

# David Copperfield

CHARLES DICKENS

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Collins English Library

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Series editors: K R Cripwell and Lewis Jones

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## Chapter One

### I Am Born

I was born on a Friday night, at twelve o'clock. As the clock rang out the midnight hour, I began to cry.

Some old ladies said I would be unlucky, because of the day and hour of my birth.

I was a fatherless child. My father's eyes closed upon the light of this world six months before mine opened. I remember the white stone behind the church where his body lay. It filled me with sadness. "Poor father!" I thought. "He is lying out there alone in the darkness, when our little house is warm and bright."

My father's aunt (my great-aunt) was the most commanding person in our family. Her name was Miss Trotwood. She lived in a small house by the sea, with one servant. My mother called her Miss Betsey, but she was afraid of this fearful person and never mentioned her.

Miss Betsey once loved my father dearly; but she was deeply angered by his marriage. She thought my mother was not suited to him. She never saw my mother, but she knew that she was not yet twenty. My father was twice my



mother's age, and his health was poor. After the marriage, my father and Miss Betsey never met again. He died a year later — six months before I came into the world.

On the afternoon of that important Friday — my birthday — my mother was sitting by the fire, crying. She was not at all happy about the arrival of a fatherless little stranger. She felt ill and feared that she might die.

Drying her eyes, she looked towards the window — and saw a strange lady coming up the garden. My mother knew that the tall, fearless lady must be Miss Betsey: it could be nobody else.

When she reached the house, she did not ring the door-bell like other people. She came and looked through the window. She pressed her face against the glass, and the end of her nose became flat and white.

My mother, in her fear, tried to hide behind her chair. Miss Betsey carried her eyes round the room till they reached her. Her arm commanded my mother to come and open the door. My mother went.

“Mrs David Copperfield, I *think*,” said Miss Betsey.

“Yes,” said my mother in a weak voice.

“Miss Trotwood,” said the visitor, “You have heard of her, I dare say?”

My mother answered that she was pleased to **know** the name — but she did not look pleased. **She bent** her head and asked my aunt to walk in.

**They went** into the sitting-room and sat by

the fire. Miss Betsey said nothing. My mother began to cry.

“Oh, tut, tut, tut!” said Miss Betsey. “Don’t do that! Come, come! Take off your cap, child. Let me see you.”

My poor mother did not dare to refuse. She took off her mob-cap with shaking hands — and her beautiful thick hair fell over her face.

“My dear!” cried Miss Betsey. “You are only a baby!”

My mother bent her head low like a child who has done something wrong.

“Well?” said Miss Betsey. “When is the birth?”

“I’m afraid,” my mother said in a shaky voice. “I shall die, I am sure!”

“No, no, no,” said Miss Betsey. “Have some tea. It will be good for you. What do you call your servant?”

“Peggotty.”

“*Peggotty!*” Miss Betsey repeated. “Do you mean to say that she went into a church and got herself the name Peggotty?”

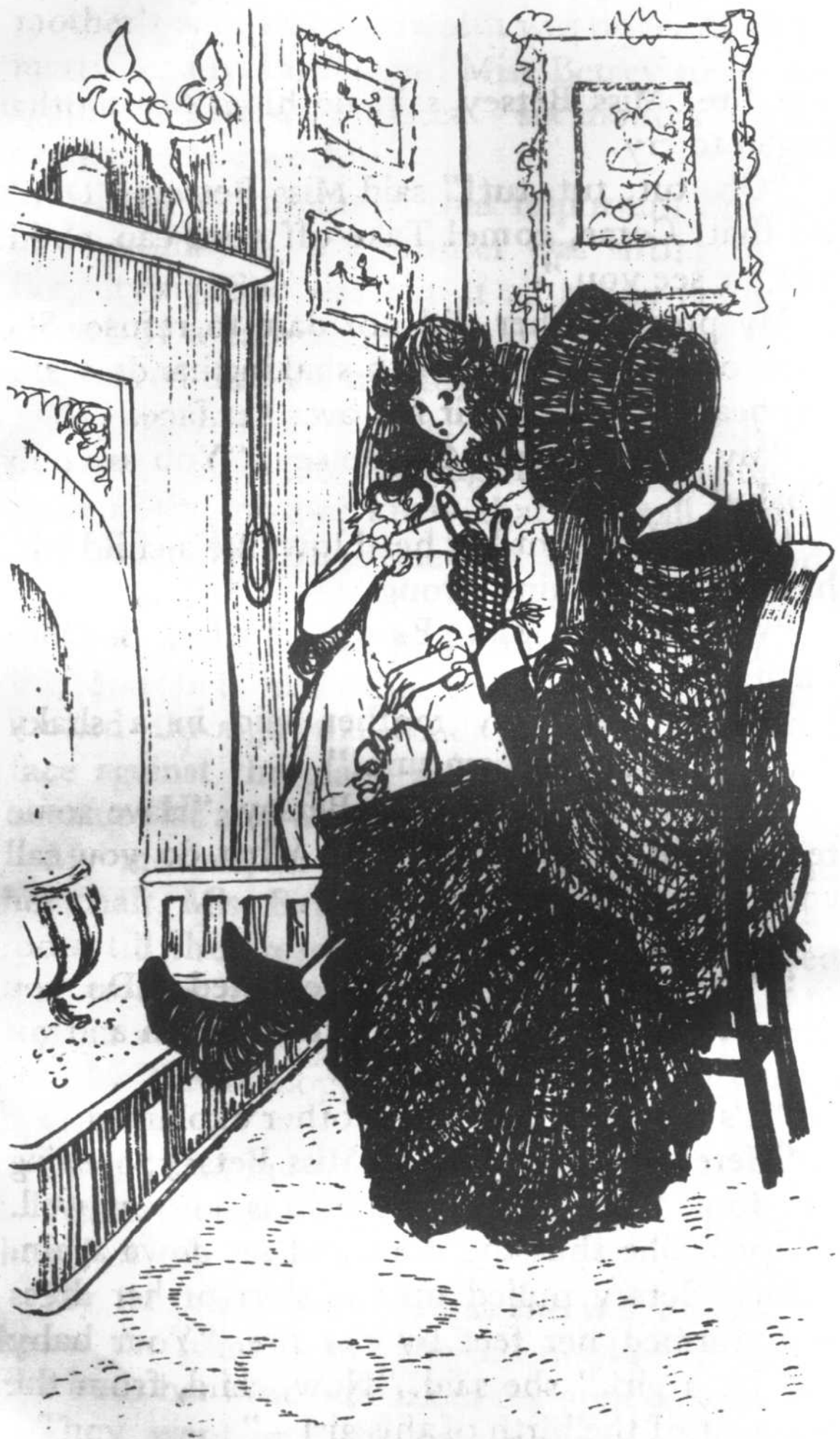
“It’s her surname,” my mother explained.

“Here! Peggotty!” cried Miss Betsey, opening the door. “Tea. Mrs Copperfield is not very well. Hurry!” She shut the door and sat down again.

Miss Betsey pulled up the skirt of her dress and warmed her feet by the fire. “Your baby will be a girl,” she said. “Now, child, from the moment of the birth of this girl —”

“Perhaps a boy,” my mother dared to say.

“I tell you, it will be a girl,” Miss Betsey



***"Don't argue. I shall be the girl's god-mother. She will be my care."***

returned. "Don't argue. I shall be the girl's god-mother, and I wish you to call her Betsey Trotwood Copperfield. She will be *my* care."

My mother was too afraid to answer.

"Was David good to you, child?" Miss Betsey asked after a short silence. "Were you happy together?"

"We were very happy," my mother answered. "Mr Copperfield was very kind to me."

"Ha! I asked the question because you were not equal to him," Miss Betsey returned. "You were a children's nurse?"

"Yes. I was nurse in a family that Mr Copperfield came to visit. He took a lot of notice of me. He asked me to marry him — and I accepted him," my mother replied.

"Ha! Poor baby!" said Miss Betsey. "Do you know anything — about keeping house?"

"Not much, really. But Mr Copperfield was teaching me — " My mother broke down.

"Don't cry! You'll become ill," said Miss Betsey. "That would not be good, either for you or for my god-daughter."

My mother quietened, but she was feeling much worse.

Peggotty, bringing in the tea, took one look at my mother and saw that she was ill. She led her upstairs to her bedroom. Then she quickly sent for the nurse and the doctor, Mr Chillip.

The doctor arrived. My birth was slow and difficult, but at last I appeared.

Mr Chillip, the gentlest of little men, went quietly into the sitting-room. He looked at my

aunt with his head on one side and said in his softest voice: "Well ma'am, I am happy to tell you it is all over."

"How is she?" asked my aunt.

"Well, ma'am," Mr Chillip replied. "She is as comfortable as a young mother can be."

"And *she*? How is *she*?" cried my aunt.

Mr Chillip turned his head a little more on one side and looked at her like a friendly bird.

"The baby," said my aunt. "How is she!"

"Ma'am," said the doctor. "The baby is not a girl. It's a boy."

My aunt said not a word. She took her large hat and hit Mr Chillip's head with it. Then she put it on bent, walked out, and never came back.

## Chapter Two

### A Gentleman Comes to the House

In my early life, the two people I loved best were my mother and Peggotty. I remember them clearly — my mother with her pretty hair and young shape, and Peggotty with no shape at all.

One evening, when I was about six years old, Peggotty and I were sitting by the fire, alone. My mother was spending the evening with a neighbour. I read a story about animals to Peg-

gotty. I grew tired of reading and became very sleepy. But I refused to go to bed. I held my eyes open with my fingers and watched Peggotty sewing.

Peggotty looked up from her sewing and gave me a little smile. "Wake up, Master Davy," she said. "Read me another story."

I was just beginning a new story, when the bell rang. We went to the door. There was my mother, looking very pretty. With her was a gentleman with black hair. He was Mr Murdstone.

As my mother bent to kiss me, the gentleman put his hand on my head. I did not like him. I pushed his hand away.

"Oh, Davy!" cried my mother.

"Dear boy!" said the gentleman, laughing. "Come, let us be friends. Shake hands!"

I refused to give him my hand. He looked at me with his hard black eyes. "You're a brave fellow!" he said — and went away.

Peggotty shut the door. We went into the sitting-room. My mother sat down and began to sing to herself.

Peggotty stood and looked at her. "I hope you had a happy evening, ma'am," she said.

"Yes, Peggotty — a *very* happy evening," my mother answered in an excited voice.

"A stranger gives you a pleasing change, I suppose?" said Peggotty.

"A very pleasing change!" returned my mother. She continued singing.

I fell asleep. In my sleep, I heard angry voices,

but not their words. When I awoke, Peggotty and my mother were crying.

"You must not do it! No, no, no!" cried Peggotty.

"Oh, Peggotty, why are you so unkind to me?" said my mother. "You know I have no friends."

I did not know what they were arguing about. But I went to bed feeling very unhappy.

I saw the gentleman with the black hair many times in the next few weeks. I liked him no better.

My mother and Peggotty were soon good friends again. But they did not seem so warm to each other. I did not know the reason. "Perhaps," I thought, "Peggotty minds my mother wearing her pretty dresses and visiting her neighbour so often."

One evening (when my mother was out) Peggotty asked me: "Would you like to come with me to Yarmouth and stay with my brother for two weeks?"

"Is your brother a friendly man?" I asked.

"Oh, yes — very friendly!" cried Peggotty. "Then there's the sea — and the boats — and the fishermen. And my brother's young son, Ham, will play with you."

Her list of wonderful ideas excited me. "I would enjoy it very much," I answered. "But what will my mother say?"

"Oh, she'll let us go," said Peggotty.

"What will she do while we are away?" I asked. "She can't live here alone."

“She’s going to stay with a friend,” Peggotty told me.

In that case, I was ready to go. I waited excitedly for my mother to come home. I wondered if she would agree to this great idea.

My mother did not seem at all surprised. She agreed gladly.

## Chapter Three

### I Have a Holiday

We travelled to Yarmouth in a carrier’s cart. The horse was the slowest horse in the world; he walked along sleepily with his head down. The carrier was as sleepy as his horse.

Peggotty brought a large box of food. We ate a lot and slept a lot. Peggotty slept with her head on the box — and I never heard anyone breathe so loudly!

We travelled a long way round and stopped at many places. I was quite tired — and very glad — when we reached Yarmouth.

As we entered the town, I smelt the fish. I saw fishermen walking about and fish-carts driving along the streets.

“Here’s Ham!” cried Peggotty.

A young man came to meet us. He was very



friendly to me. A strong young fellow, he took me on his back to carry me home. We went down busy little streets, where men were building boats. We came out on wild land near the sea.

“That’s our house, Master Davy!” Ham said.

I looked all ways, but I could see no house. There was only a large boat on dry land.

“Is *that* it?” said I.

“That’s it, Master Davy.”

The idea of living in a boat excited me. There was a small door in the side of the boat; and it had a roof with little windows. It was very clean inside. There was a table, an old clock, and some wooden boxes that were used for seats.

Peggotty opened a little door. “This is your bedroom, Master Davy,” she told me.

I never saw such a nice little bedroom. It had a small window; a looking-glass on the wall; and a little bed — just big enough for me.

A beautiful little girl came and welcomed us. Her name was Emily. I offered to kiss her, but she ran away.

We had dinner — a tasty meal of fish and potatoes, cooked in butter.

During the meal a hairy man with a very kind face came home. He was Peggotty’s brother, Dan. He gave her a loving kiss and then turned to me.

“I’m pleased to see you, sir,” he said. “We live rough, sir, but we’re friendly.”

Mr Peggotty went out and washed himself. He returned, looking much cleaner. “He’s like his