Lovereading.co.uk

Drood

Dan Simmons

Published by Quercus

Extract

All text is copyright © of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

CHAPTER ONE

My name is Wilkie Collins, and my guess, since I plan to delay the publication of this document for at least a century and a quarter beyond the date of my demise, is that you do not recognise my name. Some say that I am a gambling man and those that say so are correct, so my wager with you, Dear Reader, would be that you have neither read nor heard of any of my books or plays. Perhaps you British or American peoples a hundred and twenty-five or so years in my future do not speak English at all. Perhaps you dress like Hottentots, live in gas-lighted caves, travel around in balloons, and communicate by telegraphed thoughts unhindered by any spoken or written language.

Even so, I would wager my current fortune, such as it is, and all future royalties from my plays and novels, such as they may be, on the fact that you *do* remember the name and books and plays and invented characters of my friend and former collaborator, a certain Charles Dickens.

So this true story shall be about my friend (or at least about the man who was once my friend) Charles Dickens and about the Staplehurst accident that took away his peace of mind, his health, and, some might whisper, his sanity. This true story will be about Charles Dickens's final five years and about his growing obsession during that time with a man — if man he was — named Drood, as well as with murder,

death, corpses, crypts, mesmerism, opium, ghosts, and the streets and alleys of that black-biled lower bowel of London that the writer always called "my Babylon" or "the Great Oven." In this manuscript (which, as I have explained—for legal reasons as well as for reasons of honour—I intend to seal away from all eyes for more than one hundred years after his death and my own), I shall answer the question which perhaps no one else alive in our time knew to ask—"Did the famous and loveable and honourable Charles Dickens plot to murder an innocent person and dissolve away his flesh in a pit of caustic lime and secretly inter what was left of him, mere bones and a skull, in the crypt of an ancient cathedral that was an important part of Dickens's own childhood? And did Dickens then scheme to scatter the poor victim's spectacles, rings, stickpins, shirt studs, and pocket watch in the River Thames? And if so, or even if Dickens only *dreamed* he did these things, what part did a very real phantom named Drood have in the onset of such madness?"

The date of dickens's disaster was 9 June, 1865. The locomotive carrying his success, peace of mind, sanity, manuscript, and mistress was—quite literally—heading for a breach in the rails and a terrible fall.

I do not know if you Dear Readers living so many years hence still record or remember history (perhaps you have renounced Herodotus and Thucydides and dwell perpetually in the Year Zero), but if any sense of history remains in your time, you must know well the important events of the year we called Anno Domini 1865. Some events, such as the end of the fraternal conflagration in the United States, were considered of some drama and considerable interest by many in England, although not by Charles Dickens. Despite his great interest in America—having travelled there already and written books about it, not altogether flattering books one must add, and after having struggled so fiercely to receive some recompense for the piracy of his works in that copyright-flaunting chaos of former colonies—Dickens had little interest in a war between some distant North and more-distant South. But in 1865, the year of his Staplehurst disaster, Charles Dickens had reason to be very satisfied indeed with his own personal history.

He was the most popular novelist in England, perhaps in the world. Many people in England and America considered my friend to be — outside of Shakespeare and perhaps Chaucer and Keats — the greatest writer who had ever lived.

Of course, I knew this to be nonsense, but popularity, as they say (or as I have said), breeds more popularity. I had seen Charles Dickens stuck in a rural, doorless privy with his trousers down around his ankles, bleating like a lost sheep for some paper to wipe his arse, and you will have to forgive me if that image remains more true to me than "the greatest writer who ever lived."

But on this June day in 1865, Dickens had many reasons to be smug.

Seven years earlier, the writer had separated from his wife, Catherine, who obviously had offended him in their twenty-two years of marriage by uncomplainingly bearing him ten children and suffering several miscarriages, all the while generally putting up with his every complaint and catering to his every whim. This endeared his wife to him to the point that in 1857, during a walking trip we were taking in the countryside during which we had sampled several bottles of local wine, Dickens chose to describe his beloved Catherine to me as "Very dear to me, Wilkie, very dear. But, on the whole, more bovine than entrancing, more ponderous than feminine . . . an alchemist's dull brew of vague-mindedness, constant incompetence, shuffling sluggishness, and self-indulgent idleness, a thick gruel stirred only by the paddle of her frequent self-pity."

I doubt if my friend remembered telling me this, but I have not forgotten.

Actually, it was a complaint that did Catherine in, domestically speaking. It seems (actually, it does not "seem" at all — I was there when he purchased the blasted thing) that Dickens had bought the actress Ellen Ternan an expensive bracelet after our production of *The Frozen Deep,* and the idiot jeweller had delivered the thing to the Dickenses' home in London, Tavistock House, not to Miss Ternan's flat. As a result of this mis-delivery, Catherine had given forth several weeks' worth of bovine mewlings, refusing to believe that it was merely her husband's token offering of innocent esteem to the actress who had done such a wonderful (actually, I would say barely competent) job

as the hero's beloved, Clara Burnham, in our…no, *my*…play about unrequited love in the Arctic.

It is true, as Dickens continued to explain to his deeply hurt wife in 1858, that the author had the habit of showering generous gifts on his fellow players and participants in his various amateur theatricals. After *The Frozen Deep* he had already distributed bracelets and pendants, a watch, and one set of three shirt studs in blue enamel to others in the production.

But, then, he wasn't in love with these others. And he *was* in love with young Ellen Ternan. I knew that. Catherine Dickens knew that. No one can be sure if Charles Dickens knew that. The man was such a convincing fictionalist, not to mention one of the most self-righteous fellows ever to have trod the Earth, that I doubt if he ever confronted and acknowledged his own deeper motivations, except when they were as pure as springwater.

In this case, it was Dickens who flew into a rage, shouting and roaring at the soon-cowed Catherine—I apologise for any inadvertent bovine connotation there—that his wife's accusations were a slur on the pure and luminously perfect person of Ellen Ternan. Dickens's emotional, romantic, and, dare I say it, *erotic* fantasies always revolved around sanctified, chivalric devotion to some hypothetical young and innocent goddess whose purity was eternally beyond reproach. But Dickens may have forgotten that the hapless and now domestically doomed Catherine had watched *Uncle John,* the farce that we had put on (it was the tradition in our century, you see, always to present a farce along with a serious drama) after *The Frozen Deep*. In *Uncle John,* Dickens (age forty-six) played the elderly gentleman and Ellen Ternan (eighteen) played his ward. Naturally, Uncle John falls madly in love with the girl less than half his age. Catherine must have also known that while I had written the bulk of the drama, *The Frozen Deep,* about the search for the lost Franklin Expedition, it was her husband who had written and cast the romantic farce, *after he had met Ellen Ternan*.

Not only does Uncle John fall in love with the young girl he should be protecting, but he showers her with, and I quote from the play's stage directions, "wonderful presents—a pearl necklace, diamond ear-rings."

So it is little wonder that when the expensive bracelet, meant for Ellen,

showed up at Tavistock House, Catherine, between pregnancies, roused herself from her vague-minded shuffling sluggishness and bellowed like a milk cow with a Welsh dairyman's prod between her withers.

Dickens responded as any guilty husband would. But only if that husband happened to be the most popular writer in all of England and the English-speaking world and perhaps the greatest writer who ever lived.

First, he insisted that Catherine make a social call on Ellen Ternan and Ellen's mother, showing everyone that there could be no hint of suspicion or jealousy on his wife's part. In essence, Dickens was demanding that his wife publicly apologise to his mistress — or at least to the woman he would soon choose to *be* his mistress when he worked up the courage to make the arrangements. Weeping, miserable, Catherine did as she was bid. She humiliated herself by making a social call on Ellen and Mrs Ternan.

It was not enough to assuage Dickens's fury. He cast the mother of his ten children out.

He sent Charley, his eldest son, to live with Catherine. He kept the rest of the children to live with him at Tavistock House and eventually at Gad's Hill Place. (It was always my observation that Dickens enjoyed his children until they began to think and act for themselves in any way…in other words, when they ceased behaving like Little Nell or Paul Dombey or one of his other fictional constructs…and then he quickly grew very bored with them.)

There was more to this scandal, of course — protests by Catherine's parents, public retractions of those protests forced by Dickens and his solicitors, bullying and misleading public statements by the author, legal manoeuvrings, much terrible publicity, and a final and irrevocable legal separation forced on his wife. He eventually refused to communicate with her at all, even about the well-being of their children.

All this from the man who epitomised, not just for England but for the world, the image of "the happy home."

Of course Dickens still needed a woman in his house. He had many servants. He had nine children at home with whom he did not wish to be bothered except when he was in the mood to play with them or dangle them on his knee for photographs. He had social obligations. There were menus and shopping lists and florists' orders to prepare.

There was much cleaning and organising to oversee. Charles Dickens needed to be freed from all these details. He was, you must understand, the world's greatest writer.

Dickens did the obvious thing, although it might not have seemed so obvious to you or to me. (Perhaps in this distant twentieth or twenty-first century to which I consign this memoir, it *is* the obvious thing. Or perhaps you have, if you are smart, abandoned the quaint and idiotic institution of marriage altogether. As you will see, I avoided matrimony in my time, choosing to live with one woman while having children with another, and some in my time, to my great pleasure, called me a scoundrel and a cad. But I digress.)

So Dickens did the obvious thing. He elevated Catherine's spinster sister Georgina to the role of surrogate wife, mistress of his household, and discipline-mistress of his children, hostess at his many parties and dinners, not to mention Sergeant Major to the cook and servants.

When the inevitable rumours began — centred on Georgina rather than on Ellen Ternan, who had receded, one might say, from the gaslights to the shadows — Dickens ordered a doctor to Tavistock House. The doctor was told to examine Georgina and then was ordered to publish a statement, which he did, declaring to all and sundry that Miss Georgina Hogarth was *virgo intacta*.

And that, Charles Dickens assumed, would be that.

His younger daughter would later say to me, or at least say within my hearing, "My father was like a madman. This affair brought out all that was the worst — and all that was the weakest — in him. He did not care a damn what happened to any of us. Nothing could surpass the misery and unhappiness of our home."

If Dickens was aware of their unhappiness, or if it mattered to him if he was indeed aware, he did not show it. Not to me, nor to his newer and ultimately closer friends.

And he was correct in his assumption that the crisis would pass without his readers' abandoning him. If they knew of his domestic irregularities at all, they had obviously forgiven him. He was, after all, the English prophet of the happy home and the world's greatest writer. Allowances must be made.

Our male literary peers and friends also forgave and forgot — with the exception of Thackeray, but that is another story — and I must

admit that some of them, some of us, tacitly or privately, applauded Charles's freeing himself of his domestic obligations to such an unattractive and perpetually dragging sea anchor. The break gave a glimmer of hope to the bleakest of married men and amused us bachelors with the thought that perhaps one *could* come back from that undiscovered matrimonial country from which it was said that no man could ever return.

But, I pray you, Dear Reader, remember that we are speaking of the man who, sometime earlier, shortly before his acquaintance with Ellen Ternan, as he and I cruised the theatres for what we called "the special little periwinkles"—those very young and very pretty actresses we found to our mutual aesthetic satisfaction—had said to me, "Wilkie, if you can think of any tremendous way of passing the night, in the meantime, do. I don't care what it is. I give, for this night only, restraint to the Winds! If the mind can devise anything sufficiently in the style of Sybarite Rome in the days of its culminating voluptuousness, I am your man."

And for such sport, I was his.

I HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN 9 June, 1865, the true beginning of this cascade of incredible events.

Dickens, explaining to friends that he was suffering from overwork and what he had been calling his "frost-bitten foot" since mid-winter, had taken a week off from his work of finishing *Our Mutual Friend* to enjoy a holiday in Paris. I do not know if Ellen Ternan and her mother went with him. I do know they returned with him.

A lady whom I have never met nor much wish to, a certain Mrs William Clara Pitt Byrne (a friend, I am told, of Charles Waterton—the naturalist and explorer who reported his bold adventures all over the world but who had died from a silly fall at his estate of Walton Hall just eleven days before the Staplehurst accident, his ghost later reported to be haunting the place in the form of a great grey heron), loved to send little bits of malicious gossip to the *Times*. This malevolent morsel, reporting the sighting of our friend on the ferry from Boulogne to Folkestone that day of the ninth of June, appeared some months after Dickens's accident:

Travelling with him was a lady not his wife, nor his sister-in-law, yet he strutted about the deck with the air of a man bristling with self-importance, every line of his face and every gesture of his limbs seemed haughtily to say — "Look at me; make the most of your chance. I am the great, I am the only *Charles Dickens; whatever I may choose to do is justified by that fact."*

I am told that Mrs Byrne is known primarily for a book she published some years ago titled *Flemish Interiors*. In my modest opinion, she should have reserved her vitriolic pen for scribbling about divans and wallpaper. Human beings are clearly beyond her narrow scope.

After disembarking at Folkestone, Dickens, Ellen, and Mrs Ternan took the 2.38 tidal train to London. As they approached Staplehurst, they were the only passengers in their coach, one of seven first-class carriages in the tidal train that day.

The engineer was going full speed — about fifty miles per hour — as they passed Headcorn at eleven minutes after three in the afternoon. They were now approaching the railroad viaduct near Staplehurst, although "viaduct" — the name given the structure in the official railways guide — may be too fancy a word for the web of girders supporting the heavy wood beams spanning the shallow river Beult.

Labourers were carrying out a routine replacement of old timbers on that span. Later investigation — and I have read the reports — showed that the foreman had consulted the wrong timetable and did not expect the tidal train for another two hours. (It seems that we travellers are not the only ones to be confounded by British railway timetables with their infinite holiday and weekend and high-tide-time asterisks and confounding parentheses.)

A flagman was required by railway policy and English law to be stationed 1,000 yards up the rails from such work — two of the rails had already been lifted off at the bridge and set alongside the track — but for some reason this man with his red flag was only 550 yards from the gap. This did not give a train travelling at the speed of the Folkestone–London tidal express any chance of stopping in time.

The engineer, upon seeing the red flag so tardily waved and — a much more soul-riveting sight, I am sure — upon seeing the gap in rails and beams in the bridge ahead, did his best. Perhaps in your day,

Dear Reader, all trains have brakes that can be applied by the engineer. Not so in our day of 1865. Each carriage must be braked individually and then only upon instructions from the engineer. He madly whistled for the guards along the length of the train to apply their brakes. It did little good.

According to the report, the train was still doing almost thirty miles per hour when it reached the broken line. Incredibly, the engine *jumped* the forty-two-foot gap and leaped off the track on the other side of the chasm. Of the seven first-class carriages, all but one flew free and plummeted to their destruction in the swampy riverbed below.

The surviving coach was the one carrying Dickens, his mistress, and her mother.

The guards' van immediately behind the engine was flung to the other track, dragging the next coach — a second-class carriage — with it. Immediately behind this second-class carriage was Dickens's coach and it jolted partially over the bridge as the other six first-class carriages flew by and crashed below. Dickens's carriage finally ended up dangling over the side of the bridge, now being kept from falling only by its single coupling to another second-class carriage. Only the very rear of the train remained on the rails. The other first-class carriages had plummeted and crashed and rolled and buckled and generally been smashed to matchwood and splinters on the marshy ground below.

Dickens later wrote about these moments, in letters to friends, but always with discretion, taking care never to mention, except to a few intimates, the names or identities of his two fellow travellers. I am certain that I am the only person to whom he ever told the complete story.

"Suddenly," he wrote in his more widely disseminated epistolary version of events, *"we were off the rail, and beating the ground as the car of a half-emptied balloon might do. The old lady…"* [We must read "Mrs Ternan" here] *"…cried out, 'My God!' The young lady travelling with her* [this is Ellen Ternan, of course] *screamed.*

"I caught hold of them both… and said: 'We can't help ourselves, but we can be quiet and composed. Pray don't cry out!'

"The old lady immediately answered: 'Thank you. Rely on me. Upon my soul I will be quiet.' We were then all tilted down together in a corner of the carriage, and stopped."

The carriage was indeed tilted steeply down and to the left. All baggage and loose objects had fallen down and to the left. For the rest of his life, Charles Dickens would suffer repeated spells of feeling as if "everything, all of my body, is tilted and falling down and to the left."

Dickens continues his narrative:

"I said to the two women, 'You may be sure that nothing worse can happen. Our danger must *be over. Will you remain here, without stirring, while I get out the window?'"*

Dickens, still lithe enough then at the age of fifty-three, despite his "frost-bitten foot" (as a long-time sufferer of gout, which has required me to partake of laudanum for many years, I know gout when I hear its symptoms, and Dickens's "frostbite" was almost certainly gout), then clambered out, made the tricky jump from the carriage step to the railbed above the bridge, and reported seeing two guards running up and down in apparent confusion.

Dickens writes that he grabbed and stopped one of them, demanding of the man, *"Look at me! Do stop an instant and* look at me, *and tell me whether you don't know me."*

"We know you very well, Mr Dickens," he reports the guard replied at once.

"Then, my good fellow," cried Dickens, almost cheerily (at being recognised at such a time, a petty soul such as Clara Pitt Byrne might have interjected), *"for God's sake give me your key, and send one of those labourers here, and I'll empty this carriage."*

And then, in Dickens's letters to his friends, the guards did as they were bid, labourers laying down planks to the carriage, and then the author clambered back into the tilted coach and crawled down its length to retrieve his top hat and his flask of brandy.

I should interrupt our mutual friend's description here just long enough to say that, using the names listed in the official railway report as my guide, I later tracked down the very guard that Dickens reports stopping and galvanising into such useful action. The guard—a certain Lester Smyth—had a somewhat different recollection of those moments.

"We were trying to get down to 'elp the injured and dying when this toff who'd climbed out of the teetering first-class coach runs up to Paddy

Beale and me, all wild-eyed and pale, and keeps shouting at us, 'Do you know me, man!? Do you know me!? Do you know who I *am??*'

"I admit that I replied, 'I don't care if you're Prince Albert, mate. Get out of my bleedin' way.' It was not the usual way I'd speak to a gentleman, but that wasn't no usual day."

At any rate, Dickens did commandeer the work of some labourers to help extricate Ellen and Mrs Ternan, he did crawl back into the carriage to retrieve his flask and top hat, he did fill his top hat with water before clambering down the steep bank, and all witnesses agree that Dickens went immediately to work down among the dying and the dead.

In his five remaining years after Staplehurst, Dickens would only say about what he saw in that riverbed — "It was unimaginable" — and of what he heard there — "Unintelligible." This from the man generally agreed to have the greatest imagination, after Sir Walter Scott, of any English writer. And from a man whose stories were, if nothing else, always eminently intelligible.

Perhaps the unimaginable began when he was clambering down the steep embankment. Suddenly appearing next to him was a tall, thin man wearing a heavy black cape far more appropriate for a night at the opera than an afternoon's voyage to London on the tidal train. Both men were carrying their top hats in one hand while grabbing at the embankment for balance with their free hands. This figure, as Dickens later described to me in a throaty whisper during the days after the accident when his voice "was no longer my own," was cadaverously thin, almost shockingly pale, and stared at the writer from dark-shadowed eyes set deep under a pale, high brow that melded into a pale, bald scalp. A few strands of greying hair leapt out from the sides of this skull-like visage. Dickens's impression of a skull was reinforced, he said later, by the man's foreshortened nose — "mere black slits opening into the grub-white face than a proper proboscis" was how Dickens described it — and by small, sharp, irregular teeth, spaced too far apart, set into gums so pale that they were whiter than the teeth themselves.

The author also noticed that the man had two fingers missing—or almost missing—on his right hand, the little finger and the ring finger next to it, as well as a missing middle finger on his left hand. What especially caught Dickens's attention was the fact that the fingers had *not* been cut off at the joint, as is so often the case in an accident to the hand or subsequent surgery, but appeared to have been severed halfway through the bone between the joints. "Like tapers of white wax that had been partially melted," he told me later.

Dickens was nonplussed as he and this strange black-caped figure slowly worked their way down the steep embankment, both using shrubs and rocks as handholds.

"I am Charles Dickens," gasped my friend.

"Yesss," said the pale face, the sibilants sliding out through the tiny teeth. "I know."

This nonplussed Dickens all the more. "Your name, sir?" he asked as they slid down the embankment of loose stones together.

"Drood," said the man. At least Dickens thought this is what the man said. The pale figure's voice was slurred and tinged with what may have been a foreign accent. The word came out sounding most like "Dread."

"You were on the train going to London?" asked Dickens as they approached the bottom of the steep hill.

"To Limehousse," hissed the ungainly form in the dark cape. "Whitechapel. Ratcliff Crossss. Gin Alley. Three Foxesss Court. Butcher Row and Commercial Road. The Mint and other rookeriessss."

Dickens glanced up sharply at this strange recital, since their train had been going to the station in central London, not to these dark alleys in East London. "Rookeries" was a slang term for the worst of the tenement slums in the city. But now they had reached the bottom of the hill, and without another word, this "Drood" turned away and seemed to glide into the shadows under the railway bridge. In a few seconds the man's black cape blended with the darkness there.

"You must understand," Dickens was to whisper to me later, "I never for a second thought that this strange apparition was Death come to claim his own. Nor any other personification of the tragedy that was even then unfolding. This would have been too trite even for

far lesser fiction than that which I create. But I do admit, Wilkie," he said, "that I wondered at the time if Drood might have been an undertaker come from Staplehurst or some other nearby hamlet."

Alone now, Dickens turned his attention to the carnage.

The train carriages in the riverbed and adjoining swampy banks were no longer recognisable as railway coaches. Except for iron axles and wheels protruding here and there at impossible angles from the water, it was as if a series of wooden bungalows had been flung out of the sky, perhaps dropped from some American cyclone and smashed to bits. And then the bits looked to have been dropped and smashed yet again.

It seemed to Dickens as if no one could have survived such impact, such destruction, but screams of living sufferers — for in truth the injured far outnumbered the dead — began to fill the river valley. These were not, he thought at the time, human sounds. They were somehow infinitely worse than the moans and cries he had heard when touring overcrowded hospitals, such as the East London Children's Hospital at Ratcliff Cross — which Drood had just mentioned — where the indigent and unclaimed went to die. No, these screams seemed more as if someone had opened a portal to the pit of Hell itself and allowed the damned there to cry out one last time to the mortal world.

Dickens watched a man stagger towards him, arms outstretched as if for a welcoming hug. The top of the man's skull had been torn off rather the way one would crack an eggshell with a spoon in preparation for breakfast. Dickens could clearly see the grey-and-pink pulp glistening within the concave bowl of splintered skull. The fellow's face was covered with blood, his eyes white orbs staring out through crimson rivulets.

Dickens could think of nothing to do but offer the man some brandy from his flask. The mouth of the flask came away red from the man's lips. Dickens helped him lie on the grass and then used the water in his top hat to clean the man's face. "What is your name, sir?" asked Dickens.

The man said only, "I am gone," and died, the white eyes continuing to stare up at the sky from their bloody pools.

A shadow passed over them. Dickens whirled, sure — he told me

later—that it would be Drood, the apparition's black cape widening like a raven's wings. But it was only a cloud passing between the sun and the river valley.

Dickens refilled his top hat from the river and came upon a lady, who also had blood streaming down over her lead-coloured face. She was almost naked, her clothes reduced to a few token strips of bloody cloth dangling like old bandages from her torn flesh. Her left breast was missing. She refused to pause for the writer's ministrations and did not seem to hear his urgings that she sit down and wait for help. She walked past Dickens in a brisk manner and disappeared into the few trees that grew along the bank.

He helped two stunned guards extricate the crushed body of another woman from a flattened carriage and lay the body gently on the bank. A man was wading downstream, screaming, "My wife! My wife!" Dickens led him to the corpse. The man screamed, threw his arms above his head, and ran wildly into the swampy field near the river, crashing and thrashing about, all the while emitting sounds that Dickens later said "were like the hisses and death grunts of a boar pierced through the lungs by several large calibre bullets." Then the man fainted, dropping into the marsh more like someone shot through the heart than through the lungs.

Dickens went back towards the carriages and found a woman propped against a tree. Except for a little blood on her face, perhaps from a slight scalp wound, she seemed uninjured.

"I shall bring you some water, madam," he said.

"That would be very kind of you, sir," she replied. She smiled and Dickens flinched. She had lost all of her teeth.

He went to the stream and looked back to see a figure he took to be Drood—presumably no one else was foolishly dressed in a heavy opera cape on that warm June day—solicitously bent over the woman. When Dickens returned a few seconds later with his top hat filled with river water, the man in black was gone and the woman was dead but still showing her ragged, bloodied gums in a parody of a final smile.

He went back to the smashed carriages. Amidst the rubble of one coach, a young man moaned feebly. More rescuers were sliding down the slope. Dickens ran to get several strong guards to help extricate the fellow from the broken glass, torn red velvet, heavy iron, and col-

lapsed wooden floor of the compartment. While the guards grunted and lifted the heavy window frames and shattered flooring that had now become a fallen roof, Dickens squeezed the young man's hand and said, "I shall see you to safety, my son."

"Thank you," gasped the injured young gentleman, obviously an occupant of one of the first-class carriages. "You are most kind."

"What is your name?" asked our novelist as they carried the young man to the bank.

"Dickenson," said the young fellow.

Charles Dickens made sure that Master Dickenson was carried up to the railway line where more rescuers had arrived, then he turned back to the carnage. He rushed from injured person to injured person, lifting, consoling, assuaging thirst, reassuring, sometimes covering their nakedness with any rag he could find, all while checking other scattered forms to confirm that they were no longer amongst the living.

A few rescuers and fellow passengers seemed as focused as our author, but many—Dickens told me later—could only stand there in shock and stare. The two figures doing the most that terrible afternoon amidst the wreckage and groans were Dickens and the bizarre form who called himself Drood, although the black-caped man seemed always to be just out of earshot, always on the verge of vanishing from sight again, and always appearing to glide rather than walk from wrecked carriage to wrecked carriage.

Dickens came upon a large woman, the peasant cloth and design of her dress showing that she had come from one of the lower-class carriages. She was face-down in the swamp, her arms under her body. He rolled her over to be certain that she was no longer among the living, when suddenly her eyes popped open in her mud-covered face.

"I saved her!" she gasped. "I saved her from *him*!"

It took a moment before Dickens noticed the infant clasped fiercely between the fat woman's heavy arms, the small white face pressed deep against the woman's pendulous bosoms. The baby was dead—either drowned in the shallow swamp or asphyxiated by its mother's weight.

Dickens heard a hissing call, saw Drood's pale form waving to him from the web of shadows under the broken bridge and walked towards him, but came first to a collapsed, upside-down carriage where a young woman's bare but shapely arm protruded from what

was left of a window. Her fingers moved, seeming to beckon Dickens closer.

Dickens crouched and took the soft fingers in his own two hands. "I am here, my dear," he said to the darkness inside the small aperture that had been a window only fifteen minutes earlier. He squeezed her hand and she squeezed his back, as if in gratitude for her deliverance.

Dickens crouched but could see nothing but torn upholstery, dark shapes, and deep shadows within the tiny, triangular cave of wreckage. There was not enough room for him to squeeze in even his shoulders. The top frame of the window was pressing down almost to the marshy ground. He could only just hear the rapid, terrified breathing of the injured woman above the gurgle of the river running by. Without thinking of the possible impropriety of it, he stroked her bare arm as far as he could reach it in the collapsed wreckage. There were very fine reddish hairs along her pale forearm and they glowed coppery in the afternoon light.

"I see the guards and possibly a doctor coming," Dickens said into the tiny aperture, squeezing her arm and hand all the while. He did not know for sure if the approaching gentleman in the brown suit who carried a leather bag was indeed a doctor, but he fervently hoped so. The four guards, carrying axes and iron pry rods, were jogging ahead, the gentleman in the formal suit puffing to keep up.

"Over here!" Dickens cried to them. He squeezed the woman's hand. Her pale fingers squeezed back, the first finger closing, opening, and then curling and closing again around his first fingers much as a newborn baby would instinctively but tentatively grasp its father's hand. She said nothing, but Dickens heard her sigh from the shadows. It seemed almost a contented sound. He held her hand in both of his and prayed that she was not seriously injured.

"Here, for God's sake, hurry!" cried Dickens. The men gathered around. The heavy, suited man introduced himself—he was a physician by the name of Morris—and Dickens refused to relinquish either his place by the wrecked window or the young lady's hand as the four guards began levering the window frame and smashed wood and iron upward and to the side, enlarging the tiny space that had somehow been the woman's shelter and salvation.

"Careful now!" shouted Dickens to the guards. "With great care,

by all means! Allow nothing to fall. Careful with the bars there!" Crouching lower to speak into the dark space, Dickens fiercely gripped her hand and whispered, "We almost have you, my dear. Another minute. Be brave!"

There came a last, answering squeeze. Dickens could feel the gratitude in it.

"You'll have to get back a minute, sir," said Dr Morris. "Back just a moment while the boys heave and lift here and I lean in to see if she is too injured to move yet or not. Just for a moment, sir. That's a good gentleman."

Dickens patted the young lady's palm, his fingers reluctant to release her, feeling the final, parting pressure from her thin, pale, perfectly manicured fingers in return. His mind pushed away the very real but totally inappropriate sense of there being something physically exciting in such intimate contact with a woman whose acquaintance he had not yet made and whose face he had not yet seen. He said, "You'll be out of all of this and safe with us in a moment, my dear" and surrendered her hand. Then he crawled backwards on all fours, clearing the way for the workmen and feeling the marsh moistness seeping up through the knees of his trousers.

"Now!" cried the doctor, kneeling where Dickens had been a moment before. "Put your backs into it, boys!"

The four burly guards literally put their backs into it, first lifting with their pry bars and then setting their backs against the ragged wall of collapsed flooring that now became a heavy pyramid of wood. The cone of darkness widened a bit beneath them. Sunlight illuminated the wreckage. They gasped as they strained to hold the debris up and then one of the men gasped again.

"Oh, Christ!" cried someone.

The doctor seemed to leap back as if he had touched an electrified wire. Dickens crawled forward to offer his help and finally saw into the space.

There was no woman, no girl. Only a bare arm severed just below the shoulder lay in the tiny open circle amidst the debris. The knob of bone looked very white in the filtered afternoon light.

Everyone shouted. More men arrived. Instructions were repeated. The guards used their axes and iron bars to pry open the wreckage,

carefully at first and then with a terrible, almost wilfully destructive abandon. The rest of the young woman's body simply was not there. There were no complete bodies anywhere in this pile of wreckage, only mismatched tatters of torn clothing and random bits of flesh and gouged bone. There was not so much as an identifiable scrap of her dress left behind. There was only the pale arm ending in the bloodless and tightly curled and now motionless fingers.

Without another word, Dr Morris turned and walked away, joining other rescuers milling around other victims.

Dickens got to his feet, blinked, licked his lips, and reached for his flask of brandy. It tasted of copper. He realised that it was empty and that he was tasting only the blood left on it from some of the victims to whom he had offered it. He looked around and around for his top hat and then saw that he was wearing it. River water from it had soaked his hair and dripped down his collar.

More rescuers and onlookers were arriving. Dickens judged that he could be of little further help there. Slowly, awkwardly, he climbed the steep riverbank up to the railbed where the intact carriages now sat empty.

Ellen and Mrs Ternan were sitting in the shade on some stacked rail ties, calmly drinking water from teacups someone had brought them.

Dickens started to reach for Ellen's gloved hand and then did not complete the motion. Instead, he said, "How are you, my dear?"

Ellen smiled, but there were tears in her eyes. She touched her left arm and an area just below her shoulder and above her left breast. "A bit bruised, I believe, but otherwise well. Thank you, Mr Dickens."

The novelist nodded almost absently, his eyes focused elsewhere. Then he turned, walked to the edge of the broken bridge, jumped with the easy agility of the distracted to the step of the dangling first-class carriage, crawled through a shattered window as easily as if it were a doorway, and clambered down through rows of seats that had become rungs on the now-vertical wall of the coach floor. The entire carriage, still dangling precariously high above the valley floor and connected by only one coupling to the second-class carriage on the rails above, swayed slightly like a vibrating pendulum in a broken hallway clock.

Earlier, even before rescuing Ellen and Mrs Ternan, he had car-

ried out his leather bag carrying most of the manuscript of the sixteenth number of *Our Mutual Friend,* which he had been working on in France, but now he had remembered that the last two chapters were in his overcoat, which still lay folded in the overhead above their former seats. Standing on the backs of this last row of seats in the swaying, creaking coach, the river thirty feet below reflecting darts of dancing light through the shattered windows, he retrieved the overcoat, pulled the manuscript out to make sure that all the pages were there—it had been slightly soiled but was otherwise intact—and then, still balancing on the seats, he tucked the papers back into his overcoat.

Dickens then happened to look straight down, down through the shattered glass of the door at the end of the carriage. Far below, directly beneath the train car, some trick of the light making him appear to be standing *on* the river rather than *in* it, apparently totally unconcerned by so many tons of wood and iron swaying above him, the person who called himself Drood was tilting his head far back to stare straight up at Dickens. The man's pale eyes in their sunken sockets seemed to have no eyelids.

The figure's lips parted, its mouth opened and moved, the fleshy tongue flickered out from behind and between the tiny teeth, and hissing sounds emerged, but Dickens could make out no distinct words over the metallic groaning of the dangling carriage and the continuous cries of the injured in the valley below. "Unintelligible," murmured Dickens. "Unintelligible."

The first-class carriage suddenly swayed and sagged as if preparing to drop. Dickens casually caught the overhead with one hand to keep his balance. When the swaying ceased and he looked down again, Drood was gone. The writer tossed the coat with his manuscript in it over his shoulder and clambered up and out into the light.