

Dickens' Marchioness Identified

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## DICKENS' MARCHIONESS IDENTIFIED

Mr. William Crosby Bennett's article entitled "The Mystery of the Marchioness"<sup>1</sup> is a model of hypothetical reasoning in scholarship which lacks only *documentary evidence* to establish his conclusion that the Marchioness was the illegitimate daughter of Daniel Quilp and Miss Sally Brass. In this note I propose to furnish that evidence, and, if possible, answer some questions as to Dickens' purpose and artistry in his treatment of the Marchioness.<sup>2</sup>

Who, indeed, was this abused child? Who was her mother? her father? It is no longer necessary to build up hypothetical answers, however convincing.

There is a cancelled passage in the corrected proof sheets of *The Old Curiosity Shop* preserved in the Forster-Dyce Collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum<sup>3</sup> that answers these questions beyond peradventure of doubt. When Miss Sally had been summoned before the Notary to answer for her part in the plot against Kit, Dickens originally wrote the following startling confession which I here publish for the first time. The cancelled passage is that which appears within the square brackets:

The lovely Sarah, now with her arms folded, and now with her hands clasped behind her, paced the room with manly strides while her brother was thus employed, and sometimes stopped to pull out her snuff-box and bite the lid. [Gradually drawing in these walks, nearer and nearer Sampson, she suddenly gave vent to the emotion that stirred within her by twisting her right hand in his more than auburn locks, and shaking him desperately.

"Help, help!" cried Brass. "Gentlemen, I must be protected from personal violence. This fellow will be the death of me."

"Look at me," said Sally, "look at me and tell me.—What do you say of the first cause of all this—of that false and treacherous little serpent, eh?"

"Curse and confound her," returned Brass between his teeth. "I wish I had her here, that's all."

"You wish you had her here!" retorted Sally. "What do I wish, do you think?"

<sup>1</sup> *The Dickensian*, xxxvi (Autumn Number, 1940), 205-208.

<sup>2</sup> This note has been prepared under a Carnegie Grant-in-Aid.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted here by permission of the authorities of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

"Much the same, I suppose," said Sampson coolly, "It's not worse for you than for me."

Miss Sally folded her arms, and pressing her lips close together, and swaying herself from side to side, looked steadfastly at her brother.

"It's no worse!" she said, "no worse for the artful wretch to be the ruin of her own mother!"

Mr. Brass looked around the room, and under the table, as if for the parent in question; and again raised his eyes to his sister's face.

"It's no worse, I ask you," repeated Sarah, "for her to be my ruin than yours?"

"Gentlemen," said Brass, turning pale, "there's a little distraction going on here. You had better put that tray of forks out of the way, and take particular care of your penknives if you please."

Miss Brass smiled loftily at these fears, and folding her arms a little tighter, replied,

"I am her mother. She is my child. There. Now what do you say?"

"Why, I say," said Brass, falling back in his chair, "don't talk nonsense. Your child? I don't believe such a thing's possible. I am sure it isn't. It couldn't be. I'd sooner believe in Mrs. Southcote and *her* child. Non-sense!"

Giving utterance to this last word in a loud tone and with strong emphasis, Sampson bent over his writing again, and shook his head until he could shake it no longer.

The beautiful vision said no more, but resumed her walking up and down the room, and in perfect indifference to all that passed, and even to her brother's troubled state of mind regarding herself and her late disclosure, which vented itself all that day in the constant utterance of such phrases as "I'll never believe it possible! — It couldn't be — Don't tell me — Nonsense!" and the like, which he repeated, sometimes over and over again in a paroxysm of several minutes' duration, and sometimes singly, and at long intervals; but always with uncommon vehemence. Of none of these expressions of wonder and incredulity, nor of the evident surprise and consternation of the three gentlemen, did Miss Brass take the slightest heed.] She continued to pace up and down until she was quite tired, and then fell asleep on a chair near the door.

So, at last we have *documentary evidence* that, in the mind of her creator, and in his original manuscript, as represented by his proof sheets based on that manuscript, the Marchioness was the daughter of Miss Sarah (Sally) Brass.

Who was the father of the Marchioness? The hideous dwarf, Daniel Quilp! When he first encountered the "small servant" and before Dick Swiveller christened her "the Marchioness," he was visibly moved, and immediately, in evident astonishment, began questioning her about herself, watching her narrowly, and stroking

his chin thoughtfully. "The result of this secret survey was, that he shaded his face with his hand and laughed slyly and noiselessly until every vein in it was swollen almost to bursting . . . Once on the street, moved by some secret impulse, he laughed and held his sides and laughed again. . . ." <sup>4</sup>

How does one account for Quilp's remarkable behavior upon his discovery of the "small servant"? The only adequate answer is that he suddenly recognizes in her dwarfism and, perhaps, in her features his own likeness, and remembers in his deep, wretched mind some former relationship to Miss Sally, and comprehends her cruel hatred of the child. Dickens closed the record with the following hint which Mr. Bennett turns to good account in his article mentioned above: "Sophronia [Swiveller's final name for the Marchioness] 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.*" <sup>5</sup>

While the main action of the plot of *The Old Curiosity Shop* was going forward, Dickens, with "the small servant's" parentage in mind, has been carefully laying down another series of events that were, at the time of writing, intended to close the jaws of an almost perfect Haman plot; for, in the meantime, Dick Swiveller has won the confidence of the "small servant," has given her food and drink, and has named her the "Marchioness." He has been dismissed from the service of the Brasses, has suffered a long illness, and at last returns to consciousness and finds that the Marchioness has run away from the Brasses, has been his nurse, and that she has overheard the conference between Miss Sally and Sampson in which the trap for Kit was devised. Dick then dispatches the Marchioness in all possible haste to inform Mr. Garland and the Notary of the situation. Thus, the Marchioness sets in motion the jaws of the Haman plot that had been intended to overwhelm Kit, but was destined to overwhelm Quilp and the Brasses. Miss Sally is summoned before the Notary, and there in a most dramatic scene, reveals the parentage of the Marchioness, and recognizes her

<sup>4</sup> *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Ch. LI.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, "Chapter the Last."

as the final cause of her and Quilp's disaster; and the despised and misused daughter of Miss Sally and Quilp becomes the direct agent of their destruction. In other words, they become the victims of their own folly and machinations.

Why did Dickens de-emphasize the Marchioness? Why did he fail to capitalize on this almost perfect sub-plot and thereby leave the identity of the Marchioness and her potentialities as a character dangling inartistically? 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.

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## BEOWULF'S DERELICTION IN THE GREDEL EPISODE

Breaking open the door of Heorot, Grendel strides across the floor to a "magorinca hēap," selects a sleeping Geat (identified as Hondsciōh at l. 2076),<sup>1</sup> and begins his night's feasting. Beowulf watches:

	Þrȳðswȳð behēold	
mæg Higelāces,	hū se mānscaða	
under færgripum	gefaran wolde.	ll. 736-38

Instead of acting promptly to succor his comrade, the hero deliberately holds back in order to learn Grendel's methods,<sup>2</sup> though at the cost of the Geat's life. Significantly, this matter-of-fact statement is not phrased as an explanation. As far as anyone can judge from the passage, the poet was not sensible of a breach of the Germanic code; at the same time, the modern reader can scarcely

<sup>1</sup> Klaeber's 3d ed. of *Beowulf* is cited throughout.

<sup>2</sup> The "earliest example in English literature of the use of the scientific method," according to a facetious note in *The Explicator*, I (1942), item 1.