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# **Rochester and Charles Dickens**

**Fitzgerald Percy Hetherington**

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**Author: Fitzgerald Percy Hetherington**

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E. W. Huckle.

• Rochester •

AND

Charles . .

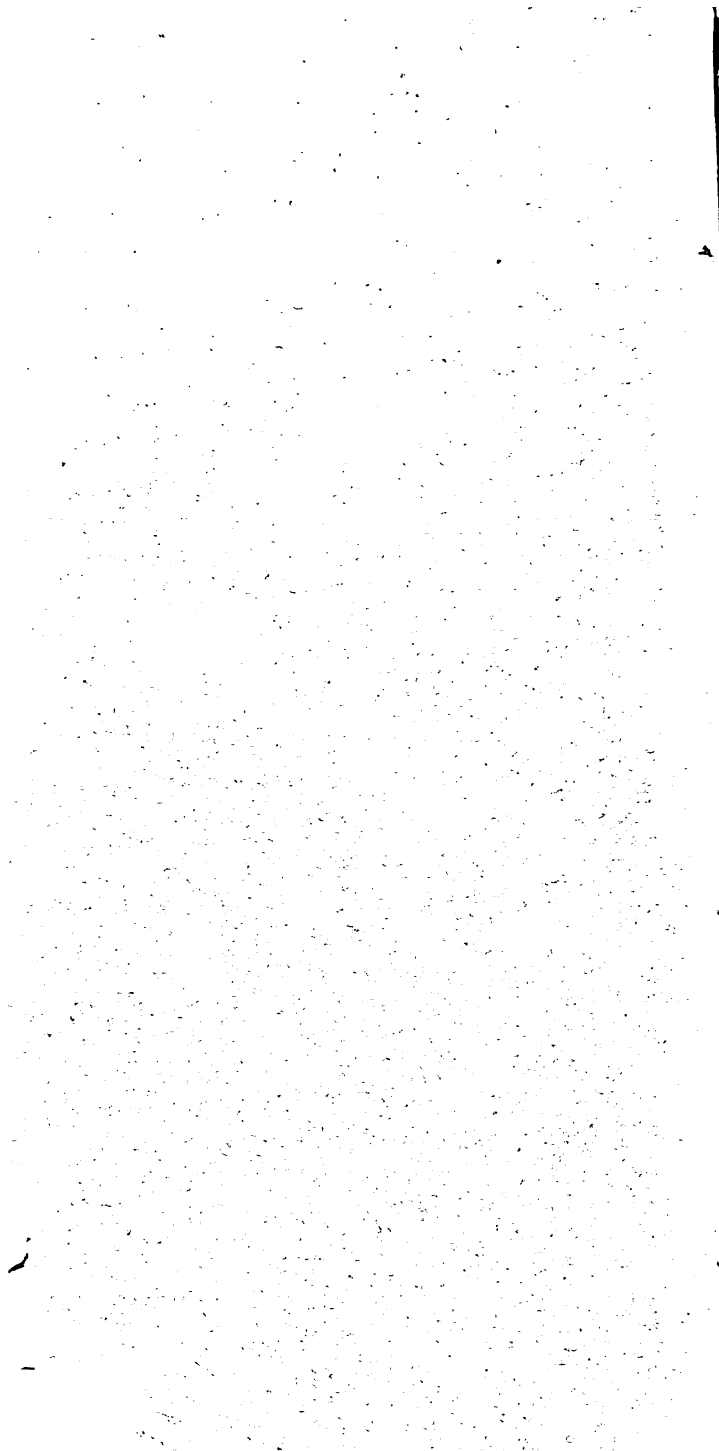
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*By Percy Fitzgerald, M.A., F.S.A.*



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1903.



E. W. Huelkel.  
Rochester, Kent,  
nineteenth of August,  
1907.

. Rochester .

AND

Charles . .

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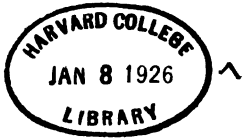


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*E. W. ...*

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**ROCHESTER**  
AND  
**CHARLES DICKENS.**

“Ubi Thesaurus, ibi cor.”

By **PERCY FITZGERALD, M.A., F.S.A.**

I.

It is said that since Dickens's death some fourteen or fifteen biographies of him have appeared. Yet, perhaps, the best and fullest account is his real autobiography, which is to be found in his writings. It would be an interesting, if difficult, task to extract all the passages dealing with his life and feelings from his books: but the result would be a very vivid and spirited portrait of the man. His childhood and youth, odd to say, was for him the most fruitful portion of his life—it was then that he observed and took stock of life, and garnered up the knowledge that he put to profit later. The scenes and personages about him were his microcosm, which he was to expand and magnify on a larger canvas. This can be proved in the most convincing way. In all his writings we find a vast amount of these personal recollections and impressions. He gives us all that he saw and felt under innumerable disguises. These personal matters he adapted in the most ingenious, clever fashion to his stories.

This is no mere fanciful theory, for it can be shown how, from a few chapters in “Pickwick,” we can restore the general Rochester life, society, and manners in the midst of which he passed his childhood. He was but eight or nine years of age when he quitted the Town; and yet fifteen years later he gave us the most minute and vivid sketches of the place, showing how the child had



been observing everything that passed before his eyes—seeing and marking all its humours, absurdities, and fashions. Rochester is certainly one of the most scenic of old towns. Its framed houses in the High-street, its picturesque Guildhall, Market House, and other buildings now stand where they did; we almost expect to see fellows in hoods and jerkins and bearing quarter staves—or, as the guide books put it, “there is quite an air of bagwigs and ruffles.” One cannot be surprised at Boz’s enduring love, or that it was the first place he wrote about in the opening chapters of “Pickwick,” and the last he was writing of when the pen dropped from his hand. Rochester is, indeed, interwoven closely with his whole life. As it was with Stevenson, so it was with Boz. At that distance of time, the retrospect seemed inviting and all-important—the intervening interval was uninteresting compared with the childish dramas. They were as fairy tales, and full of pleasing, happy visions.

It is astonishing what a number of persons—travellers, visitors, and gossips—have found their way to this good old city, mainly inspired by those two stories, “Pickwick” and “Edwin Drood.” I mind the time when “Pickwick” was as dead as a door nail—and that was in Boz’s own day. He never spoke of it himself—nor did he care to hear it spoken of. Forster thought it a clever young fellow’s first attempt. Not long since, when opening the Exhibition in London of the Dickens Fellowship, of which I am president, I told the company a little story which has since gone the round of the Press, illustrative of this incuriousness. Once when I was travelling with him an amiable enthusiast gained admission, carrying a little parcel, which he opened. It was, he assured Dickens, of enormous value—being, in fact, “Old Gold.” “Yes,” he repeated several times, “This is real old gold, and I value it as such, and it will be valued by and by.” And what was this lump of “old gold?” It proved to be a copy of “Pickwick,” one of his genuine first issues. Boz was good-naturedly amused and encouraged his devotee, and, when the latter had retired, repeating still that it *was* “old gold,” Boz smiled, and said he was evidently a good, honest fellow; but laughed heartily at the “old gold” notion. The treasure, in fact, was

worth about ten shillings. Well, as I told our fellowship, this worthy man was infinitely wiser in his generation than either Boz or his friend—for that copy of "Pickwick," supposing it in good and clean condition, and equipped with all the advertisements and addresses, is now worth some fifty pounds or so—a very fair approach to "old gold."

In the seventies, then, I doubt if pilgrims had begun to come to Rochester. I really think that the first attempt at Boz topography—now so abundant—was by an American, Mr. Hassard, who wrote a little book, called "A Pickwickian Pilgrimage," issued more than twenty years ago. It is very pleasant reading, and interesting as describing the places years ago—since when many changes have occurred. Then came Frost, with his "Dickens in Kent," and the good, amiable Hughes—an official of Birmingham Corporation—who was almost mad on the subject of Boz. He came down here with his friend, Kitton—no better ally could he have—and regularly explored what he called the "Dickens Land" of Kent. A large and handsome volume was the result. I, myself, have laboured much in the same vineyard, and have written many a volume on a subject which seems almost fascinating. Then came Mr. Hammond Hall, in the pleasant little book, "Mr. Pickwick's Kent." There are, no doubt, many more explorers.

There is a great future for the "Nuns' House," and the building may yet have a prodigious influence on the fortunes of Rochester, for it offers a chance that should not be missed of having a centre in the place which should crystallize the memory of Boz. Should there be, as is talked of, a room devoted to Dickens memorials—filled with pictures and relics—folk will begin to make many pious pilgrimages to the place. It will have the effect of Carlyle's house at Chelsea, which draws visitors from all parts of the world—curious to say, mostly Germans. Germans, too, I fancy, will come also to the "Nuns' House."

How interesting it is to look on that old, dilapidated row of houses which stretches off at a right angle to the road just at the entrance to Chatham, Ordnance-terrace. There was one of the houses where the family resided. We can follow the bright, intelligent boy as he went about—using, even then, his keen powers of observation—taking

in the whole Rochester life, manners, figures, characters—civil, military, dockyard, and the rest. There was his microcosm, and here, in little, he saw a whole world. He knew his Rochester and Chatham by heart, and, as he knew, loved both. This is shewn by his perpetual recurrence all through his life to these early scenes.

In an old "Court Kalendar" I lately came on a list of employés in the various Government offices, and turned at once to the roll of the Chatham Dockyard. Here we find the name of the "commissioner resident" in 1823, and who is likely to have been in office in 1827—the pompous Sir Thomas Clubber of the story. He is set down as "Sir Robert Barlow, Kt.," which has also an air of pomposity. In the Navy pay office we find the name of John Dickens as fifth clerk, and it is curious that in the "Treasurer's branch" we should come upon a fellow-clerk of his bearing the name of Samuel Tupman. Dickens's father was sent down to Chatham in the year 1819. He was, of course, no more than a superior clerk, with £200 a year. He first lived at No. 11 (then No. 2) Ordnance-terrace, on the borders of Chatham and Rochester. He later removed to a less pretentious tenement, No. 18, St. Mary's-place, next door to a sort of "little Bethel." His was not a high position, but his bright, little son made his way everywhere and observed everything.

## II.

We may begin our investigation at the pleasant ball or assembly, at the Bull Inn, with which "Pickwick" opens. Boz remembered every detail nearly twenty years later, and, having friends in the garrison and in the town, was, no doubt, taken in *ex gratia* to look on. He even points out to us the difference between assembly and ball—as it was a matter of high etiquette in Rochester life. The boy recalled even the music at the balls, and what instruments furnished it. The "elevated den" could not hold more than four musicians, who had fiddles and a harp—say, two fiddles, a bass, and harp. This, however, was enough for the room. From his minute description, we could reconstruct the manners and habits of an English social meeting of the time. The great lady in blue satin, and her daughters also in blue; whist tables; snuff-



**BULL INN, ROCHESTER.**