

THE MYSTERY OF THE MARCHIONESS

BY WILLIAM CROSBY BENNETT

WHEN the elder Dickens and his family were in the Marshalsea they were waited upon by a maid-of-all-work, formerly a workhouse orphan, whose quaint ways and kindly manner caused her to be regarded as quite an unique little person. It is from this servant that Dickens is said to have drawn the character of the little drudge, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, upon whom Dick Swiveller bestows the romantic title of Marchioness.

This obscure, rather commonplace character, backed by Dick, seems to give that human touch to the whole story without which there would be neither light nor colour. Indeed, it is the little creature's propensity for looking and listening through keyholes that turns out to be the most important link in the plot. Although there are only brief glimpses of her as she flits through the text, I am not so sure but that she might be rated among the leading characters in the story; and, with the exception of Dick, undoubtedly the most human.

Sweet, saintly Little Nelly Trent is, of course, supposed to be the real heroine; but from the very beginning we find ourselves making excuses for her, and this is not what Dickens had intended. Without realising what he was doing he had made an unconscious little prig out of her—a sort of saccharine Hollywood angel child—and few, in our time at least, can be induced to see her through his eyes. It is the Marchioness we take to our heart, and choke down many a laugh with a sob at her forlorn existence.

When we are first introduced to the little slavey she is picking up, literally, the very crumbs of life in the household of Lawyer Brass and his flinty sister, Sally.

As Sampson Brass's clerk, Dick Swiveller viewed her as a small, slip-shod girl, in a dirty, coarse apron, which left nothing visible but her face and feet. . . . There never was such an old-fashioned child in her looks and manner. She must have been at work from her cradle. She seemed as much afraid of Dick as Dick was amazed at her.

He was soon to discover that she knew nothing about herself; that from her earliest recollection she had never owned a name; and as far back as she could remember she had been at the Brass's establishment. But by carefully "reading between the lines," I believe we can brush aside the apparent mystery connected with her parentage and gain an inkling of whom she really was.

The first clue is to be found in the amazing actions of Quilp when he goes to Bevis Marks to invite Sampson and Sally to take tea with him in that "wild wet summer-house by the river." The Marchioness opens the door. The dwarf pushes past her into the office, and says he will leave a note.

As Mr. Quilp folded the note (which was soon written, being a short one) he encountered the gaze of the small servant. He looked at her long and earnestly.

“ How are you ? ” said the dwarf, moistening a wafer with horrible grimaces.

The small servant, perhaps frightened by his looks, returned no audible reply ; but it appeared from the motion of her lips that she was inwardly repeating the same form of expression concerning a note or message.

“ Do they treat you ill here ? Is your mistress a Tartar ? ” said Quilp with a chuckle.

In reply to the last interrogation, the small servant, with a look of infinite cunning mingled with fear, screwed up her mouth very tight and round, and nodded violently.

Whether there was anything in the peculiar slyness of her action which fascinated Mr. Quilp, or *anything in the expression of her features at the moment which attracted his attention for some other reason* ; or whether it merely occurred to him as a pleasant whim to stare the small servant out of countenance ; certain it is, that he planted his elbows square and firmly on the desk, and squeezing up his cheeks with his hands, looked at her fixedly.

“ Where do you come from ? ” he said after a long pause, stroking his chin.

“ I don't know.”

“ What's your name ? ”

“ Nothing.”

“ Nonsense ! ” retorted Quilp. “ What does your mistress call you when she wants you ? ”

“ A little devil,” said the child.

She added in the same breath, as if she feared any further questioning, “ But please, will you leave a card or message ? ”

These unusual answers might naturally have provoked some more inquiries. Quilp, however, without uttering another word, withdrew his eyes from the small servant, stroked his chin more thoughtfully than before, and then, bending over the note as if to direct it with scrupulous and hair-breadth nicety, looked at her, covertly but very narrowly, from under his bushy eyebrows. The result of this secret survey was, that he shaded his face with his hands, and laughed slyly and noiselessly, until every vein in it was swollen to bursting. Pulling his hat over his brow to conceal his mirth and its effects, he tossed the letter to the child, and hastily withdrew.

Obviously this is the first time Quilp has seen the drudge. Why his abnormal curiosity ? Whom does she so much resemble that he should be provoked to almost uncontrollable mirth ? And why does Dickens add :

Once in the street, *moved by some secret impulse*, Quilp laughed, and held his sides, and laughed again, and tried to peer through the dusty area railings as if to catch another glimpse of the child, until he was quite tired out.

Does not all this point to the fact that Quilp may have discovered more than ordinary relationship between Sally Brass and the Marchioness ? Following this lead, let us recall the incident in which Dick, his interest in the little slavey aroused, looks into the horrible basement where the poor little creature lives her miserable life.

The small servant stood with humility in the presence of Miss Sally, and hung her head.

"Are you there?" said Miss Sally.

"Yes, ma'am," was the answer in a weak voice.

"Go further away from the leg of mutton, or you'll be picking it," said Miss Sally.

The girl withdrew into a corner, while Miss Brass took a key from her pocket, and opening the safe, brought from it a dreary waste of cold potatoes, looking as eatable as Stonehenge. This she placed before the small servant, ordering her to sit down before it, and then, taking up a great carving knife, made a mighty show of sharpening it upon the carving fork.

"Do you see this?" said Miss Brass, slicing off about two square inches of cold mutton, after all this preparation, and holding it out on the point of the fork.

"You've been helped once to meat," said Miss Brass, summing up the facts; "you have had as much as you can eat, you've been asked if you want any more, and you answer 'No!' Then don't you ever go and say you were allowanced, *mind that!*"

With these words, Miss Sally put the meat away and locked the safe, and then drawing near to the small servant, overlooked her while she finished the potatoes.

To this, Dickens adds:

It was plain that some extraordinary grudge was working in Miss Brass's gentle breast, and that it was that which impelled her, without the smallest present cause, to rap the child with the blade of the knife, now on her hand, now on her head, and now on her back, as if she found it quite impossible to stand so close to her without administering a few slight knocks.

Police courts teem with cases of unnatural mothers treating their unfortunate children with wanton cruelty. Sally Brass was evidently of that same type who would visit on the head of her unwanted offspring—an ever-present reminder of her lapse—all the chagrin and contempt she felt for her own weakness.

Another point strengthening the theory is to be found in the incident occurring after the Marchioness has told of overhearing the plot which has sent the innocent Kit to prison, and the Notary, who acts for Mr. Garland, Kit's benefactor, summons Miss Brass:

"Miss Sally," said the Notary, "we professional people understand each other, and, when we choose, can say what we have to say in a very few words. You advertised for a runaway servant, the other day?"

"Well," returned Miss Sally, *with a sudden flush overspreading her features*, "what of it?"

"She is found, ma'am. Only last night, or you would have heard from us before."

"And now I have heard from you," said Miss Brass, folding her arms *as though she were about to deny something to the death*, "what have you got to say? Something that you have got into your heads about her, of course. *Prove it*, will you—that's all. *Prove it*. You have found her, you say. I can tell you (if you don't know it) that

you have found the most artful, lying, pilfering, devilish little minx that was ever born. . . .”

After hearing from the Notary that the Marchioness was going to relate in Court that day, conversations she had overheard between Sally and her brother regarding the plot against Kit, Dickens tells us :

Sally took another pinch of snuff. Although her face was wonderfully composed, *it was apparent that she was wholly taken by surprise, and that she had expected to be taxed with, in connection with her small servant, something very different from this.*

With what did Sally expect to be taxed that is different ? Something she would “ deny to the death ? ” And when she adds, “ Prove it ! ”—What is it she demands should be proven ? Is it not she fears the secret of her parenthood has been discovered, and is ready “ to deny it to the death ? ”

Again, at the end of the book, it will be recalled that Dick marries the Marchioness, whom he has had educated and re-christened Sophronia Sphynx, and the happy pair retire to a rented cottage, at Hampstead, “ with a smoking box in the garden.” Here Dick, in a philosophic and reflective mood, is accustomed, at times, to debate the mysterious question of Sophronia’s parentage :

Sophronia herself supposed she was an orphan ; but Mr. Swiveller, putting slight circumstances together, *often thought Miss Brass must know better than that ; and, having heard from his wife of her strange interview with Quilp, entertained sundry misgivings whether that person, in his lifetime, might not also have been able to solve the riddle, had he chosen.*

That paragraph, to me, finally settles it ! The Marchioness is none other than the child of that ill-flavoured pair, Mr. Daniel Quilp and Miss Sally Brass !



WHAT DO YOU KNOW OF DICKENS ?

(Answers to Questions on page 246)

1, Lodging-house keeper in Southampton Street ; 2, Law-stationer ; 3, Mr. Johnson ; 4, United Bull-dogs ; 5, Slumkey, Fizkin ; 6, Behind a greengrocer’s shop in Bath ; 7, Gerrard Street ; 8, Biler ; 9, Five brothers ; 10, Jingle ; 11, Bob Sawyer ; 12, Ruth Pinch ; 13, Norfolk Street, Strand ; 14, Edward, Roger ; 15, Lincoln’s Inn Fields ; 16, Mrs. Raddle ; 17, Spontaneous combustion ; 18, Tim Linkinwater ; 19, Who knows ? 20, The Aged Parent ; 21, Maidstone, Sudbury ; 22, The deceased husband of Flora Finching ; 23, Niece ; 24, Sir John Chester ; 25, Amy Dorrit ; 26, May ; 27, Fanny Cleaver ; 28, Mr. Lillyvick ; 29, Akershem ; 30, Nell Trent, Amy Dorrit, not recorded ; 31, In a bedroom of the “ Great White Horse,” Ipswich ; 32, Mrs. Joe Gargery ; 33, Mrs. P. Toots, Mrs. Frank Cheeryble ; 34, *Hard Times*, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Little Dorrit*, *David Copperfield* ; 35, He was “ suspended ” at the George and Vulture ; 36, Molly, Abel Magwitch ; 37, Coketown ; 38, Mrs. Harris ; 39, John Barsad ; 40, The two daughters of Mr. Pecksniff.

THE DICKENS FELLOWSHIP CONFERENCE

THE Thirty-fourth Annual Conference of the Dickens Fellowship was held at the Comedy Restaurant, Haymarket, London, on May 25th, and in spite of all difficulties and anxieties a surprising number participated, fourteen branches being represented.

The Conference opened with an address on "The Strength of Dickens" by the Chairman, Mr. Leo Mason (Blackburn). The business meeting which followed was purely formal. The Report of the Council and the accounts, which will be printed in our next issue, were presented, and the position of the Dickens House was outlined.

At the Luncheon which followed, the President, Mr. Compton Mackenzie, occupied the chair, and proposed the Toast of the Immortal Memory of Charles Dickens.

Mr. COMPTON MACKENZIE said he welcomed this opportunity of meeting the Fellowship—the first chance he had had since his election as President, and congratulated the members on showing such a good muster at such a fateful time.

He had a strong feeling that whatever trials the coming weeks might bring us, and whatever we might have to endure, we should strive finally to get back to the England that Dickens knew and loved. Personally, he would like to see a general exodus from the big towns, with their hectic excitements, and a return to the simpler and more enduring pleasures of the country. Although Dickens was primarily the novelist of London, and distinguished as the portrayer of the London scene, yet how much of the country comes back to us in his writings. Mr. Mackenzie recalled a description of Autumn in *Pickwick Papers*, but said that, attractive as that description was, for him spring and early summer were his favourite seasons, with a wealth of flowers and fresh green foliage and all the birds in full song and full of family cares; whereas autumn to him was a sad time; the colourful flowers had gone, the birds were silent, and the leaves, glorious as were their russets and browns, were rapidly falling and leaving the branches of the trees naked and skeleton-like. There was no doubt that we should have to return to the country and to reconstruct our lives on simpler lines in the future; for years we had been indulging in all the things that Dickens disliked, and these would have to be given up. It was impossible at such a time as this to treat the name of Dickens lightly, as his work was full of all that we stand for, of all that we are fighting for, and of all that we hold dear and most love.

Even to-day, in the midst of troublous times, we Dickens lovers find escape and peace in his pages. Above them all, *Pickwick* was to Mr. Mackenzie an eternal refuge.

Mr. Mackenzie said that, like Dickens, he had at the age of seven, read Smollett and Fielding, and claimed an advantage over Dickens in that he had had the pleasure of reading Dickens as well, and he hoped that his hearers shared his joy.

Mr. Mackenzie then introduced Mr. George Orwell as one of the few younger literary men who had recognised the greatness of Dickens.

Mr. GEORGE ORWELL, who has recently published a study of Dickens, said that as an amateur he felt nervous in the presence of experts, as he could not claim to be more than a student of Dickens, and confessed that he has not read everything that Dickens wrote. But he had known him in his principal novels since early childhood. Of all the books, *David Copperfield* was his favourite, perhaps because it was so largely autobiographical and showed the author's own reaction to life. To be a lover of Dickens, he felt, it was not necessary to know his work perfectly, as he was one of the very few writers who have a tradition that moves outside the realm of literature. In this connection, Mr. Orwell said that ten years ago he had been among the hop-pickers, and there he had met men who, although they had not read the book, nevertheless knew all about *Oliver Twist*; they knew it instinctively and felt that the author had struck a memorable blow on their behalf.

There was no need to fear for the continued popularity of Dickens: that was assured so long as people cared for themselves and cared for the ideals that Dickens ever kept before him. A book (not his own) had lately been published, dealing with the books read by boys and girls: it was a *resumé* of what three thousand children borrowed from the public library, and it was most encouraging to find that Dickens was the outstanding favourite with children of twelve years and upwards.

There were few writers who had such a catholic appeal as Dickens—whose appeal was to so many styles, grades and classes of readers, and the spirit Dickens expressed will—must—ultimately triumph. The ghost of Dickens was fighting for us to-day, for Dickens was in our inner consciousness putting our innermost thoughts into words and action.

The afternoon was occupied by a visit to the Adelphi and neighbourhood, conducted by Mr. George F. Young. In the evening, to a small audience at the Dickens House, Mr. V. C. Clinton-Baddeley gave a most interesting address on "The Dramatic Technique of Charles Dickens," brilliantly illustrated by extracts from the novels, which resulted in a considerable addition to the Fellowship's War Comforts Fund.

On the following day a motor-coach tour took many of the delegates through Kentish Dickensland and, by special permission, a visit was paid to Gads Hill Place and its gardens. Tea was served in the Dickens Room at the Leather Bottle at Cobham, after which a pleasant hour was spent in the village and at Cobham College. The evening was spent in the beautiful gardens of Cobham Hall, where the visitors saw the chalet which Dickens used at Gads Hill as a summer study.

At Westminster the tour concluded, and with it this simple but memorable war-time Conference which rather reminded one of Dr. Johnson on the performing dog—one did not remark upon the manner in which it was accomplished so much as upon the fact that it was accomplished at all.

L. C. S.