

**LANG  
ANDREW**

THE PUZZLE  
OF DICKENS'S  
LAST PLOT

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*The Puzzle of Dickens's Last Plot:*

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# Andrew Lang

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### INTRODUCTION

Forster tells us that Dickens, in his later novels, from *Bleak House* onwards (1853), “assiduously cultivated” construction, “this essential of his art.” Some critics may think, that since so many of the best novels in the world “have no outline, or, if they have an outline, it is a demned outline,” elaborate construction is not absolutely “essential.” Really essential are character, “atmosphere,” humour.

But as, in the natural changes of life, and under the strain of restless and unsatisfied activity, his old buoyancy and unequalled high spirits deserted Dickens, he certainly wrote no longer in what Scott, speaking of himself, calls the manner of “hab nab at a venture.” He constructed elaborate plots, rich in secrets and surprises. He emulated the manner of Wilkie Collins, or even of Gaboriau, while he combined with some of the elements of the detective novel, or *roman policier*, careful study of character. Except *Great Expectations*, none of his later tales rivals in merit his early picaresque stories of the road, such as *Pickwick* and

*Nicholas Nickleby*. "Youth will be served;" no sedulous care could compensate for the exuberance of "the first sprightly runnings." In the early books the melodrama of the plot, the secrets of Ralph Nickleby, of Monk, of Jonas Chuzzlewit, were the least of the innumerable attractions. But Dickens was more and more drawn towards the secret that excites curiosity, and to the game of hide and seek with the reader who tried to anticipate the solution of the secret.

In April, 1869, Dickens, outworn by the strain of his American readings; of that labour achieved under painful conditions of ominously bad health – found himself, as Sir Thomas Watson reported, "on the brink of an attack of paralysis of his left side, and possibly of apoplexy." He therefore abandoned a new series of Readings. We think of Scott's earlier seizures of a similar kind, after which *Peveril*, he said, "smacked of the apoplexy." But Dickens's new story of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, first contemplated in July, 1869, and altered in character by the emergence of "a very curious and new idea," early in August, does not "smack of the apoplexy." We may think that the mannerisms of Mr. Honeythunder, the philanthropist, and of Miss Twinkleton, the schoolmistress, are not in the author's best vein of humour. "The Billickin," on the other hand, the lodging-house keeper, is "in very gracious fooling:" her unlooked-for sallies in skirmishes with Miss Twinkleton are rich in mirthful surprises. Mr. Grewgious may be caricatured too much, but not out of reason; and Dickens, always good at boys,

presents a *gamin*, in Deputy, who is in not unpleasant contrast with the pathetic Jo of *Bleak House*. Opinions may differ as to Edwin and Rosa, but the more closely one studies Edwin, the better one thinks of that character. As far as we are allowed to see Helena Landless, the restraint which she puts on her “tigerish blood” is admirable: she is very fresh and original. The villain is all that melodrama can desire, but what we do miss, I think, is the “atmosphere” of a small cathedral town. Here there is a lack of softness and delicacy of treatment: on the other hand, the opium den is studied from the life.

On the whole, Dickens himself was perhaps most interested in his plot, his secret, his surprises, his game of hide and seek with the reader. He threw himself into the sport with zest: he spoke to his sister-in-law, Miss Hogarth, about his fear that he had not sufficiently concealed his tracks in the latest numbers. Yet, when he died in June, 1870, leaving three completed numbers still unpublished, he left his secret as a puzzle to the curious. Many efforts have been made to decipher his purpose, especially his intentions as to the hero. Was Edwin Drood killed, or did he escape?

By a coincidence, in September, 1869, Dickens was working over the late Lord Lytton’s tale for *All The Year Round*, “The Disappearance of John Ackland,” for the purpose of mystifying the reader as to whether Ackland was alive or dead. But he was conspicuously defunct! (*All the Year Round*, September-October, 1869.)

The most careful of the attempts at a reply about Edwin, a study based on deep knowledge of Dickens, is “Watched by the Dead,” by the late ingenious Mr. R. A. Proctor (1887). This book, to which I owe much aid, is now out of print. In 1905, Mr. Cuming Walters revived “the auld mysterie,” in his “Clues to Dickens’s Edwin Drood” (Chapman & Hall and Heywood, Manchester). From the solution of Mr. Walters I am obliged to dissent. Of Mr. Proctor’s theory I offer some necessary corrections, and I hope that I have unravelled some skeins which Mr. Proctor left in a state of tangle. As one read and re-read the fragment, points very dark seemed, at least, to become suddenly clear: especially one appeared to understand the meaning half-revealed and half-concealed by Jasper’s babblings under the influence of opium. He saw in his vision, “*that*, I never saw *that* before.” We may be sure that he was to see “*that*” in real life. We must remember that, according to Forster, “such was Dickens’s interest in things supernatural that, but for the strong restraining power of his common sense, he might have fallen into the follies of spiritualism.” His interest in such matters certainly peeps out in this novel – there are two specimens of the supernormal – and he may have gone to the limited extent which my hypothesis requires. If I am right, Dickens went further, and fared worse, in the too material premonitions of “The Signalman” in *Mugby Junction*.

With this brief preface, I proceed to the analysis of Dickens’s last plot. Mr. William Archer has kindly read the proof sheets

and made valuable suggestions, but is responsible for none of my theories.

*ANDREW LANG.*

St. Andrews,

*September 4, 1905.*

# THE STORY

## Dramatis Personæ

For the discovery of Dickens's secret in *Edwin Drood* it is necessary to obtain a clear view of the characters in the tale, and of their relations to each other.

About the middle of the nineteenth century there lived in Cloisterham, a cathedral city sketched from Rochester, a young University man, Mr. Bud, who had a friend Mr. Drood, one of a firm of engineers – somewhere. They were “fast friends and old college companions.” Both married young. Mr. Bud wedded a lady unnamed, by whom he was the father of one child, a daughter, Rosa Bud. Mr. Drood, whose wife's maiden name was Jasper, had one son, Edwin Drood. Mrs. Bud was drowned in a boating accident, when her daughter, Rosa, was a child. Mr. Drood, already a widower, and the bereaved Mr. Bud “betrothed” the two children, Rosa and Edwin, and then expired, when the orphans were about seven and eleven years old. The guardian of Rosa was a lawyer, Mr. Grewgious, who had been in love with her mother. To Grewgious Mr. Bud entrusted his wife's engagement ring, rubies and diamonds, which Grewgious was to hand over to Edwin Drood, if, when he attained his majority, he and Rosa decided to marry.

Grewgious was apparently legal agent for Edwin, while Edwin's maternal uncle, John Jasper (aged about sixteen when the male parents died), was Edwin's "trustee," as well as his uncle and devoted friend. Rosa's little fortune was an annuity producing £250 a-year: Edwin succeeded to his father's share in an engineering firm.

When the story opens, Edwin is nearly twenty-one, and is about to proceed to Egypt, as an engineer. Rosa, at school in Cloisterham, is about seventeen; John Jasper is twenty-six. He is conductor of the Choir of the Cathedral, a "lay precentor;" he is very dark, with thick black whiskers, and, for a number of years, has been a victim to the habit of opium smoking. He began very early. He takes this drug both in his lodgings, over the gate of the Cathedral, and in a den in East London, kept by a woman nicknamed "The Princess Puffer." This hag, we learn, has been a determined drunkard, – "I drank heaven's-hard," – for sixteen years *before* she took to opium. If she has been dealing in opium for ten years (the exact period is not stated), she has been very disreputable for twenty-six years, that is ever since John Jasper's birth. Mr. Cuming Walters suggests that she is the mother of John Jasper, and, therefore, maternal grandmother of Edwin Drood. She detests her client, Jasper, and plays the spy on his movements, for reasons unexplained.

Jasper is secretly in love with Rosa, the *fiancée* of his nephew, and his own pupil in the musical art. He makes her aware of his passion, silently, and she fears and detests him, but keeps these

emotions private. She is a saucy school-girl, and she and Edwin are on uncomfortable terms: she does not love him, while he perhaps does love her, but is annoyed by her manner, and by the gossip about their betrothal. "The bloom is off the plum" of their prearranged loves, he says to his friend, uncle, and confidant, Jasper, whose own concealed passion for Rosa is of a ferocious and homicidal character. Rosa is aware of this fact; "a glaze comes over his eyes," sometimes, she says, "and he seems to wander away into a frightful sort of dream, in which he threatens most.. " The man appears to have these frightful dreams even when he is not under opium.

## Opening of the Tale

The tale opens abruptly with an opium-bred vision of the tower of Cloisterham Cathedral, beheld by Jasper as he awakens in the den of the Princess Puffer, between a Chinaman, a Lascar, and the hag herself. This Cathedral tower, thus early and emphatically introduced, is to play a great but more or less mysterious part in the romance: that is certain. Jasper, waking, makes experiments on the talk of the old woman, the Lascar and Chinaman in their sleep. He pronounces it “unintelligible,” which satisfies him that his own babble, when under opium, must be unintelligible also. He is, presumably, acquainted with the languages of the eastern coast of India, and with Chinese, otherwise, how could he hope to understand the sleepers? He is being watched by the hag, who hates him.

Jasper returns to Cloisterham, where we are introduced to the Dean, a nonentity, and to Minor Canon Crisparkle, a muscular Christian in the pink of training, a classical scholar, and a good honest fellow. Jasper gives Edwin a dinner, and gushes over “his bright boy,” a lively lad, full of chaff, but also full of confiding affection and tenderness of heart. Edwin admits that his betrothal is a bore: Jasper admits that he loathes his life; and that the church singing “often sounds to me quite devilish,” – and no wonder. After this dinner, Jasper has a “weird seizure;” “a strange film comes over Jasper’s eyes,” he “looks frightfully ill,” becomes

rigid, and admits that he “has been taking opium for a pain, an agony that sometimes overcomes me.” This “agony,” we learn, is the pain of hearing Edwin speak lightly of his love, whom Jasper so furiously desires. “Take it as a warning,” Jasper says, but Edwin, puzzled, and full of confiding tenderness, does not understand.

In the next scene we meet the school-girl, Rosa, who takes a walk and has a tiff with Edwin. Sir Luke Fildes’s illustration shows Edwin as “a lad with the bloom of a lass,” with a *classic profile; and a gracious head of long, thick, fair hair*, long, though we learn it has just been cut. He wears a soft slouched hat, and the pea-coat of the period.

## Sapsea and Durdles

Next, Jasper and Sapsea, a pompous ass, auctioneer, and mayor, sit at their wine, expecting a third guest. Mr. Sapsea reads his absurd epitaph for his late wife, who is buried in a “Monument,” a vault of some sort in the Cathedral churchyard. To them enter Durdles, a man never sober, yet trusted with the key of the crypt, “as contractor for rough repairs.” In the crypt “he habitually sleeps off the fumes of liquor.” Of course no Dean would entrust keys to this incredibly dissipated, dirty, and insolent creature, to whom Sapsea gives the key of his vault, for no reason at all, as the epitaph, of course, is to be engraved on the outside, by Durdles’s men. However, Durdles insists on getting the key of the vault: he has two other large keys. Jasper, trifling with them, keeps clinking them together, so as to know, even in the dark, by the sound, which is the key that opens Sapsea’s vault, in the railed-off burial ground, beside the cloister arches. He has met Durdles at Sapsea’s for no other purpose than to obtain access at will to Mrs. Sapsea’s monument. Later in the evening Jasper finds Durdles more or less drunk, and being stoned by a *gamin*, “Deputy,” a retainer of a tramp’s lodging-house. Durdles fees Deputy, in fact, to drive him home every night after ten. Jasper and Deputy fall into feud, and Jasper has thus a new, keen, and omnipresent enemy. As he walks with Durdles that worthy explains (in reply to a question by Jasper), that, by tapping a wall,

even if over six feet thick, with his hammer, he can detect the nature of the contents of the vault, “solid in hollow, and inside solid, hollow again. Old ’un crumbled away in stone coffin, in vault.” He can also discover the presence of “rubbish left in that same six foot space by Durdles’s men.” Thus, if a foreign body were introduced into the Sapsea vault, Durdles could detect its presence by tapping the outside wall. As Jasper’s purpose clearly is to introduce a foreign body – that of Edwin who stands between him and Rosa – into Mrs. Sapsea’s vault, this “gift” of Durdles is, for Jasper, an uncomfortable discovery. He goes home, watches Edwin asleep, and smokes opium.

# The Landlesses

Two new characters are now introduced, Neville and Helena Landless,<sup>1</sup> twins, orphans, of Cingalese extraction, probably Eurasian; very dark, the girl “almost of the gipsy type;” both are “fierce of look.” The young man is to read with Canon Crisparkle and live with him; the girl goes to the same school as Rosa. The education of both has been utterly neglected; instruction has been denied to them. Neville explains the cause of their fierceness to Crisparkle. In Ceylon they were bullied by a cruel stepfather and several times ran away: the girl was the leader, always “*dressed as a boy, and showing the daring of a man.*” Edwin Drood’s air of supercilious ownership of Rosa Bud (indicated as a fault of youth and circumstance, not of heart and character), irritates Neville Landless, who falls in love with Rosa at first sight. As Rosa sings, at Crisparkle’s, while Jasper plays the piano, Jasper’s fixed stare produces an hysterical fit in the girl, who is soothed by Helena Landless. Helena shows her aversion to Jasper, who, as even Edwin now sees, frightens Rosa. “You would be afraid of him, under similar circumstances, wouldn’t you, Miss Landless?” asks Edwin. “Not under any circumstances,” answers Helena, and Jasper “thanks Miss Landless for this vindication of his character.”

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<sup>1</sup> Landless is not “Lackland,” but a form of de Laundeles, a Lothian name of the twelfth century, merged later in that of Ormistoun.

The girls go back to their school, where Rosa explains to Helena her horror of Jasper's silent love-making: "I feel that I am never safe from him.. a glaze comes over his eyes and he seems to wander away into a frightful sort of dream in which he threatens most," as already quoted. Helena thus, and she alone, except Rosa, understands Jasper thoroughly. She becomes Rosa's protectress. "*Let whomsoever it most concerned look well to it.*"

Thus Jasper has a new observer and enemy, in addition to the omnipresent street boy, Deputy, and the detective old hag of the opium den.

Leaving the Canon's house, Neville and Edwin quarrel violently over Rosa, in the open air; they are followed by Jasper, and taken to his house to be reconciled over glasses of mulled wine. Jasper drugs the wine, and thus provokes a violent scene; next day he tells Crisparkle that Neville is "murderous." "There is something of the tiger in his dark blood." He spreads the story of the *fracas* in the town.

## Mr. Grewgious

Grewgious, Rosa's guardian, now comes down on business; the girl fails to explain to him the unsatisfactory relations between her and Edwin: Grewgious is to return to her "at Christmas," if she sends for him, and she does send. Grewgious, "an angular man," all duty and sentiment (he had loved Rosa's mother), has an interview with Edwin's trustee, Jasper, for whom he has no enthusiasm, but whom he does not in any way suspect. They part on good terms, to meet at Christmas. Crisparkle, with whom Helena has fallen suddenly in love, arranges with Jasper that Edwin and Landless shall meet and be reconciled, as both are willing to be, at a dinner in Jasper's rooms, on Christmas Eve. Jasper, when Crisparkle proposes this, denotes by his manner "some close internal calculation." We see that he is reckoning how the dinner suits his plan of campaign, and "*close calculation*" may refer, as in Mr. Proctor's theory, to the period of the moon: *on Christmas Eve there will be no moonshine at midnight*. Jasper, having worked out this problem, accepts Crisparkle's proposal, and his assurances about Neville, and shows Crisparkle a diary in which he has entered his fears that Edwin's life is in danger from Neville. Edwin (who is not in Cloisterham at this moment) accepts, by letter, the invitation to meet Neville at Jasper's on Christmas Eve.

Meanwhile Edwin visits Grewgious in his London chambers;

is lectured on his laggard and supercilious behaviour as a lover, and receives the engagement ring of the late Mrs. Bud, Rosa's mother, which is very dear to Grewgious – in the presence of Bazzard, Grewgious's clerk, a gloomy writer of an amateur unacted tragedy. Edwin is to return the ring to Grewgious, if he and Rosa decide not to marry. The ring is in a case, and Edwin places it “in his breast.” We must understand, in the breast-pocket of his coat: no other interpretation will pass muster. “Her ring – will it come back to me?” reflects the mournful Grewgious.

# The Unaccountable Expedition

Jasper now tells Sapsea, and the Dean, that he is to make “a moonlight expedition with Durdles among the tombs, vaults, towers, and ruins to-night.” The impossible Durdles has the keys necessary for this, “surely an unaccountable expedition,” Dickens keeps remarking. The moon seems to rise on this night at about 7.30 p.m. Jasper takes a big case-bottle of liquor – drugged, of course and goes to the den of Durdles. In the yard of this inspector of monuments he is bidden to beware of a mound of quicklime near the yard gate. “With a little handy stirring, quick enough to eat your bones,” says Durdles. There is some considerable distance between this “mound” of quicklime and the crypt, of which Durdles has the key, but the intervening space is quite empty of human presence, as the citizens are unwilling to meet ghosts.

In the crypt Durdles drinks a good deal of the drugged liquor. “They are to ascend the great Tower,” – and why they do that is part of the Mystery, though not an insoluble part. Before they climb, Durdles tells Jasper that he was drunk and asleep in the crypt, last Christmas Eve, and was wakened by “the ghost of one terrific shriek, followed by the ghost of the howl of a dog, a long dismal, woeful howl, such as a dog gives when a person’s dead.” Durdles has made inquiries and, as no one else heard the shriek and the howl, he calls these sounds “ghosts.”

They are obviously meant to be understood as supranormal premonitory sounds; of the nature of second sight, or rather of second hearing. Forster gives examples of Dickens's tendency to believe in such premonitions: Dickens had himself a curious premonitory dream. He considerably overdid the premonitory business in his otherwise excellent story, *The Signalman*, or so it seems to a student of these things. The shriek and howl heard by Durdles are to be repeated, we see, in real life, later, on a Christmas Eve. The question is – when? More probably *not* on the Christmas Eve just imminent, when Edwin is to vanish, but, on the Christmas Eve following, when Jasper is to be unmasked.

All this while, and later, Jasper examines Durdles very closely, studying the effects on him of the drugged drink. When they reach the top of the tower, Jasper closely contemplates “that stillest part of it” (the landscape) “which the Cathedral overshadows; but he contemplates Durdles quite as curiously.”

There is a motive for the scrutiny in either case. Jasper examines the part of the precincts in the shadow of the Cathedral, because he wishes to assure himself that it is lonely enough for his later undescribed but easily guessed proceedings in this night of mystery. He will have much to do that could not brook witnesses, after the drugged Durdles has fallen sound asleep. We have already been assured that the whole area over which Jasper is to operate is “utterly deserted,” even when it lies in full moonlight, about 8.30 p.m. “One might fancy that the tide of life was stemmed by Mr. Jasper's own gate-house.” The people

of Cloisterham, we hear, would deny that they believe in ghosts; but they give this part of the precinct a wide berth (Chapter XII.). If the region is “utterly deserted” at nine o’clock in the evening, when it lies in the ivory moonlight, much more will it be free from human presence when it lies in shadow, between one and two o’clock after midnight. Jasper, however, from the tower top closely scrutinizes the area of his future operations. It is, probably, for this very purpose of discovering whether the coast be clear or not, that Jasper climbs the tower.

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