"I do not know if my father owed his introduction to Dickens to his acting but have an impression that he did," recalled the son of Francis Topham; "Certainly it was the cause of their after intimacy." Certainly, too, it was the reason why the artist was invited to illustrate *A Child's History of England*, which appeared in three volumes from 1852 to 1854 with some revision after its irregular appearance in *Household Words* from 1851 to 1853. By the time he met Dickens in 1847, the thirty-nine-year-old Topham, trained as an engraver of printing before he learned to engrave pictures, was a frequent exhibitor of historical and literary subjects at the Royal Academy, a member of the elite societies of watercolor painters, where George Cattermole befriended him, and a popular book illustrator. He was also a fine amateur actor. Forster, reviewing anonymously for the *Examiner*, was impressed by the "considerable force and truth" with which Topham performed one of his roles for the Artists' General Benevolent Institution productions (fig. 178) and probably called him to Dickens's attention. The author, always looking for artists to join his amateur troupe, subsequently asked Topham to participate in his own benefit theatricals.

Topham accepted with pleasure, and did not complain even when he was cast initially only as an understudy. Amicably enough, he took over the role of Shallow in Scotland when Leech was preoccupied with his baby's illness; replaced G. H. Lewes as Andrew in the accompanying piece, *Love, Law, and Physic*; and played Nym when Dickens's brother was unable to perform the part in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at Birmingham. After managing competently in all three parts, despite short notice, Topham became a more prominent member of the company. He acted in the 1850 performances of *The Rent Day* and *The Poor Gentleman*, and earned Dickens's special praise for his characterization of Mr. Goodenough Easy in Bulwer's *Not So Bad as We Seem* the following year. Indeed, Topham proved invaluable throughout the company's northern tour in 1851 and 1852; while offstage, Dickens wrote his wife, the artist had "suddenly come out as a juggler, and swallows candles, and does wonderful things with the poker very well indeed, but with a bashfulness and embarrassment extraordinarily ludicrous."
Close contact with the author must have inspired Topham to select subjects from Dickens's novels, which he deeply admired, for some of his own works of art. In the autumn of 1848 the artist executed the first of his three watercolor scenes inspired by *Master Humphrey's Clock*, this one depicting little Nell and her grandfather making bouquets in a tent for the races; three years later he produced (and publicly exhibited) a second watercolor showing Barnaby Rudge and his mother surrounded by children as they pass through her native village; and in 1856 he finished a third watercolor, portraying little Nell resting in the churchyard and presented it, as he had the others, as a gift to the delighted author. 8

Perhaps as a result of Dickens's appreciation of the first two watercolors, Topham was invited in 1851 to provide the illustrations for the one work Swinburne, for example, was to regret that Dickens ever wrote. A *Child's History of England*, grumbled Shaw in agreement, "had not even the excuse of being childish." 9 The simplified chronicle, written or dictated to Georgina in spare moments during the composition of *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House*, was a systematic debunking of English heroes. Dickens viewed these historical figures as men, not idols, and subjected them to the same relentless moral analysis he exercised on the personages he described in *American Notes* and in *Pictures from Italy* as well as his fictional characters; few survived with either reverence or honor. The author believed his conclusions valid, if unconventional, and considered his juvenile audience unlikely to question them. Topham's elegant frontispieces, however, belied the crudely oversimplified scholarship to come. They must have delighted Victorian children and allayed the suspicions of the most skeptical parent.

Whereas Dickens intended to shock his readers, Topham hoped to provide them with two gentle visual surprises at the beginning of each of the three small volumes of *A Child's History*. The artist conceived the idea of printing each frontispiece in "differently tinted inks," a plan that he was "confident" would produce "some new and good effect." 10 Dickens presumed the publishers would not object despite the extra expense—each color had to be printed separately—and the black-and-white scenes surrounded by a warm grey-mauve border proved elegant indeed. 11 Thus, for example, young Marcus Stone, to whom the author gave a presentation copy of the *History*, opened each volume to find a frontispiece whose border incorporated the same four vignettes: Alfred in the Neather's Cot; Canute reproving his courtiers; the boy-king Edwy and his wife Elgiva; and Eleanor and Fair Rosamonde. 12 These identical borders, however, surrounded a different central subject in each volume: a young girl reading to her two siblings (cdxliii); young Alfred, the only figure accorded the status of hero in the *History*, reading aloud to his mother (cdli) (fig. 179); and a mother reading to her child (cdxiv). 13 Dickens dedicated the book to his own children in the hope that they would be inspired to "read with interest larger and better books on the same subject" (cdxii). Topham's frontispieces, however, as striking graphically as the author's viewpoint was historically, were better received by mature readers, and indeed, they are more sophisticated in conception than the text.

Whereas Dickens intended to shock his readers, Topham hoped to provide them with two gentle visual surprises at the beginning of each of the three small volumes of *A Child's History*. The artist conceived the idea of printing each frontispiece in "differently tinted inks," a plan that he was "confident" would produce "some new and good effect." 10 Dickens presumed the publishers would not object despite the extra expense—each color had to be printed separately—and the black-and-white scenes surrounded by a warm grey-mauve border proved elegant indeed. 11 Thus, for example, young Marcus Stone, to whom the author gave a presentation copy of the *History*, opened each volume to find a frontispiece whose border incorporated the same four vignettes: Alfred in the Neather's Cot; Canute reproving his courtiers; the boy-king Edwy and his wife Elgiva; and Eleanor and Fair Rosamonde. 12 These identical borders, however, surrounded a different central subject in each volume: a young girl reading to her two siblings (cdxliii); young Alfred, the only figure accorded the status of hero in the *History*, reading aloud to his mother (cdli) (fig. 179); and a mother reading to her child (cdxiv). 13 Dickens dedicated the book to his own children in the hope that they would be inspired to "read with interest larger and better books on the same subject" (cdxii). Topham's frontispieces, however, as striking graphically as the author's viewpoint was historically, were better received by mature readers, and indeed, they are more sophisticated in conception than the text.

Fig. 179. Francis W. Topham, Frontispiece for *A Child's History of England*, vol. 2. Wood engraving. 5½" x 4" (14 x 10.2 cm). From the Harry Elkins Widener Collection, by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Throughout this brief and busy period, Topham was becoming a friend as well as a theatrical and artistic collaborator of Dickens; further intimacy with the artist,
however, was precluded by the artist's subsequent travels to Spain, Ireland, and the Continent after 1852. Abroad he found scenery and subjects more congenial to his nature than those he had found in England. His subsequent contributions to the exhibitions of the Royal Academy were praised even by such a severe critic as Ruskin for their "delicate feeling and expression," qualities already evident in his three designs for *A Child's History of England*. 