketches by Boz* which first appeared in the *Monthly Magazine*, and afterwards in the *Evening Chronicle*.

From this time there was for him really no looking back, either in popularity or fortune, and his first book, the *Pickwick Papers*, went up in circulation from four hundred copies of part i. to forty thousand of part xv., and this, says Forster, "without newspaper notice or puffing, until people at this time talked of nothing else, tradesmen recommended their goods by using its name, and its sale, outstripping at a bound all the most famous books of the century, had reached to an almost fabulous number."

Writing at this time on the wonderful popularity of *Pickwick*, Thomas Carlyle says—

An archdeacon with his own venerable lips repeated to me, the other night, a strange profane story of a solemn clergyman who had been administering ghostly consolation to a sick person; having finished, satisfactorily as he thought, and got out of the room, he heard the sick man ejaculate: "Well, thank God, Pickwick will be out in ten days any way."

Having thus very briefly sketched an outline of the childhood and youth of Charles Dickens, I will now enter upon the more immediate subject in hand, and it will perhaps be better to take the works containing references to Rochester (which of course includes Chatham) in the order in which they appeared; and here I may say that the very beautiful drawings of my friend, the late William Hull, show Rochester not only as it now is, but as it was when Dickens was a child. Changes have taken place in the old city during the last half century, and notably the old bridge has been replaced by a new one; but the views of Rochester here shown by Mr. Hull, and which he truly said he took up at my invitation as a labour of love, are most of them substantially the same as they must have appeared to William Hogarth and his four jovial friends, when they visited Rochester during their memorable "Five days peregrination" in May, 1732! It is very probable that had Charles Dickens lived to complete *Edwin Drood*, some of the illustrations would have included views of places now before you. From the volumes of *Dickens's Letters* we learn that at the end of the very week in which Dickens died, Mr. Fildes was to have been introduced to Rochester and neighbourhood, with a view to future illustrations. In the woodcut opposite page 88 of the unfinished story, we have a view taken opposite the west door of the cathedral, and which shows part of the cathedral graveyard, part of St. Nicholas' Parish Church, and the Gatehouse. This was evidently taken after Dickens's death, and though the Gatehouse is shewn as a stone building to the top, instead of timber, it is still a wonderfully fine illustration, and serves to show what we have lost.

In "The Great Winglebury Duel," one of the *Sketches*, occurs the first recognizable hint of Rochester, though it is is of course not mentioned by name. It was nevertheless evidently in the mind of the writer when he penned the description of the High Street and the hotel.

At the opening of *Pickwick* we find the friends on their way to

the Bull Hotel, Rochester, and a capital description is given of the old house, the ball-room and grand staircase of which remain to this day just as it appeared to Mr. Pickwick and his friends more than fifty years since, for the tale is laid in the year 1827. Standing on Rochester bridge early on a fine summer morning, Mr. Pickwick, beheld the landscape here described, and part of which I have attempted to show in a sketch at the head of this paper.

On the left of the spectator lay the ruined wall, broken in many places, and in some overhanging the narrow beach below in rude and heavy masses. * * * Behind it rose the ancient castle, its towers roofless, and its massive walls crumbling away, but telling us proudly of its old might and strength * * * On either side the banks of the Medway, covered with cornfields and pastures, with here and there a windmill or a distant church, stretched away as far as the eye could see, presenting a rich and varied landscape, rendered more beautiful by the changing shadows which passed swiftly across it, as the thin and half-formed clouds skimmed away in the light of the morning sun.

We next get a glimpse of the friends just issued from their hotel, on their way to Dingley Dell, Mr. Winkle's horse "drifting up the High Street in the most mysterious manner—side first, with his head to one side of the way, and his tail towards the other." Then there is an account of a review on Chatham Lines, wonderfully told, but too long to give here. An extract from Mr. Pickwick's never-failing notebook runs thus: "The principal productions of these towns appear to be soldiers, sailors, Jews, chalk, shrimps, officers, and dock-yard men. The commodities chiefly exposed for sale in the public streets are marine stores, hard bake, apples, flat fish, and oysters."

Mr. Jingle, in describing the various grades of exclusiveness in these parts, says, for the enlightenment of Mr. Tupman, "The dock-yard people of upper rank don't know dock-yard people of lower rank; * * * dock-yard people of lower rank don't know small gentry; * * * small gentry don't know tradespeople; * * * commissioner don't know anybody."

It is worthy of notice, more particularly as it is not mentioned by Forster, that the scene of the duel which was to have been fought between Mr. Winkle, and the irascible Dr Slammer, is laid in the field at the back of Fort Pitt; the very spot where the four schools before-mentioned, used to meet to settle their difficulties with their fists!! Here too they occasionally met in the more

friendly rivalry of Cricket. We do not find Rochester mentioned again till 1849, when David Copperfield passes through these towns on his way to Dover.

I see myself, as evening closes in, coming over the bridge at Rochester, footsore and tired, and eating bread that I had bought for supper. One or two little houses with the notice "Lodgings for travellers" hanging out had tempted me; but I was afraid of spending the few pence I had, and was even more afraid of the vicious looks of the trampers I had met or overtaken. I sought no shelter, therefore, but the sky, and toiling into Chatham—which in that night's aspect is a mere dream of chalk and drawbridges, and mastless ships in a muddy river, roofed like Noah's arks—crept at last upon a sort of grass-grown battery overhanging a lane, where a sentry was walking to and fro. There I lay down near a cannon, and, happy in the society of the sentry's footsteps, slept soundly till morning.

He then tells how he had to sell his little jacket in order to buy food, and "Old Charley," the dealer in second-hand clothes—a real character of forty years ago—is portrayed for all time. The description is too long for quotation, but here is the close of it:—

There never was such another drunken madman in that line of business, I hope. That he was well known in the neighbourhood, and enjoyed the reputation of having sold himself to the Devil, I soon understood from the visits he received from the boys who continually came skirmishing about the shop, shouting that legend and calling to him to bring out his gold.

There is another reference to this district in *David Copperfield*, where Mrs. Micawber explains her presence thus:—

Mr. Micawber was induced to think, on enquiry, that there might be an opening for a man of his talent in the Medway coal trade. Then, as Mr. Micawber very properly said, the first step to be taken was to come and see the Medway—which we came and saw. We came, repeated Mrs. Micawber, and saw I think the greater part of the Medway, and my opinion of the coal trade on that river is that it may require talent, but that it certainly requires capital. Talent, Mr. Micawber has; Capital, Mr. Micawber has not.

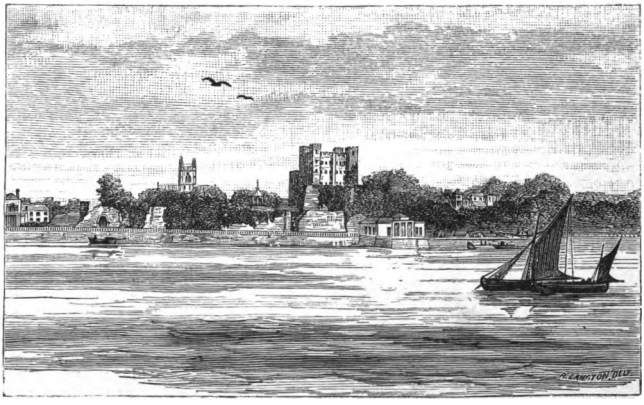
In 1854 we have as a Christmas tale *The Seven Poor Travellers*, the scene of which is laid in High Street, Rochester, at Watts's Charity. The well known Inscription over the door of Watts's Charity has puzzled many generations of men. It runs thus:—

Richard Watts, Esq.,
by his Will, dated 22 Aug., 1579,
founded this Charity
for Six poor Travellers,
who not being Rogues or Proctors,
may receive gratis for one night,
Lodging, Entertainment,
and Fourpence each.

WATTS'S CHARITY.

MINOR CANON ROW, ROCHESTER.

See *The Seven Poor Travellers*, and *Edwin Drood*.



ROCHESTER CATHEDRAL AND CASTLE.

This may have been well understood three hundred years ago, but, Time had drawn a veil over the true reading of the inscription, till quite lately, when Mr. W. Gibson Ward of Ross, pointed out, that the PROCTORS who are not to participate in the charity, were a set of mendicants, who swarmed everywhere in the South of England, under the pretence of collecting alms for the support of Leper-houses, at a time, too, when these Hospitals had fortunately become unnecessary.

In the time of Watts, these Proctors had become a greater nuisance than the Leprosy itself. Hence the prohibition.

Dickens under guise of a *seventh* poor Traveller, then gives a description of the Charity as administered in 1854.

I had been wandering about the neighbouring cathedral and had seen the tomb of Richard Watts, with the effigy of worthy Master Richard starting out of it like a ship's figure-head, and the way being very short and very plain, I had come prosperously to the inscription and the quaint old door.

I found it to be a clean white house, of a staid and venerable air, with choice little low lattice windows, and a roof of three gables. The silent High Street of Rochester is full of gables, with old beams and timbers carved into strange faces. It is oddly garnished with a queer old clock that projects over the pavement out of a grave red-brick building, as if time carried on business there and hung out his sign. Sooth to say, he did an active stroke of work in Rochester, in the days of the Romans, and the Saxons, and the Normans; and down to the times of King John, when the rugged castle—I will not undertake to say how many hundreds of years old then—was abandoned to the centuries of weather which had so defaced the dark apertures in its walls that the ruin looks as if the rooks and daws had picked its eyes out.

As I passed along the High Street I heard the waits at a distance, and struck off to find them. They were playing near one of the old gates of the city, at the corner of a wonderfully quaint row of red-brick tenements, which the clarionet obligingly informed me were inhabited by the minor canons. They had odd little porches over the doors, like sounding-boards over old pulpits; and I thought I should like to see one of the minor canons come out upon his top step and favour us with a little Christmas discourse about the poor scholars of Rochester, taking for his text the words of his Master relative to the devouring of widows' houses.

This refers to a great scandal, caused by the discovery of a serious misappropriation of the Rochester Cathedral funds by the clergy, and for the exposure of which the Rev. Robert Whiston, M.A., then Head Master of the Grammar School, had just before this date (November, 1854) been presented with a service of plate.

Mr. Whiston recovered for the school a large sum of money, amounting to many thousands of pounds, for which service he was promptly turned out of his Head Mastership by the Dean and Chapter. They were however compelled to re-instate him at once, and the foregoing allusion by Dickens was thought at the time to be well deserved, and not at all too strong.

In the *Uncommercial Traveller*, 1860, we have many glimpses of Rochester and its vicinity. The first is in a chapter on Tramps, which abound on the great Dover Road, and especially so in the neighbourhood of Gads Hill.*

As a tramping clock-maker the un-commercial traveller gives a good description of Cobham Hall and Woods. * * * Having in following his vocation given voice to the long silent bell of the stable-clock, the un-commercial is introduced to the hospitality of the servants' hall * * * "and there regaled with beef and bread, and powerful ale."

Then, paid freely, we should be at liberty to go, and should be told by a pointing helper to keep round over yinder by the blasted ash, * * * and so straight through the woods, till we should see the town-lights, right afore us. * * * Then should we make a burst to get clear of the trees, and should soon find ourselves in the open, with the town-lights bright ahead of us.

So should we lie that night at the ancient sign of the Crispin and Crispanus,† and rise early next morning to be betimes on tramp again.

Farther on in this chapter on tramps, we have the surroundings of the third milestone from Rochester, on the road to Gravesend, lying a little to the West of Gads-hill Place, brought before our notice thus. * * * (The distant river is the Thames.)

I have my eye on a piece of Kentish road, bordered on either side by a wood, and having on one hand, between the road-dust and the trees, a skirting patch of grass. Wild flowers grow in abundance on this spot, and it lies high and airy, with a distant river stealing steadily away to the ocean, like a man's life. To gain the milestone here, which the moss, primroses, violets, blue bells, and wild roses would soon render illegible but for peering travellers pushing them aside with their sticks, you must come up a steep hill, come which way you may. So all the tramps with carts or caravans—the gipsy tramp, the show tramp, the Cheap Jack—find it impossible to resist the

* The initial letter I at the head of this paper represents the monument erected to the memory of Charles Larkin, of Rochester, at Gads Hill.

† At Strood.

temptations of the place, and all turn the horse loose when they come to it, and boil the pot. Bless the place, I love the ashes of the vagabond fires that have scorched its grass! On this hallowed ground has it been my happy privilege (let me whisper it) to behold the white-haired lady with the pink eyes eating meat pie with the giant. It was on an evening in August that I chanced upon this ravishing spectacle, and I noticed that, whereas the giant reclined half concealed beneath the overhanging boughs and seemed indifferent to nature, the white hair of the gracious lady streamed free in the breath of evening, and her pink eyes found pleasure in the landscape. I heard only a single sentence of her uttering, yet it bespoke a talent for modest repartee. The ill-mannered giant—accursed be his evil race!—had interrupted the lady in some remark, and, as I passed that enchanted corner of the wood, she gently reproved him with the words, "Now, Cobby;"—Cobby! so short a name!—"ain't one fool enough to talk at a time?"

This describes the neighbourhood of Gads Hill as probably only Dickens could have described it. Of the house, Gads Hill Place, little need be said here, as it has been so thoroughly done by Forster. It is a comfortable, old-fashioned house, built about a century since, in the reign of George III., and is on the very spot mentioned in Shakspere's *Henry IV.* as the scene of the robbery of the travellers.

Gads Hill had been the scene of many robberies on the highway, long before Shakspere conferred upon it what may now be called its *first* world-wide renown. An extract or two from the parish registers of Gravesend will serve to show that Travellers in these parts did not always tamely submit to be spoiled of their goods.

Thus we find the following entry:—"1586, September 29th daye, was a thiefe yt was slayne, buried." And again, "1590, Marche the 17th daie, was a theefe yt was at Gadshill wounded to deathe, called Robert Writs, buried."

Also in John Clavell's "Recantation of an ill-led life" published in 1634, we find the following allusion to the well known character of this part of the Dover Road.

> "For though I oft have seen Gads-hill and those
> Red tops of mountains, where good people lose
> Their ill-kept purses. I did never climbe
> Parnassus' Hill or could aduenture time
> To tread the muse's mazes, * * * *"

The circumstances connected with the purchase of this estate by Dickens are so remarkable that it will be as well to give an

extract from a letter from Dickens to his friend M. de Cerjat, written in 1857, fully detailing them :—

I happened to be walking past [the house] a year and a half or so ago, with my sub-editor of *Household Words* (Mr. W. H. Wills,) when I said to him, "You see that house? It has always a curious interest for me, because when I was a small boy down in these parts I thought it the most beautiful house (I suppose because of its famous old cedar trees) ever seen. And my poor father used to bring me to look at it, and used to say that if ever I grew up to be a clever man perhaps I might own that house, or such another house. In remembrance of which I have always in passing looked to see if it was to be sold or let, and it has never been to me like any other house, and it has never changed at all." We came back to town, and my friend went out to dinner. Next morning he came to me in great excitement and said, "It is written that you are to have that house at Gads Hill. The lady I had allotted to me to take down to dinner yesterday began to speak of that neighbourhood. 'You know it?' I said; 'I have been there to-day.' 'O yes,' she said, 'I know it very well. I was a child there in the house they call Gads Hill Place. My father was the rector, and lived there many years. He has just died, has left it to me, and I want to sell it.' So," says the sub-editor, "you must buy it. Now or never!" I did, and hope to pass next summer there.

Nearly opposite Gads Hill Place, is the Falstaff Inn, dating probably from Queen Anne's time. It formerly had an old-fashioned swinging sign, on one side of which was painted Falstaff fighting with the men in buckram suits, and on the other, Falstaff being pitched into the Thames from a buck-basket, the merry wives of Windsor looking on approvingly. In its long, sanded room there was a copy of Shakspere's monument in Westminster Abbey, with the inscription, "The cloud-capt towers, the gorgeous palaces," and so forth. It is worth noting, that forty years ago, something like ninety coaches passed this old hostelry every day!

The Railways have altered that, and although it is still true, as Mr. F——'s Aunt says, that, "there's milestones on the Dover road,"* it is also true that, in some places there is very little else; for in parts of the road grass struggles successfully with the diminished traffic of these latter days.

"Dullborough Town" is the title of another chapter of the *Uncommercial Traveller*, and is another name for Rochester.

The following extracts show more clearly perhaps than any other portion of the writings of Charles Dickens, how he clung to

* Little Dorrit.—Chap. XXIII.

GATEHOUSE OF CATHEDRAL CLOSE, ROCHESTER.

the memories of his childhood, and how he still loved Rochester when in the full-tide of his popularity, and in the prime of his life.

As the uncommercial saunters along a street, he at last recognises a man he had known many years before, when a child. * * * "It was he himself; he might formerly have been an old-looking young man, or he might now be a young-looking old man, but there he was." * * * Addressing the man (a greengrocer) he wishes to explain that he formerly as a boy had the honour of his acquaintance, but he quite failed to excite the interest of his former acquaintance. * * *

Nettled by his phlegmatic conduct, I informed him that I had left the town when I was a child. He slowly returned, quite unsoftened, and not without a sarcastic kind of complacency, *Had* I? Ah! And did I find it had got on tolerably well without me? Such is the difference (I thought, when I had left him a few hundred yards behind, and was by so much in a better temper) between going away from a place and remaining in it. I had no right, I reflected, to be angry with the greengrocer for his want of interest; I was nothing to him: whereas he was the town, the cathedral, the bridge, the river, my childhood, and a large slice of my life, to me.

There is probably more of fact than fiction, in the following extract from the same chapter.

As I left Dullborough in the days when there were no railroads in the land, I left it in a stage coach. Through all the years that have since passed have I ever lost the smell of the damp straw in which I was packed—like game—and forwarded, carriage paid, to the Cross Keys, Wood Street, Cheapside, London? There was no other inside passenger, and it rained hard all the way, and I thought life sloppier than I had expected to find it.

The coach that had carried me away was melodiously called Timpson's Blue-eyed Maid, and belonged to Timpson, at the coach office up street; the locomotive engine that had brought me back was called severely No. 97 and belonged to S.E.R., and was spitting ashes and hot water over the blighted ground.

When I had been let out at the platform door the first discovery I made was that the station had swallowed up the playing field. I looked in again over the low wall at the scene of departed glories. Here, in the haymaking time, had I been delivered from the dungeons of Seringapatam, an immense pile (of haycock,) by my countrymen, the victorions British (boy next door and his two cousins,) and had been recognized with ecstasy by my affianced one (Miss Green,) who had come all the way from England (second house in the terrace) to ransom me and marry me. Here had I first heard of the existence of a terrible banditti, called "The Radicals," whose principles were that the Prince Regent wore stays, and that nobody had a right to any salary, and

that the army and navy ought to be put down—horrors at which I trembled in my bed, after supplicating that the Radicals might be speedily taken and hanged.

The theatre was in existence, I found, and I resolved to comfort my mind by going to look at it. Many wondrous secrets of nature had I come to the knowledge of in that sanctuary, of which not the least terrific were, that the witches of Macbeth bore an awful resemblance to the thanes and other proper inhabitants of Scotland; and that the good King Duncan couldn't rest in his grave, but was constantly coming out of it and calling himself somebody else. To the theatre, therefore, I repaired for consolation. But I found very little, for it was in a bad and declining way. No, there was no comfort in the theatre. It was mysteriously gone, like my own youth—unlike my own youth, it might be coming back some day; but there was little promise of it.

Of course the town had shrunk fearfully since I was a child there. I found the High Street little better than a lane. There was a public clock in it which I had supposed to be the finest clock in the world: whereas it now turned out to be as inexpressive, moon-faced, and weak a clock as ever I saw.

I had not gone fifty paces along the street when I was suddenly brought up by the sight of a man who got out of a little phaeton at the doctor's door, and went into the doctor's house. Immediately the air was filled with the scent of trodden grass, and the perspective of years opened, and at the end of it was a little likeness of this man keeping a wicket, and I said "God bless my soul! Joe Specks!" Scorning to ask the boy left in the phaeton whether it was really Joe, and scorning even to read the brass plate on the door—so sure was I—I rang the bell and informed the servant maid that a stranger sought audience of Mr. Specks. Into a room half surgery, half study, I was shown to await his coming.

When my old schoolfellow came in and I informed him with a smile that I was not a patient, he seemed rather at a loss to perceive any reason for smiling in connection with that fact, and enquired to what was he to attribute the honour? I asked him with another smile could he remember me at all? He had not (he said) that pleasure. I was beginning to have but a poor opinion of Mr. Specks, when he said reflectively, "And yet there's a something, too." Upon that I saw a boyish light in his eyes that looked well, and I asked him if he could inform me, as a stranger who desired to know and had not the means of reference at hand, what the name of the young lady was who married Mr. Random? Upon that he said "Narcissa," and, after staring for a moment called me by my name, shook me by the hand, and melted into a roar of laughter. "Why, of course," you'll remember Lucy Green," he said, after we had talked a little. "Of course," said I. "Whom do you think she married?" said he. "You?" I hazarded. "Me," said Specks, "and you shall see her." So I saw her, and she was fat, and if all the hay in the world had been heaped upon her it could scarcely have altered her face more than

time had altered it from my remembrance of the face that had once looked down upon me into the fragrant dungeons of Seringapatam.*

We talked immensely, Specks, and Mrs. Specks, and I, and we spoke of our old selves as though our old selves were dead and gone, and indeed, indeed they were—dead and gone as the playing field that had become a wilderness of rusty iron, and the property of S.E.R.

When I went to catch my train at night I was in a more charitable mood with Dullborough than I had been all day; and yet in my heart I had loved it all day too. Ah! who was I that I should quarrel with the town for being changed to me, when I myself had come back so changed to it! All my early readings and early imaginations dated from this place, and I took them away so full of innocent construction and guileless belief, and I brought them back so worn and torn, so much the wiser and so much the worse!

In another paper of the *Uncommercial Traveller* there is a graphic description of Chatham Dockyard and the machinery there, also of the appearance of the Medway and the marshes beyond. In Paper 26 there is a reminiscence of a funeral Dickens attended when a child at Chatham, and the impressions it made on his mind. "Other funerals," he says, "have I seen with grown-up eyes since that day, of which the burden has been the same childish burden. Making game. Real affliction, real grief and solemnity, have been outraged, and the funeral has been *performed*." These impressions enlarged on in nearly all his other works have gone far to abolish the absurdities and extravagance of modern funeral customs.

In 1861 *Great Expectations* appeared. The opening scene is Cooling Churchyard, near Rochester, beyond which lies a large tract of marsh country extending from the Medway to the estuary of the Thames. While at Rochester in August, 1879, with Mr. Hull, we drove out to look at the spot, and the sketch is one I made of the church and churchyard. (See Tail-piece.)

The curious rows of little coffin-shaped stones are still to be seen exactly as described by Pip, but with this difference, the tale says there are five of them, Forster says there are "a dozen," the real number is thirteen,—and they are all the children of one family! Even the names of the children are accurately given so far as they go.

This tale has many allusions to Rochester, but mostly under

*"Death doesn't change us more than life my dear."—*Old Curiosity Shop.* Chap. XVII.

the name of "Our market town." According to Forster, "Restoration House," as it is called, stands for the "Satis House" in the tale. That may be so, but it certainly is not *the* "Satis House" where Richard Watts entertained Queen Elizabeth. That stood on Boley Hill, close up to the curtain wall of the castle, and overlooking the river. A portion of this fine old house is incorporated with the new one built about a century since.

There is a fine description of the desolate tract of wild marshes beyond the village of Cooling, and of the "fearful wild fowl" in the shape of escaped convicts sometimes caught there. Pip, the hero of the story, says :—

To five little stone lozenges, each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row, and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine—who gave up trying to get a living exceedingly early in that universal struggle—I am indebted for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs, with their hands in their trouser pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence. Ours was the marsh country, down, by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out, for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard ; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard was the marshes ; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river ; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea ; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all, and begining to cry, was Pip. "Hold your noise !" cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. "Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your throat !"

A fearful man all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briers ; who limped and shivered, and glared and growled ; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.

The convict makes the frightened boy promise to bring him in the morning a file and some "wittles," and then takes himself off, "hugging his shuddering body in both his arms, and picking his way among the nettles, and among the brambles that bound the green mounds, as if he were eluding the hands of the dead people, stretching up cautiously out of their graves to get a twist upon his ankle and pull him in." Pip gets the file and the "wittles,"

EASTGATE, ROCHESTER.

and in the morning finds the convict at an old battery on the marshes :—

Hugging himself and limping to and fro as if he had never all night left off hugging and limping. He was awfully cold, to be sure. I half expected to see him drop down before my face, and die of deadly cold. His eyes looked so awfully hungry, too, that when I handed him the file, and he laid it down on the grass, it occurred to me he would have tried to eat it if he had not seen my bundle. "What's in the bottle, boy?" said he. "Brandy," said I. He was already handing mince-meat down his throat in the most curious manner—more like a man who was putting it away somewhere in a violent hurry than a man who was eating it—but he left off to take some of the liquor. He shivered all the while so violently that it was quite as much as he could do to keep the neck of the bottle between his teeth without biting it off. "I think you have got the ague," said I. "I'm much of your opinion, boy," said he. "It's bad about here," I told him. "You've been lying out on the meshes, and they're dreadful aguish. Rheumatic too." "I'll eat my breakfast afore they're the death of me," said he. "I'll beat the shivers so far, I'll bet you." He was gobbling mince-meat, meat-bone, bread, cheese, and pork pie all at once; staring distrustfully while he did so at the mist all around us, and often stopping—even stopping his jaws—to listen. Some real or fancied sound, some clink upon the river or breathing of beast upon the marsh, now gave him a start, and he said suddenly: "You're not a deceiving imp? You brought no one with you?" "No, sir! no!" "Nor giv' no one the office to follow you?" "No!" "Well," said he, "I believe you. You'd be but a fierce young hound indeed if, at your time of life, you could help to hunt a wretched warmint, hunted as near death and dunghill as this poor wretched warmint is!" Something clicked in his throat as if he had works in him like a clock, and was going to strike. And he smeared his ragged, rough sleeve over his eyes.

Dickens must have had many opportunities of observing the appearance and condition of the Chatham convicts, and there are many vivid glimpses of convict life in this tale. The captured convicts in this chapter, were spirited away to the hulk lying out in the Medway, and looking by night like "a wicked Noah's Ark." He also describes in another chapter the manner of conveying convicts to Chatham by coach, and how ordinary outside passengers first became aware of their presence by their "bringing with them that curious flavour of bread poultice, baize, rope yarn, and hearthstone, which attends the convict presence."

Farther on in the tale, Pip is taken to the Town Hall to be bound apprentice to Joe Gargery, the blacksmith. The "Hall," is of course the Guildhall, Rochester.

The Hall was a queer place I thought, with higher pews in it than a church, * * * and with mighty justices leaning back in chairs, with folded arms,

or taking snuff, or going to sleep, or writing, or reading the newspapers, * * * and with some shining black portraits on the walls, which my unartistic eye regarded as a composition of hardbake and sticking-plaster. There in a corner my indentures were duly signed and attested, and I was "bound;" Mr. Pumblechook holding me all the while as if we had looked in on our way to the scaffold, to have those little preliminaries disposed of.

At the dinner and merry-making at the Blue Boar, which followed, Pip complains that being sleepy, his friends kept waking him up, and telling him to enjoy himself,—and farther on in the evening

Mr. Wopsle gave us Collins's Ode, and threw his blood-stained sword in thunder down, with such an effect, that a waiter came in and said "The commercials underneath sent up their compliments, and it wasn't the Tumblers Arms."

The Blue Boar so often mentioned in this tale is undoubtedly intended for the Bull Hotel in the High Street.

The following extract may have been and very likely was, a personal experience of Dickens on revisiting Rochester. In the story it is the experience of Pip, after he had for a time realized his great expectations :—

It was interesting to be in the quiet old town once more, and it was not disagreeable to be here and there suddenly recognized and stared after. One or two of the tradespeople even darted out of their shops, and went a little way down the street before me, that they might turn, as if they had forgotten something, and pass me face to face—on which occasions I don't know whether they or I made the most pretence; they of not doing it, or I of not seeing it.

The story of *Great Expectations* lies either in Rochester and neighbourhood or London, and, like *Edwin Drood*, is so full of Rochester and London that either book might equally with his terrible story of the French Revolution have been called *A Tale of Two Cities.*

Many characters in the earlier and later books of Charles Dickens are, it is well known, taken from actual life, and have been thought by some still living in these towns to be much too easily recognizable to be pleasant.

Names of places, too, are occasionally used in works that do not otherwise touch on Rochester district at all; for instance, in *Bleak House*, a rookery in London is called "Tom-all-alone's," which to thousands not in the secret may seem an unmeaning name. It is really the name of an outlying district of Chatham, at the back of the Lines, and is now being nearly all absorbed in the dockyard extension. There is or was lately here a tavern also

called "Tom-all-alone's." Of the names of characters throughout the works of Dickens, many are drawn from these towns. Hubble, Jasper, Cobb, Dowler, Larkins, and many others are well-known local names; Caleb Pordage and Fanny Dorritt lie side by side in the cathedral graveyard; and there is a Weller, a greengrocer, in High Street, Chatham.

In the last work of Dickens, Rochester figures again as Cloisterham, and there are several fine passages in the fragment relating to his favourite spot. In a letter to Forster, written some six years before his death, he says:—"I have grown hard to satisfy, and write very slowly." There is, however, no doubt that this work shows no falling off either in invention or descriptive power; and although his statement to his friend, "that he had grown hard to satisfy," is fully borne out by a careful examination of the manuscript, where erasures and interlineations are numerous, perhaps few will doubt that this, his last work, is one of his best, if not the best of all.

It may be noted, too, that towards the close of his life Charles Dickens seems to have been more frequently in the immediate precincts of the cathedral than ever before; this may very probably have been in order to make a closer study of its surroundings, for use as the story developed itself. The apparitor of the cathedral (the Mr. Tope of the tale) says:—"he often saw Mr. Dickens about the cathedral during the last few months of his life; and for some time he took no particular notice of him, not knowing who he was." And to the remark, "Ah, but he was taking notice of you!" he replied "Very true, sir, very true," and seemed pleased with the recognition of his portrait. The curious character, Durdles, who has only recently disappeared from the neighbourhood, was from the life, as was also, to some extent, Mr. Sapsea. There is plenty of good comedy in *Edwin Drood*,* but it is rather noticeable for a quieter and more thoughtfully subdued tone throughout. The first extract describes Eastgate House, or the Nun's House of the tale, the High Street, and Mr. Sapsea's premises. Mr. Hull's drawings of the High Street and Eastgate give capital views of this part of Rochester.

* It is believed on good grounds, that (with the alteration of one letter,) *Edwin Drood* is named after a former Landlord of the Falstaff, his name being Edwin Trood.

A drowsy city, Cloisterham, whose inhabitants seem to suppose, with an inconsistency more strange than rare, that all its changes lie behind it, and that there are no more to come. A queer moral to derive from antiquity, yet older than any traceable antiquity.

So silent are the streets of Cloisterham (though prone to echo on the smallest provocation,) that of a summer day the sunblinds of its shops scarce dare to flap in the south wind; while the sun-browned tramps who pass along and stare, quicken their limp a little, that they may the sooner get beyond the confines of its oppressive respectability.

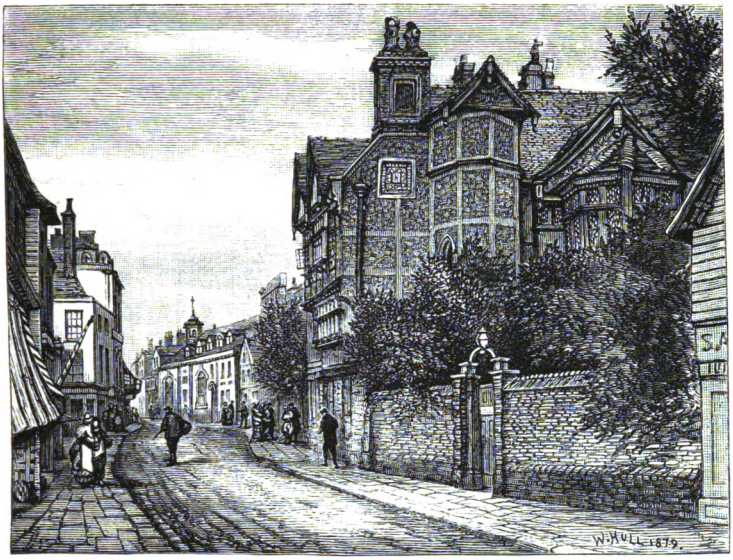
In a word, a city of another and a bygone time is Cloisterham, with its hoarse cathedral bell, its hoarse rooks hovering about the cathedral tower, its hoarser and less distinct rooks in the stalls far beneath.

In the midst of Cloisterham stands the Nun's House; a venerable brick edifice, whose present appellation is doubtless derived from the legend of its conventual uses. On the trim gate enclosing its old courtyard is a resplendent brass plate flashing forth the legend "Seminary for Young Ladies. Miss Twinkleton." The house front is so old and worn, and the brass plate is so shining and staring, that the general result has reminded imaginative strangers of a battered old beau with a large modern eyeglass stuck in his blind eye. * * * * * * * *

Mr. Sapsea's premises are in the High Street, over against the Nun's House. They are of about the period of the Nun's House, irregularly modernized here and there, as steadily deteriorating generations found, more and more, that they preferred air and light to fever and the plague. Over the doorway is a wooden effigy, about half life size, representing Mr. Sapsea's father, in a curly wig and toga, in the act of selling. The chastity of the idea, and the natural appearance of the little finger, hammer, and pulpit, have been much admired.

The figure of the auctioneer just mentioned, disappeared some twenty-five years since, but the description of it, and it is said of the auctioneer also, was true to life; certain it is that, when Charles Dickens died, the successors of this very auctioneer, Messrs. Thomas and Homan, were employed by the executors to sell the furniture and effects at Gads Hill Place. Here follows a description of Minor Canon Row, or, as it is called in the tale, "Minor Canon Corner," the residence of the minor canons. Mr. Hull's beautiful drawing was sketched under difficulties, and we were more than once invited into the nearest house in the row, the corner one, out of the pitiless rain. What we were shown there convinced us that Dickens had been there before us, as his account of the interior of Canon Crisparkle's house is photographic in its accuracy.

Minor Canon Corner was a quiet place in the shadow of the cathedral, which the cawing of the rooks, the echoing footsteps of rare passers, the sound



EASTGATE HOUSE, ROCHESTER.

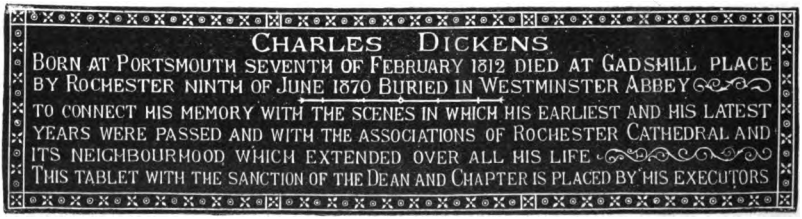
The Nun's House of *Edwin Drood*.

"THE VINES," ROCHESTER; WITH RESTORATION HOUSE.

The "Satis House" of *Great Expectations*.

ROCHESTER CATHEDRAL (WEST DOOR).

Norman work, *circa* 1130.



BRASS IN WALL OF SOUTH TRANSEPT, ROCHESTER CATHEDRAL.

of the cathedral bell, or the roll of the cathedral organ, seemed to render more quiet than absolute silence. Swaggering fighting men had had their centuries of ramping and raving about Minor Canon Corner, and beaten serfs had had their centuries of drudging and dying there, and powerful monks had had their centuries of being sometimes useful and sometimes harmful there; and behold, they were all gone out of Minor Canon Corner, and so much the better. Perhaps one of the highest uses of their ever having been there was that there might be left behind that blessed air of tranquillity which pervaded Minor Canon Corner, and that serenely romantic state of the mind, productive for the most part of pity and forbearance, which is engendered by a sorrowful story that is all told, or a pathetic play that is played out.

Red-brick walls harmoniously toned down in color by time, strong-rooted ivy, latticed windows, panelled rooms, big oaken beams in little places, and stone-walled gardens where annual fruit yet ripened upon monkish trees, were the principal surroundings of pretty old Mrs. Crisparkle and the Reverend Septimus as they sat at breakfast.

Here is what Mr. Grewgious saw and heard as he stood at the great west door of the cathedral on the afternoon of a fine autumn day:—

"Dear me," said Mr. Grewgious, peeping in, "it's like looking down the throat of Old Time."

Old Time heaved a mouldy sigh from tomb and arch and vault; and gloomy shadows began to deepen in corners; and damps began to rise from green patches of stone; and jewels, cast upon the pavement of the nave from stained glass by the declining sun, began to perish. Within the grill-gate of the chancel, up the steps surmounted loomingly by the fast darkening organ, white robes could be dimly seen, and one feeble voice, rising and falling in a cracked monotonous mutter, could at intervals be faintly heard. In the free outer air, the river, the green pastures, and the brown arable lands, the teeming hills and dales, were reddened by the sunset; while the distant little windows in windmills and farm homesteads shone patches of bright beaten gold. In the cathedral all became grey, murky, and sepulchral, and the cracked monotonous mutter went on like a dying voice, until the organ and the choir burst forth, and drowned it in a sea of music. Then the sea fell, and the dying voice made another feeble effort, and then the sea rose high, and beat its life out, and lashed the roof, and surged among the arches, and pierced the heights of the great tower; and then the sea was dry, and all was still.

The old building before mentioned, called "Restoration House," has always in the memory of man been said to be haunted. The story is that a lady, with a child in her arms and a rope dangling from her neck, has been seen, not only in the house, but in the Vines opposite (the monk's vineyard of the story,) and in parts of the precincts. Dickens says:—

A certain awful hush pervades the ancient pile, the cloisters, and the churchyard, after dark, which not many people care to encounter. The cause

of this is not to be found in any local superstition that attaches to the precincts, but it is to be sought in the innate shrinking of dust with the breath of life in it from dust out of which the breath of life has passed; also in the widely diffused, and almost as widely unacknowledged, reflection: "If the dead do, under any circumstances, become visible to the living, these are such likely surroundings for the purpose that I, the living, will get out of them as soon as I can."

This reminds one of that fine passage in *Rasselas*, where Imlac says:—"That the dead are seen no more I will not undertake to maintain against the concurrent and unvaried testimony of all ages and of all nations. That it is doubted by single cavillers can very little weaken the general evidence; and many who deny it with their tongues confess it by their fears."

Christmas Eve in Cloisterham:—

A few strange faces in the streets; a few other faces, half strange and half familiar, once the faces of Cloisterham children, now the faces of men and women who come back from the outer world at long intervals. To these, the striking of the cathedral clock, and the cawing of the rooks, are like voices of their nursery time.

To such as these, it has happened in their dying hours afar off, that they have imagined their chamber floor to be strewed with the autumal leaves fallen from the elm trees in the close: so have the rustling sounds and fresh scents of their earliest impressions revived, when the circle of their lives was very nearly traced, and the beginning and the end were drawing close together.

The next and last extract was written at Gads Hill, on the morning of the 8th of June, 1870, in the Swiss chalet which stood in the grounds on the opposite side of the road; and in the evening Charles Dickens was stricken with apoplexy, and died the next day. The weather was unusually fine and warm,* and in the morning of his last day of consciousness we find him thus beautifully describing the effects of such a morning in his favourite spot:—

A brilliant morning shines on the old city. Its antiquities and ruins are surpassingly beautiful, with the lusty ivy gleaming in the sun, and the rich trees waving in the balmy air. Changes of glorious light from moving boughs, songs of birds, scents from gardens, woods, and fields—or rather, from the one great garden of the whole cultivated island in its yielding time—penetrate into the cathedral, subdue its earthly odour, and preach the Resurrection and the Life. The cold stone tombs of centuries ago grow warm; and flecks of brightness dart into the sternest marble corners of the building, fluttering there like wings.

*"The June weather was delicious. The sky was blue, the larks were soaring high over the green corn, I thought all that country-side more beautiful and peaceful by far than I had ever known it to be yet."—*Great Expectations.* Chap. LVIII.

Having thus glanced at all the works of Dickens containing references to this neighbourhood, it remains only to note that, although none of the books between *Pickwick* and *David Copperfield* touch upon Rochester, we can by the aid of Forster's Life of Dickens, and the two volumes of Letters published by Miss Dickens, and her Aunt, get many glimpses of his old love for these towns. Charles Dickens never wearied of taking his friends Forster, Maclise, Stanfield, Leech, Longfellow, Fields, Wilkie Collins, and many others to see the places he had known from childhood; and which places may certainly be said to have left their influences,—very beneficent influences too—upon the whole of his after life.

Charles Dickens has now been in his grave ten years, and although it would not be becoming in me to express any opinion as to the relative value of his works, or the hold they are destined to take on posterity, I may say that I have taken some little pains to get an expression of opinion from the booksellers as to the present and probable future sale of his books. To quote a term used in the trade, "Dickens is still alive." The sales are good, and to all appearances likely to continue so permanently, and there is an entirely new edition recently published, the Pocket Edition, which is selling well. Of Dickens himself it may be said that probably there has not been another man so entirely beloved by all classes of people during the present century.*

Some persons it is true have written and thought disparagingly of our great novelist, but it has perhaps been more from ignorance of the facts than from any other cause. The publishing lately of his private letters, written to all sorts and conditions of men, has let in a flood of light as to the real character of this gifted, generous man.

It is not too much to say that very few men could have passed through that greatest of all trials, unbounded success and popularity, and yet have remained, as he did, unspoiled to the last! Prosperity, in his case, only served to bring out the sterling good qualities of the man, not to dwarf or narrow them. Most men

* It may be recorded here on the best authority, that of Dean Stanley, that occasionally to this day, flowers, and now and then a wreath, are laid on the grave of Dickens in Westminster Abbey. This is independent of a fine wreath of choice flowers placed there annually by loving hands on the ninth of June.

starting in life as poor as he, would, when they had attained to riches and honour, have turned Conservative in the worst sense of the word, while he, as we all know, remained a consistent Radical to his life's end.

Charles Dickens was "born with Heavenly compassion in his heart,"* and was ever ready to help with money and with hard work the families of deceased literary men, and others less fortunate than himself. He no more believed "that people with nought are naughty" than did Thomas Hood, the genial author of that punning line.

To learn how world-wide is the knowledge of the works of Charles Dickens we have but to look to the newspaper press of the present day, whether metropolitan, provincial, or colonial. Take up a newspaper where you will in the English-speaking portions of our globe, and oftener than not you will find one or more quotations from his books in its leaders. And what is quite as remarkable, quotations, phrases, and sayings from Dickens are noticeably more and more getting into our language.

So that, finally, it may be said of him, without exaggeration, that "his sound is gone out into all lands, and his words to the ends of the world!"

* *Bleak House.* Chap. XLVII.

COOLING CHURCH NEAR ROCHESTER.

William Alcock, Printer, Lord's Chambers, Corporation Street, Manchester.

GATEHOUSE AND CATHEDRAL PRECINCTS, ROCHESTER.

This Drawing was left unfinished at the death of the Artist, Mr. WILLIAM HULL.