

DICKENS OF A MYSTERY

By Craig Sodaro

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STORY OF THE PLAY

While engaged in an interview with *London Times* reporter Edwina Drood, world-famous author Charles Dickens falls asleep. He dreams of a variety of his characters as passengers aboard a ship heading to England. But they are now in a future he doesn't quite understand. And an immediate air of mystery surrounds them. Miss Havisham and her adopted daughter Estella are luring Uriah Heep into a trap. Mr. McCawber is running from Madame Defarge, to whom he owes money. Captain Fagin tries to avoid the crewman Oliver Twist, who has become very adept at pick-pocketing. Nancy, the barkeep, and Belle, the barmaid, are hiding secrets of their own. Before Dickens realizes what's happening, Uriah Heep is poisoned. Clara Peggotty, shrewd but motherly, proposes to Dickens that they solve the crime, since Captain Fagin is the least likely person to take charge in a criminal investigation. The two amateur sleuths question the suspects, but Belle finally tells them that she knows who the killer is because she saw the murderer give Heep the poison. But before she's able to name the killer, Belle herself falls dead. Dickens and Clara search Heep's cabin and find evidence to incriminate each of the suspects. But their sleuthing isn't enough to stop a third murder. It's only when they ask the audience to name the killer, do they solve the crime.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

5 m, 7 w

EDWINA DROOD: A reporter for the *London Times*.

CHARLES DICKENS: The famous author, now somewhat elderly.

MISS HAVISHAM: An older woman with a cane; a wedding planner.

ESTELLA: Her adopted daughter.

BELLE: A barmaid.

NANCY: The barkeep.

URIAH HEEP: A man-about-town.

MR. MCCAUBER: A man in debt.

MADAME DEFRARGE: A Frenchwoman.

CLARA PEGGOTY: A kindly fishmonger's wife now turned amateur sleuth.

OLIVER TWIST: A crew member with nimble fingers for picking pockets.

CAPTAIN FAGIN: Captain of the ship.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I

Scene 1: Aboard a steamer bound from New York to London, 1876.

Scene 2: Main salon of the *Queen Victoria*, the present.

Scene 3: The same, minutes later.

Scene 4: The same, several hours later.

ACT II

Scene 1: The same, a short time later.

Scene 2: The same, just about midnight.

Scene 3: The same, an hour later.

Scene 4: Back to 1876, on deck as in Act I, Scene 1.

SETTING

The first and last scenes of the play are set aboard the steamship heading from New York to London, 1876. Nothing is needed but a pair of deck chairs played before the curtain.

The rest of the play takes place in the main salon of the mid-sized steamer, *Queen Victoria*, bound from New York to London in the present. Upstage center is a bar, behind which is a portrait of Queen Victoria. Several tables are USL set with two or three chairs each. DSR is a couch or a pair of easy chairs with a small table between them holding reading material and so on. There are entrances down left and right, either doors or wing entrances. Portholes left and right will give the impression that we are at sea, as will other décor such as life preservers, ropes, lanterns, and so on.

PROPS

Act I, Sc. 1: Blanket and book; pen and pad.

Sc. 2: Bar towel and glasses; order pad and pencil; tray with 2 cups; book; wallet; envelope, 2 glasses of Coke.

Sc. 3: Knitting, handkerchief, glass, envelope, key, small dart.

Sc. 4: Knitting, wallet and watch; 6-pack of soft drink; box.

Act II Sc. 1: box, knitting, letter, poster, deposition, envelopes, wallet, watch, bracelet.

Sc. 2: Pen and pad; locket watch.

Sc. 3: Pen and pad; shawl and hat; folded note; rope, handcuffs.

Sc. 4: Pen and pad.

NOTE: The asides written into the script are meant to be said directly to the audience, though the other characters hear the asides as well. In a sense, the fourth wall is gone and the audience is a part of the action. In this way, the final vote for the killer will work nicely.

ACT I
Scene 1

(The deck of a ship, 1867. Played before the curtain. AT RISE: DICKENS lies in deck chair, a blanket covering him, a book open on his chest. He is sleeping. An empty chair at his right. EDWINA ENTERS right carrying a pad and pencil.)

EDWINA: Mr. Dickens? Mr. Dickens?

DICKENS: *(Awakening.)* Yes? Someone call?

EDWINA: It's I, Edwina Drood.

DICKENS: Drood ... Drood.

EDWINA: Edwina Drood from the *Times*. You agreed to an interview at two o'clock.

DICKENS: So I did.

EDWINA: May I sit down?

DICKENS: It's a free world, my dear.

(EDWINA sits in chair at right.)

EDWINA: You can't believe what a thrill it is meeting such an illustrious writer like this!

DICKENS: I didn't realize that you are so famous.

EDWINA: Oh, no, Mr. Dickens! I meant you! The author of *Oliver Twist*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *A Christmas Carol* ... well, the list goes on and on!

DICKENS: My dear, my publishers have told me never to say no to an interview and to always be pleasant. Therefore I shall try to oblige. *(HE yawns.)* But, as you can see ... I am a bit tired. These publicity tours can be very, very wearing.

EDWINA: This was your second visit to the United States.

DICKENS: Yes. I don't know why, but apparently they buy books. I doubt if they read them, but they make nice doorstops.

EDWINA: From all accounts you were received far better this time than the first time you visited the States in ... what was it?

DICKENS: 1842. And that's only because my books have become longer and weigh more and thus do a much better job keeping their doors from blowing shut in the infernal winds that blow there.

EDWINA: I take it you'll be glad to get back to England.

DICKENS: Civilization, you mean? And why shouldn't I? We have trains that take us where we want to go. No need for a covered wagon crossing endless expanses of nothing but grass and what they call prairie dogs, which don't resemble a dog any more than a rat resembles the Queen!

EDWINA: Oh, well, now ... perhaps you could tell me just a bit of your background.

DICKENS: Born February 7, 1812, Landport, Portsmouth. A few happy years as a young child, but then my father had financial reversals, to put it kindly, and we ended up in London. That would have been 1821 or so. I hated London to begin with. The only air there was coal smoke and filth. And then, of course, those aires my mother put on trying to retain her former social position, which really was no position at all. Between her wants and my father's lack of ability to provide them, he ended up in Marshalsea, the debtor's prison

EDWINA: At about this time, didn't you begin your career?

DICKENS: *(With a laugh.)* My career? My dear Miss Drood, you could make the gates of hell sound positively inviting. I was sent to work at a warehouse where I pasted labels on bottles of shoe blacking. The only good thing about that terrible job for a young boy was that I sat by a window and could look out upon the city as its life pulsed. Fortunately, I then managed to go to school for two years where I learned to spell and craft a sentence with some ability. By the time I was nineteen, I was a reporter of debates in the House of Commons. And it was about that same time *(HE yawns.)* that I felt the need to write down my observations of the world around me. The sketches of London life I wrote and sent off to ... what were those periodicals ... the *Monthly Magazine* and the *Evening Chronicle*. Yes ... they began to publish them.

End of Freeview

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