

Dickens's Marchioness Again

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DICKENS'S MARCHIONESS AGAIN

Gerald G. Grubb brought to light in 1953 the omitted passage in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* which shows the true parentage of the Marchioness,¹ following up William Crosby Bennett's article 'The Mystery of the Marchioness'.² Sally Brass's admission that she is the mother of the Marchioness, which Dickens cut at proof stage, confirms what is fairly clearly suggested in the novel as it now stands. Grubb went on to suggest why Dickens omitted this sensational revelation:

Why did he delete the most dramatic scene in the entire story as it stood in galley proofs? The answer seems to be near at hand.

Suddenly, when reading his galley proofs, Dickens realized that the Marchioness was becoming a real threat to the supremacy of Little Nell. She was becoming a distractive element just when he wanted everything to converge upon his dying heroine; therefore, he decided to risk artistic incompleteness rather than raise up a rival of Little Nell. (p. 165)

This may be part of Dickens's reason, but there are other points to be made. Although Dickens cut out Sally's direct admission, there are sufficient hints remaining, both in Quilp's fascination in the servant (Chapter 51) and Dick Swiveller's musing on the subject in the last chapter, that Sally and Quilp are her parents, and thus that the downfall of Quilp and the Brasses is by their own creation, out of evil coming good. In Chapter 51, Dickens, having underwritten the episode, chose to stress the mystery of the Marchioness by adding a passage at proof stage, which includes the following:

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.

The manuscript is then resumed. The idea of the servant's origins, about which Dick has also been curious, is obviously emphasized by this passage. Since it was written as space-filling, how far is it evidence of intention? Dickens often expands by repetition, but rarely by stress of this kind: it is presumably a point he does wish to stress. Still, it might be that he had changed his mind by the time he came to Chapter 66. Even here, though, while omitting the actual confession by Sally, he had to provide extra material: the episode was originally eight lines overwritten, according to a note on the back of the proof sheets,³ while the passage eventually omitted filled forty-three lines. In making up the necessary thirty-five lines, Dickens included a new paragraph, though if it is read only in the light of Sally's original admission it looks like a preparation for that revelation:

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

This refers us back to her earlier indignation: "what have you got to say? Something you have got into your head about her, of course. Prove it, will you — that's all. . . ." Sally has no reason to suspect that the Marchioness knows about the framing of Kit. She might suppose that she is to be charged with cruelty — or

¹ *M.L.N.*, 68 (1953), 162–5.

² *Dickensian*, 36 (1940), 205–8.

³ Victoria and Albert Museum, Forster Collection, 48E.27 item 121.

with being the mother. The paragraph is not explicit about the 'something' which is 'very different from' the revelation the Marchioness has made, but it does suggest more mysteries about the girl. However, we cannot read it as an anticipation of Sally's original revelation which Dickens failed to excise when cutting the main passage. The passage is not even hinted at in the manuscript, being part of the extra matter written to make up the episode. If Dickens omitted Sally's confession, yet added what seems a premonition of it, presumably he wanted to keep the idea of a mystery about the Marchioness: the idea of things Sally fears she might have revealed, that are never directly revealed to the reader. Taken in association with the other hints, it points to the Marchioness's real origins and so helps Dickens to retain (though to make less explicit) the idea of Sally's downfall (and Quilp's) coming through their own creation, which Grubb pointed to. So out of evil comes good: but to make the Marchioness unequivocally their child would provide her with an almost impossible parentage if she is ever to come to good. Rather than a direct revelation, and not especially (I would suggest) because he wanted no distraction from Little Nell, Dickens preferred mystification. This delight in puzzles can be seen throughout his work: it shows itself at the beginning of *The Old Curiosity Shop* when Master Humphrey first meets Little Nell. He asks her what she has been doing, and she replies she must not tell him; the mystery of Nell and her grandfather, which draws the reader on, is thus laid. But in the manuscript, Dickens was more explicit:

'And what have you been doing?'

'Selling diamonds,' said the child quietly.

Well! This was a startling answer. My face must have showed pretty plainly that I thought so, for she added directly with a slight hesitation:

'You don't believe me, I think, sir; but I have indeed.'¹

Even in one of the clearest hints as to the Marchioness's origin, made in the final chapter, Dickens can be seen deliberately obscuring the matter as he writes. Dick Swiveller wonders about the origins of Sophronia Sphynx (the name suggests the riddle she presents, while Sally herself has been described by Dick as the 'Sphynx of private life' (Chapter 50)): 'and, having heard from his wife of her strange interview with Quilp, entertained sundry misgivings whether that person, in his life-time, might not also have been able to solve the riddle, had he chosen' (Chapter the Last). The manuscript shows Dickens evolving the sentence. He removed the report of the interview from the present to the past ('hearing' to 'having heard'); the ambiguous, rhetorical 'entertained sundry misgivings' was at first the explicit 'had some misgivings'; while the idea of the riddle was a second thought, Dickens first writing 'have been possessed of some information upon the subject'.

These changes suggest Dickens's desire to hint at the answer to the riddle without ever coming into the open about it. We understand the Marchioness to be the daughter of Quilp and Sally without being told. The moral irony is still present, the plotters being defeated by their own creation, but none of the heredity problems consequent on such parentage need be touched on. The Marchioness remains a mystery rather than a freak, the only answer to her own riddle.

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NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

¹ Printed here by courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum. I have modernized punctuation and spelling.