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CHAPTER I

DICKENS'S NEW IDEA

DICKENS'S unfinished story presents us not with one, but with many mysteries, none of which, I believe, has yet been satisfactorily solved. Efforts have, up to the present, been principally directed to the solution of the problems connected with the identity of Datchery, the death or escape of Edwin, and the identity of the opium woman, and the main idea of the book has been either completely overlooked, or treated as of secondary importance only ; logically, I think the process should have been reversed, and that the theme around which Dickens wove his romance should have received primary attention, inasmuch as discovery of the leading motive might possibly throw light upon the minor mysteries, and accordingly I shall endeavour in the first place to ascertain whether there is any material from which the nature of the

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

2 *The Mystery in the Drood Family*

main theme can fairly be inferred, regarding this, in fact, as the main mystery.

So far as regards external evidence, we find Dickens writing to Forster : “ I 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.” I lay some stress upon the word “ new,” first, because Mr R. A. Proctor, who identifies Datchery with Edwin, considers the main theme of the story to be the tracking of Jasper, the supposed murderer, by Edwin, his supposed victim, an idea which Dickens had admittedly already used on several previous occasions, and secondly, because, as Sir W. Robertson Nicoll points out, the idea of a young girl assuming a disguise had been used in *No Name*. I think, therefore, that if Dickens had meant either of those ideas to form his main plot, he would hardly have qualified it as new, and for that reason I suggest that neither Proctor’s nor Mr Cuming Walters’s theory, even if correct, which I doubt, would satisfactorily explain Dickens’s statement quoted above. The supporters of the Helena-Datchery view certainly partly avoid

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

Dickens's New Idea

3

this particular objection, as the assumption by a young girl of the character of such a man as Datchery was, I think, new, so far as Dickens was concerned; but I hardly think that Dickens would have said of an idea of this nature that it was "very curious" or that it was "not a communicable idea" or "a very strong one, though difficult to work." In the first place, I cannot see that the "interest of the book would be gone," even although we knew Helena to be Datchery; in the second place, a craftsman like Dickens would hardly have considered such an idea as "difficult to work," and lastly, I am convinced that he would not have qualified it as "very strong." The difficult-to-work objection seems the gravest, as there would seem to have been no great difficulty either in effectually disguising Helena, had Dickens set out with the intention of doing so, or in locating her in Cloisterham, instead of taking her up to London, as he does, but both the "very curious" and "very strong" expressions appear to me also to be quite inapplicable to the Helena-Datchery hypothesis.

Neither of the theories of attempted-

1-2

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

4 *The Mystery in the Drood Family*

murder-and-escape, and murder-and-discovery-by-the-ring, seems to me in itself to merit Dickens's description of "very curious and new, incommunicable, very strong, difficult to work," and I am consequently of opinion that we must look elsewhere for "the plan," as Sir W. R. Nicoll puts it, which "Dickens had in his mind, and half revealed and half concealed." The first likely suggestion that we find in the story itself is in Chapter III, where animal magnetism and two states of consciousness are referred to, and this suggestion is somewhat strengthened by the scene at the piano described in Chapter VII, by Crisparkle's memorable night-walk, which we find in Chapter XVI, and finally by the whole of the conversation between Jasper and Rosa, set out in detail in Chapter XIX. It is not at all improbable that animal magnetism was in some way intended to be used by Dickens; it would certainly be "incommunicable, or the interest of the book would be gone," but I cannot say whether the idea would have been new at the time *Edwin Drood* was being written, nor whether at that time it would have been thought "very curious." At the

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[More information](#)

Dickens's New Idea

5

same time it hardly appears to me to merit the epithet "a very strong one" employed by Dickens himself, and personally, I should be inclined to regard it as easy, rather than difficult, to work; that, however, is purely a matter of opinion, and I cannot pretend to the slightest authority on this point. On the whole, however, while admitting that animal magnetism may quite possibly have something to do with the plot, and while, like Mr Grewgious, keeping an eye on every direction that may present itself, I incline to the opinion that the suggestion that I am now about to put forward embodies Dickens's leading idea.

In the notes which Dickens made for the chapters which he wrote, we find, under Chapter XII, the following entry: "Jasper's diary? Yes," and again under Chapter XVI, a similar note: "Jasper's diary." The notes for Chapter XII are, comparatively speaking, long, and deal with so many points that, in my opinion, it would not have been possible to dispose of them all in one chapter; we find, as a fact, that in Chapter X, although there is nothing in the notes to this effect, Jasper produces his diary to Crisparkle,

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

6 *The Mystery in the Drood Family*

wherein he has set out his fears for Edwin at the hands of Neville, and this, I take it, disposes of the note under Chapter XII. The production of the diary to Crisparkle at this point, is, in my view, evidently intended to prepare the reader for the later production at the end of Chapter XVI, so that it may then appear natural, and not excite any particular attention; if this supposition be correct, Dickens certainly succeeded in achieving his object. Under the notes for Chapter XVI, immediately after the words "Jasper's diary," we find, "I devote myself to his destruction," and if we turn to the end of that chapter, where the quotation from the diary appears in full, we see how this last phrase has been expanded: "I now swear, and record the oath on this page, that I never more will discuss this mystery with any human creature until I hold the clue to it in my hand. That I will never relax in my secrecy or in my search. That I will fasten the crime of the murder of my dear dead boy upon the murderer. That I will devote myself to his destruction."

Now, if Jasper were a murderer (or intended to be a murderer) and desired to put

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

Dickens's New Idea

7

Crisparkle off the scent, the earlier production of his diary to the latter, before Edwin's disappearance, would have sufficed to attain this object; from this point of view, the communication at the end of Chapter XVI, made, as Dickens states, "without one spoken word," really took the matter no further. This consideration, in conjunction with Dickens's notes, leads me to the belief that the entry in Jasper's diary last referred to, was quoted in order to convey something to the *reader*, if he could only perceive it. Can we discover what that something was? Suppose, now, that Dickens meant every line and every word of this entry to be read literally, as conveying the simple truth; that he meant it to be fulfilled word for word, and letter for letter; and suppose also that Jasper was, or thought himself to be (for it does not very much matter for this purpose which view we adopt) the murderer. We are forced, upon these lines, to "a very curious and very strong idea, difficult to work, and not communicable without endangering the interest of the story"; namely, the idea of a murderer attempting and intending to fasten his crime on to

8 *The Mystery in the Drood Family*

another, but in reality *tracking himself*, and involuntarily putting the noose round his own neck! So far as I am aware, such an idea was entirely new, and in Dickens's hands it would have been highly dramatic; he would have seen and rejoiced in its possibilities, although we can quite understand that he would also have foreseen the difficulties of its treatment.

That Jasper was and had good reason for being at work endeavouring to fix the crime upon Neville, is plainly to be gathered from subsequent passages. First, there is the interview with Honeythunder, where the latter tells Crisparkle that he would be better employed in devoting himself to the discovery and punishment of the murderer than in leaving that duty to be undertaken by a layman, showing clearly that Jasper had been in communication with Honeythunder on this subject. (Dickens deleted this passage, for some unknown reason; possibly desiring, as Honeythunder was a character he intended to utilise further, not to disclose the presumably close relations between him and Jasper. I think, by the way, that Honeythunder was present

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[More information](#)

Dickens's New Idea

9

at Mrs Crisparkle's dinner-party, in order that Jasper might make his acquaintance naturally.) Next, there is the conversation between Sapsea and Datchery (which Dickens also deleted) in which Sapsea, Jasper's tool, stated that there were more than suspicions, all but certainties, of some one. Thirdly, there is Jasper's own declaration to Rosa: "Mr Crisparkle knows under my hand that I have devoted myself to the murderer's discovery and destruction, *be he whom he might*, and that I determined to discuss the mystery with no one until I should hold the clue in which to entangle the murderer as in a net. I have since worked patiently to wind and wind it round him; *and it is slowly winding as I speak.*" And lastly, there is the fact of Jasper watching Neville, as Grewgious had discovered. Jasper the murderer, whether in deed or intention, Honeythunder the bully, Sapsea the jackass, possibly also Bazzard the fool, are all labouring to convict Neville of the crime, a task in which we have every reason for believing that they did not succeed; would it not be an excellent *dénouement* if Jasper and his allies in this nefarious plot

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[More information](#)

10 *The Mystery in the Drood Family*

merely succeeded in achieving the result which Justice demands, namely, that of convicting Jasper himself of the deed ?

While there is not, and cannot be, any direct evidence that this was the plot which Dickens had in his mind, nevertheless I think that I am justified in saying that it fits in better with all the known facts than any of the other theories yet advanced. In particular, it satisfactorily explains Dickens's note to Forster, in every detail, while it also supplies a valid reason for the second production to Crisparkle of Jasper's diary, a communication which otherwise seems to me to be quite objectless. I think it likely that Rosa's mother's ring would have been used by Dickens as the means for bringing about the desired end,—as I shall show later on ; Jasper was to get to hear of it, designedly or by accident, and, meaning to place it in Neville's possession secretly, was to attempt to gain possession of it ; in the act of doing so he would be surprised (at Mrs Sapsea's tomb, possibly) by the person knowing him to have the information, whereby Jasper's guilty knowledge would be disclosed by his own act. We have to give