Chapter 8

RICHARD DOYLE

Except for John Leech, Richard Doyle provided the largest number of illustrations for Dickens's Christmas books; and like that of his *Punch* superior, Doyle's work, more fanciful than witty, as William Rossetti observed, also demonstrated that graphic humor could be conveyed without coarseness. In contrast to Leech and many of the other artists who worked on the holiday books, however, Doyle was not an intimate of the author. The artist, who was small, reclusive, genteel, even quaint (fig. 137), had been trained informally by his father, the noted political caricaturist (whose early pseudonym, H.B., often caused his works to be attributed to Hablot Browne). Nicknamed “The Professor of Medieval Design,” Doyle, a Catholic, would have been as uncomfortable in the irreverent Dickens circle as he apparently was among the rowdy staff of *Punch*.

It was his noted facility with fairies, elves, and other fantasy figures—and perhaps some urging by Leech—that prompted Bradbury and Evans, who published *Punch* as well as Dickens's work, to solicit Doyle's help in 1844 in illustrating *The Chimes*. Doyle supplied the illustration that appeared on the opening page of each quarter of *The Chimes*. By their position and by their inclusion of imaginary with realistic beings, Doyle's designs stressed visually Dickens's blend of fantasy and reality. The artist also took pains to accommodate his conceptions to those of his fellow *Chimes* illustrators—Leech, Stanfield, and particularly Maclise. His first assignment was to introduce Trotty Veck and his daughter sitting on the church steps (I, 84) (fig. 138). He initially portrayed the “weak, small, spare, old” hero of the narrative as a “very Hercules” in appearance, as well as in intention (I, 84); but after noting Leech's more accurate pictures of the workman (I, 89, 100), he modified his own characterization accordingly (II, 109; III, 134). In this first illustration, the Vecks sit beneath the soaring tower of St. Dunstan's, which Stanfield was to include later in ‘The Old Church’ (II, 129) (see fig. 166). The tower, an especially suitable subject for Doyle and Stanfield, both pious men, was merely outlined by Doyle as if to provide Stanfield with direction yet freedom for his later portrayal. In keeping with Maclise's geometric use of line and shapes in the frontispiece (82) (see fig. 155) and title page (83) that preceded this picture, Doyle framed the vertical tower within the upper curve of a reversed S, which, in turn, is
partly framed by a rectangle. Doyle’s more delicate lines, open spaces, holly leaves, and merrier elves added elements of airiness, freshness, and humor lacking in Maclise’s more formal, crowded designs.

Yet throughout his illustrations, Doyle kept in mind Maclise’s frontispiece, with its clouds of elfin creatures emerging from bells. In the upper portions of his three remaining illustrations, he wrought variations on this theme, thereby supplying continuity to his various designs as well as consistent supernatural relief to the three scenes of despair he was asked to depict: the Vecks with the beleaguered Will Fern and his motherless daughter (II, 109); Trotty overwhelmed by his visions among the bells (III, 134); and Margaret with her child at the river’s edge (IV, 158). The contrast between the lightly sketched elves higher up on the plate and the firmly demarcated humans below visually established the separate realms of fantasy and reality between which The Chimes moved. For one of these pictures, Dickens rejected a preliminary sketch, which he said was “so unlike his ideas” that Doyle did it “afresh.”

All of the published illustrations seem so fitting, however, that even with the benefit of hindsight it is impossible to determine which one the author initially deemed unsuitable.

Dickens must have been satisfied with Doyle’s contributions to The Chimes, for he had Bradbury and Evans invite him to help illustrate The Cricket on the Hearth the following year. Doyle agreed to provide three illustrations for this genial Christmas book, one for the beginning of each segment or “Chirp.” Doyle separated the two subjects of the illustration heading “Chirp the First” by time, place, and a quaint initial letter, but gave them continuity by including a sprinkle of elves and the Peerybingle dog in each one (I, 184) (see fig. 161). The dog, seen preceding the Carrier’s cart in the top picture, and snoozing by his feet before the hearth next to a parcel marked with Dickens’s initials in the bottom one, proves to be Boxer, with whom Stanfield (I, 190) (see fig. 166), Leech (I, 194; III, 276) (see fig. 163), and particularly Landseer (II, 230) (see fig. 162) subsequently took great pains. Assigned the task of introducing three of the major characters—the Peerybingles and their pet—Doyle generalized them enough to permit his colleagues to add individualistic details if they wished.

In addition to his customary thoughtfulness, Doyle also displayed great aesthetic versatility. In the illustration heading “Chirp the Second” (II, 215), playful toys function as effectively as his habitual elves would have to suggest the unreal world Caleb is trying so hard to create for his blind daughter, thus making part of Leech’s task easier when he came to infuse the same setting with added pathos later (II, 219). Doyle’s ability to convey gloom as well as gaiety is here indicated by his scene for “Chirp the Third,” in which John Peerybingle sits overwhelmed with suspicions of his wife’s infidelity and oblivious to the comforting spirits around him (III, 247).

Doyle also supplied the illustrations that headed the three parts of The Battle of Life in 1846. His good nature enabled Forster to calm the egocentric Maclise during Dickens’s continued absence abroad. Doyle, a mere caricaturist as far as Maclise was concerned, had already begun his first subject—the Jeddler sisters dancing around the apple tree—while the touchy Royal Academician was still trying to decide first, whether to illustrate The Battle at all, and then, whether to do his customary frontispiece. When he
finally made up his mind to proceed, Maclise insisted that he must have the subject of the two dancing sisters for his frontispiece; consequently, Forster "shut up" Doyle's sketch for this subject. Doyle did not protest, though Maclise neither apologized nor thanked him. In the course of doing his three illustrations for *The Battle of Life*, Doyle got to try his hand at both sisters, and indeed he individualized their coloring and expression far more successfully than Maclise. Sensitive to the text, Doyle must have realized that his beloved imaginary elements would be out of place here; he allowed himself no fairy creatures and only one holly spray to ornament his scenes for Dickens's least festive Christmas book. Instead, the upper portion of Doyle's illustrations—portraying past battlefields (I, 284), abandoned corpses (II, 314), and a wagon hearse (III, 351)—force a harsh perspective on the immediate actions below. These powerful designs, however, were his last for any of Dickens's work. Perhaps he was not asked to contribute to the final holiday book in 1848; if he was, he may have been too busy, or possibly he was offended by the author's failure to express appreciation for his past work.

Dickens, away from England during most of the periods when Doyle was illustrating his Christmas books, communicated with him mainly through Forster (fig. 139) or the publishers. Even had Dickens been inclined to further his acquaintance with the artist upon his return in 1847, circumstances would have conspired against him. While the novelist was wrestling with his own emotional ghosts, prior to his work on *The Haunted Man* and *David Copperfield*, Doyle was confronting spiritual ones. His Irish Catholic heritage had long made him uneasy among his irreverent Anglican colleagues on *Punch*. When, in 1850, England finally legalized the existence of a Roman Catholic hierarchy within its boundaries, *Punch* came out vehemently against the Roman church despite Doyle's protests. The sight of one of his cartoons printed opposite the magazine's editorial, which seriously advocated trying English cardinals for treason, proved the last straw. His resignation enabled John Tenniel, his successor on the *Punch* staff, as well as on the last of Dickens's Christmas books, to win both fame and fortune sooner rather than later.

What Dickens thought of Doyle's secession and the reasons for it is not known; certainly his antipathy toward the Roman Catholic church did not extend to individual Catholics, as his warm and enduring friendship with Stanfield attests. Had the novelist known Doyle better, he might well have joined Thackeray and Ruskin in finding commissions for the former *Punch* staffer, who found himself handicapped by the fact that his countrymen persisted in remembering him more as a papist than as an artist. Ultimately, in the course of his long career, Doyle specialized in marine painting, a genre long dominated by Stanfield, his coreligionist since 1846. Here Doyle could maintain his sense of moral integrity without the slightest risk of offending anyone.