

CLASSICS SERIES CL65

CHARLES DICKENS

# DAVID COPPERFIELD

*Introduction by Mary E. Threapleton*



Complete  
and Unabridged

# David Copperfield



CHARLES DICKENS

## Introduction

Of all my books I like this one best; like many fond parents I have my favourite child, and his name is David Copperfield." Thousands of readers would agree with this verdict of Dickens himself. Perhaps it was closest to his heart because it was the closest to his own life. While he was writing *David Copperfield*, he drew on a fragment of autobiography he had begun some time before, but had abandoned because he found it painful to re-live his unhappy childhood. Like Dickens, David finds solace in reading, and the books he reads are the same ones that comforted young Charles, until he had to pawn them. Like Dickens, David is sent as a child to work in a factory, and to live alone in London, more or less abandoned by his family. Dickens' father, exaggerated into rich comedy, appears as Mr. Micawber. David's love for Dora is reminiscent of his creator's short-lived but sincere passion for Maria Beadnell, whose father broke up the romance. Agnes may be an idealized portrait of Dickens' young sister-in-law. Like Dickens, David teaches himself shorthand, becomes a parliamentary reporter, and finally is a successful novelist, although Somerset Maugham, who does not care much for David, comments, "If he wrote novels, I suspect they were more like the novels of Mrs. Henry Wood than the novels of Charles Dickens."<sup>1</sup>

The autobiographical or first-person narrative that Dickens uses in *David Copperfield* is his first venture with the technique,

<sup>1</sup> Somerset Maugham: *The World's Ten Greatest Novels*.

and on the whole it serves him well. The major weakness is in the character of the hero, who is so much less vivid than the people he observes that he is perhaps the least interesting character in the book. But there is one great compensating advantage. Because we are limited to what David sees and hears, a valuable discipline and unity are imposed on the plot, which the earlier *Nicholas Nickleby* lacked. This unity is all the more important since the book appeared in serial form, and Dickens was seldom more than one number ahead of publication. He recounts that he once heard a woman in a shop asking for the next number of *David Copperfield* before a word of it was written, whereupon he felt "a vivid sense of mingled enjoyment and dismay." Some of the story grew as it was being written down. Dickens seems to have been torn between letting Dora die, to make room for Agnes, and letting her live on, with Agnes as adviser and comforter. In a letter written in May, 1850, while he was working on the fourteenth number, he commented, "Still undecided about Dora, but *must* decide today." But it would be a mistake to assume that Dickens had *no* clear picture of the whole book in mind from the beginning. Clearly developing themes are observable in the studies of various marriages, and in the triumph of goodness, generosity, and perseverance over calculated and selfish evil. The structure, too, shows considerable evidence of planning.

The unity of structure imposed by the first-person narrative marks an advance in Dickens' maturing technique. The stages of the novel are the stages of David's career. Many varied characters are introduced, but they are introduced as they affect David directly. Moreover, Dickens takes care to have these characters recur and interact in the plot, forming links between the stages of David's life. Mr. Micawber is perhaps the best example of this unifying recurrence. He is first introduced as David's landlord in London. He turns up in Canterbury, where David is at Dr. Strong's school, and there meets Uriah Heep. Back in London, we find him landlord to Tommy Traddles, and later in Canterbury, he is clerk to Uriah Heep. It is he who exposes Uriah, and is therefore instrumental in restoring Miss Betsey's fortune. Finally he emigrates to Australia with Mr. Peggotty and Em'ly. Thus he moves in and out of almost all the groups of characters of David's acquaintance. Sometimes recurrence seems a little forced and overdone, as when we find Miss Murdstone acting as Dora's chaperone, and come upon Mr. Murdstone taking out his second marriage license, but we are interested to see them again, and to have a loose thread tied in.

Another powerful agent in the creation of unity is the use of foreshadowing. When little Em'ly tells David that she longs to be a "lady," and that she fears the power of the sea, we sense events far ahead in the story. Sometimes the narrator, relating

events with full knowledge of their outcome, foreshadows them even more clearly for us. As early as Chapter 3, David tells us: "I have asked myself the question, would it have been better for little Em'ly to have had the waters close over her head that morning in my sight, and I have answered Yes, it would have been." And later, at the end of Chapter 29, he bursts forth in grim phrophecy: "Never more, oh God forgive you, Steerforth! to touch that passive hand in love and friendship . . ." Besides foreshadowings, there are echoes. Dora calls herself David's "child wife," and we remember his mother's words to Miss Betsey, that she was "but a childish widow, and would be but a childish mother if she lived." The most striking echo is in the three descriptions of Steerforth asleep—once at Dr. Creakle's, once before his flight with Em'ly, and finally as he lies on the beach in the great storm, "with his head upon his arm, as I had often seen him lie at school."

*David Copperfield* is a rich novel, rich in its emotions and most of all in its people. Although we become impatient at times with David himself, and although the idealized Agnes fails to come to life, Dickens has presented us with a gallery of unforgettable minor characters. The writhing Uriah Heep, good-natured Tommy Traddles, Miss Betsey in pursuit of the donkeys, the tearful Mrs. Gummidge in her corner, Mr. Murdstone and his singularly metallic sister—these we see and hear so clearly that they seem part of our own lives. Mr. Micawber holds high place among the greatest comic figures in English literature. Like Mrs. Micawber, we will never desert him. Even Dora, who irritates the reader at first, develops finally into a pathetic and likable little figure.

There is much that is weak in the ending of *David Copperfield*, since so many of the really interesting people are shipped off to an idealized Australia in a sentimental sunset, and we are asked to believe that Mr. Micawber becomes successful, and even that Mrs. Gummidge becomes cheerful. But we forget the weaknesses in retrospect, and re-live again and again the vivid scenes of the earlier pages of this wonderfully generous novel.

Charles Dickens, famous for his portrayals of unhappy childhood, had a far from happy one himself. He was the second of the six children of John Dickens, an improvident clerk in the Naval Pay Office, who managed to reduce the family to such desperate financial straits that at one period young Charles was sent to pawn everything of value that they owned, including his beloved books. When his father was arrested for debt, and his mother and the younger children joined Mr. Dickens in the Marshalsea prison, Charles was earning six shillings a week wrapping and labeling bottles in a blacking factory, and hating it. He was twelve years old.

He and his family were eventually released from their respective imprisonments, and Charles was sent to school. When he was fifteen, he went out to work again, this time as a clerk in a solicitor's office. In his spare time, he trained himself in the elaborate shorthand of the day for work as a parliamentary reporter, and at twenty was reporting House of Commons debates. At the same time, he began contributing humorous articles about London life to magazines. These "Sketches by Boz" brought him to the attention of the editors of *Monthly Magazine*, who contracted for a series for their periodical—and so was born the immortal Mr. Pickwick. The sales of the magazine soared, and Dickens was accepted into literary society as an original genius. He became editor of *Bentley's Miscellany*, in which *Oliver Twist* was serialized in 1837. There followed in rapid succession *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Barnaby Rudge*, and, after a visit to America, *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

Then came *A Christmas Carol*, *Dombey & Son*, *David Copperfield*, and *Bleak House*. By this time, Dickens was operating his own periodical, *Household Words*. His next two novels, *Hard Times* and *Little Dorrit*, were dark and disillusioned, perhaps darkened by trouble in Dickens' own life, for it was during this period that he became separated from his wife, after more than twenty years of marriage, and had a long love affair with a young actress.

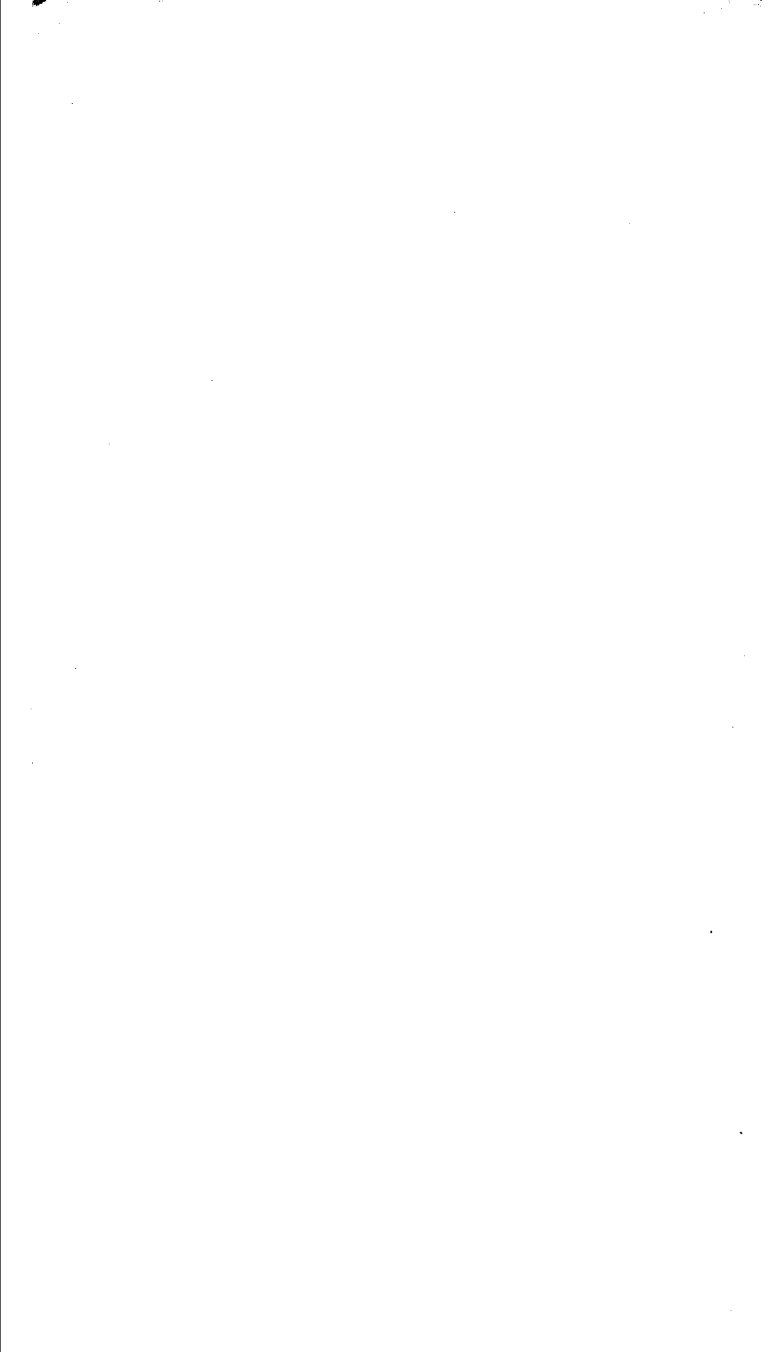
In 1859, *A Tale of Two Cities* was serialized in Dickens' new periodical, *All the Year Round*, which soon outsold *Household Words*. Restored to favor with the reading public, he settled down at his estate in Kent, and cut himself off from London society. *Great Expectations*, which many consider his masterpiece, came out in 1860-61, and the less-popular *Our Mutual Friend* in 1864-65.

For some time, Dickens had been giving frequent public readings of his works, which he found enormously enjoyable, but, his friends feared, almost equally exhausting. Despite failing health, he insisted on revisiting the United States on a reading tour. On his return, he began *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, but, with the tale half-finished, he died on the 9th of June, 1870, at the age of fifty-eight. He was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Dickens' life was a fantastically busy one. Besides writing fifteen major novels and other minor works so rapidly that he sometimes began one before its predecessor was finished, he founded and edited three magazines, was active in the theatre, traveled extensively in Europe, gave readings and lectures, and worked indefatigably for various social reforms. But it is for his novels that he is remembered. He seems to have profited from his friend Wilkie Collins' formula for writing successful fiction: "Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em wait." How successful Dickens was at this is perhaps best evidenced by the crowds at

the dock in New York, during the serializing of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, shouting to incoming ships, "Is little Nell dead?" Despite the prediction of the *Quarterly Review* early in his career that "he has risen like a rocket and he will come down like a stick," Dickens remained throughout his lifetime the most popular novelist in England—a title many would accord him still, after over one hundred years!

MARY M. THREAPLETON



# DAVID COPPERFIELD

CHARLES DICKENS



WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
MARY M. THREAPLETON



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## Contents

**CHAPTER**

1	I Am Born . . . . .	13
2	I Observe . . . . .	22
3	I Have a Change . . . . .	35
4	I Fall into Disgrace . . . . .	48
5	I Am Sent Away from Home . . . . .	63
6	I Enlarge My Circle of Acquaintance . . . . .	78
7	My "First Half" at Salem House . . . . .	85
8	My Holidays. Especially One Happy Afternoon . . . . .	100
9	I Have a Memorable Birthday . . . . .	112
10	I Become Neglected, and Am Provided For . . . . .	122
11	I Begin Life on My Own Account, and Don't Like It . . . . .	139
12	Liking Life on My Own Account No Better, I Form a Great Resolution . . . . .	152
13	The Sequel of My Resolution . . . . .	160
14	My Aunt Makes Up Her Mind About Me . . . . .	177
15	I Make Another Beginning . . . . .	190
16	I Am a New Boy in More Senses Than One . . . . .	198
17	Somebody Turns Up . . . . .	216
18	A Retrospect . . . . .	230
19	I Look About Me, and Make a Discovery . . . . .	237
20	Steerforth's Home . . . . .	250
21	Little Em'ly . . . . .	258
22	Some Old Scenes, and Some New People . . . . .	274
23	I Corroborate Mr. Dick, and Choose a Profession . . . . .	292
24	My First Dissipation . . . . .	304
25	Good and Bad Angels . . . . .	311
26	I Fall into Captivity . . . . .	327
27	Tommy Traddles . . . . .	340
28	Mr. Micawber's Gauntlet . . . . .	348
29	I Visit Steerforth at His Home Again . . . . .	365
30	A Loss . . . . .	371

## CHAPTER

31	A Greater Loss . . . . .	377
32	The Beginning of a Long Journey . . . . .	385
33	Blissful . . . . .	400
34	My Aunt Astonishes Me . . . . .	414
35	Depression . . . . .	421
36	Enthusiasm . . . . .	438
37	A Little Cold Water . . . . .	452
38	A Dissolution of Partnership . . . . .	459
39	Wickfield and Heep . . . . .	473
40	The Wanderer . . . . .	489
41	Dora's Aunts . . . . .	496
42	Mischief . . . . .	509
43	Another Retrospect . . . . .	526
44	Our Housekeeping . . . . .	533
45	Mr. Dick Fulfils My Aunt's Prediction . . . . .	545
46	Intelligence . . . . .	558
47	Martha . . . . .	570
48	Domestic . . . . .	579
49	I Am Involved in Mystery . . . . .	588
50	Mr. Peggotty's Dream Comes True . . . . .	598
51	The Beginning of a Longer Journey . . . . .	607
52	I Assist at an Explosion . . . . .	621
53	Another Retrospect . . . . .	641
54	Mr. Micawber's Transactions . . . . .	645
55	Tempest . . . . .	658
56	The New Wound, and the Old . . . . .	668
57	The Emigrants . . . . .	673
58	Absence . . . . .	682
59	Return . . . . .	687
60	Agnes . . . . .	700
61	I Am Shown Two Interesting Penitents . . . . .	708
62	A Light Shines on My Way . . . . .	718
63	A Visitor . . . . .	725
64	A Last Retrospect . . . . .	731

## Author's Preface

I remarked in the original Preface to this Book, that I did not find it easy to get sufficiently far away from it, in the first sensations of having finished it, to refer to it with the composure which this formal heading would seem to require. My interest in it was so recent and strong, and my mind was so divided between pleasure and regret—pleasure in the achievement of a long design, regret in the separation from many companions—that I was in danger of wearying the reader with personal confidences, and private emotions.

Besides which, all that I could have said of the Story, to any purpose, I had endeavoured to say in it.

It would concern the reader little, perhaps, to know how sorrowfully the pen is laid down at the close of a two-years' imaginative task; or how an Author feels as if he were dismissing some portion of himself into the shadowy world, when a crowd of the creatures of his brain are going from him for ever. Yet, I had nothing else to tell; unless, indeed, I were to confess (which might be of less moment still) that no one can ever believe this Narrative, in the reading, more than I believed it in the writing.

So true are these avowals at the present day, that I can now only take the reader into one confidence more. Of all my books, I like this the best. It will be easily believed that I am a fond parent to every child of my fancy, and that no one can ever love that family as dearly as I love them. But, like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is **DAVID COPPERFIELD.**

[1869]



## 1. I Am Born

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.

In consideration of the day and hour of my birth, it was declared by the nurse, and by some sage women in the neighbourhood who had taken a lively interest in me several months before there was any possibility of our becoming personally acquainted, first, that I was destined to be unlucky in life; and secondly, that I was privileged to see ghosts and spirits: both these gifts inevitably attaching, as they believed, to all unlucky infants of either gender born towards the small hours on a Friday night.

I need say nothing here on the first head, because nothing can show better than my history whether that prediction was verified or falsified by the result. On the second branch of the question, I will only remark, that unless I ran through that part of my inheritance while I was still a baby, I have not come into it yet. But I do not at all complain of having been kept out of this property; and if anybody else should be in the present enjoyment of it, he is heartily welcome to keep it.

I was born with a caul, which was advertised for sale in the newspapers at the low price of fifteen guineas. Whether seagoing people were short of money about that time, or were short of faith and preferred cork jackets, I don't know; all I know is, that there was but one solitary bidding, and that was from an attorney connected with the bill-broking business, who offered two pounds in cash, and the balance in sherry, but declined to be guaranteed from drowning on any higher bargain. Consequently the advertisement was withdrawn at a dead loss—for as to sherry, my poor dear mother's own sherry was in the market then—and ten years afterwards the caul was put up in a raffle down in our part of the country, to fifty members at half a crown a head, the winner to spend five shillings. I was present myself, and I remember to have felt quite uncomfortable and confused at a part of myself being disposed of in that way. The caul was won, I recollect, by an old lady with a hand basket,

who, very reluctantly, produced from it the stipulated five shillings, all in halfpence, and twopence halfpenny short—as it took an immense time and a great waste of arithmetic to endeavour, without any effect, to prove to her. It is a fact which will be long remembered as remarkable down there, that she was never drowned, but died triumphantly in bed at ninety-two. I have understood that it was, to the last, her proudest boast that she never had been on the water in her life, except upon a bridge; and that over her tea (to which she was extremely partial) she, to the last, expressed her indignation at the impiety of mariners and others who had the presumption to go “meandering” about the world. It was in vain to represent to her that some conveniences, tea perhaps included, resulted from this objectionable practice. She always returned, with greater emphasis and with an instinctive knowledge of the strength of her objection, “Let us have no meandering.”

Not to meander myself, at present, I will go back to my birth.

I was born at Blunderstone, in Suffolk, or “thereby,” as they say in Scotland. I was a posthumous child. My father’s eyes had closed upon the light of this world six months when mine opened on it. There is something strange to me, even now, in the reflection that he never saw me; and something stranger yet in the shadowy remembrance that I have of my first childish associations with his white gravestone in the churchyard, and of the indefinable compassion I used to feel for it lying out alone there in the dark night, when our little parlour was warm and bright with fire and candle, and the doors of our house were—almost cruelly, it seemed to me sometimes—bolted and locked against it.

An aunt of my father’s, and consequently a great-aunt of mine, of whom I shall have more to relate by-and-by, was the principal magnate of our family. Miss Trotwood, or Miss Betsey, as my poor mother always called her when she sufficiently overcame her dread of this formidable personage to mention her at all (which was seldom), had been married to a husband younger than herself, who was very handsome, except in the sense of the homely adage, “handsome is, that handsome does”; for he was strongly suspected of having beaten Miss Betsey, and even of having once, on a disputed question of supplies, made some hasty but determined arrangements to throw her out of a two-pair-of-stairs window. These evidences of an incompatibility of temper induced Miss Betsey to pay him off, and effect a separation by mutual consent. He went to India with his capital, and there, according to a wild legend in our family, he was once seen riding on an elephant, in company with a Baboon; but I think it must have been a Baboo—or a Begum. Anyhow, from India tidings of his death reached home, within

ten years. How they affected my aunt, nobody knew; for immediately upon the separation she took her maiden name again, bought a cottage in a hamlet on the seacoast a long way off, established herself there as a single woman with one servant, and was understood to live secluded, ever afterwards, in an inflexible retirement.

My father had once been a favorite of hers, I believe; but she was mortally affronted by his marriage, on the ground that my mother was "a wax doll." She had never seen my mother, but she knew her to be not yet twenty. My father and Miss Betsey never met again. He was double my mother's age when he married, and of but a delicate constitution. He died a year afterwards, and, as I have said, six months before I came into the world.

This was the state of matters on the afternoon of, what I may be excused for calling, that eventful and important Friday. I can make no claim, therefore, to have known, at that time, how matters stood; or to have any remembrance, founded on the evidence of my own senses, of what follows.

My mother was sitting by the fire, but poorly in health, and very low in spirits, looking at it through her tears, and desponding heavily about herself and the fatherless little stranger, who was already welcomed by some grosses of prophetic pins, in a drawer upstairs, to a world not at all excited on the subject of his arrival—my mother, I say, was sitting by the fire that bright, windy March afternoon, very timid and sad, and very doubtful of ever coming alive out of the trial that was before her, when, lifting her eyes as she dried them to the window opposite, she saw a strange lady coming up the garden.

My mother had a sure foreboding at the second glance that it was Miss Betsey. The setting sun was glowing on the strange lady, over the garden fence; and she came walking up to the door with a fell rigidity of figure and composure of countenance that could have belonged to nobody else.

When she reached the house, she gave another proof of her identity. My father had often hinted that she seldom conducted herself like any ordinary Christian; and now, instead of ringing the bell, she came and looked in at that identical window, pressing the end of her nose against the glass to that extent that my poor dear mother used to say it became perfectly flat and white in a moment.

She gave my mother such a turn that I have always been convinced I am indebted to Miss Betsey for having been born on a Friday.

My mother had left her chair in her agitation, and gone behind it in the corner. Miss Betsey, looking round the room, slowly and inquiringly, began on the other side, and carried her eyes on, like a Saracen's Head in a Dutch clock, until they



reached my mother. Then she made a frown and a gesture to my mother, like one who was accustomed to be obeyed, to come and open the door. My mother went.

"Mrs. David Copperfield, I *think*," said Miss Betsey; the emphasis referring, perhaps, to my mother's mourning weeds, and her condition.

"Yes," said my mother faintly.

"Miss Trotwood," said the visitor. "You have heard of her, I dare say?"

My mother answered she had had that pleasure. And she had a disagreeable consciousness of not appearing to imply that it had been an overpowering pleasure.

"Now you see her," said Miss Betsey. My mother bent her head, and begged her to walk in.

They went into the parlour my mother had come from, the fire in the best room on the other side of the passage not being lighted—not having been lighted, indeed, since my father's funeral; and when they were both seated, and Miss Betsey said nothing, my mother, after vainly trying to restrain herself, began to cry.

"Oh, tut, tut, tut!" said Miss Betsey, in a hurry. "Don't do that! Come, come."

My mother couldn't help it notwithstanding, so she cried until she had had her cry out.

"Take off your cap, child," said Miss Betsey, "and let me see you."

My mother was too much afraid of her to refuse compliance with this odd request, if she had any disposition to do so. Therefore she did as she was told, and did it with such nervous hands that her hair (which was luxuriant and beautiful) fell all about her face.

"Why, bless my heart!" exclaimed Miss Betsey, "you are a very Baby!"

My mother was, no doubt, unusually youthful in appearance even for her years. She hung her head, as if it were her fault, poor thing, and said, sobbing, that indeed she was afraid she was but a childish widow, and would be but a childish mother if she lived. In a short pause which ensued she had a fancy that she felt Miss Betsey touch her hair, and that with no ungentle hand; but, looking at her, in her timid hope, she found that lady sitting with the skirt of her dress tucked up, her hands folded on one knee, and her feet upon the fender, frowning at the fire.

"In the name of Heaven," said Miss Betsey suddenly, "why Rookery?"

"Do you mean the house, ma'am?" asked my mother.

"Why Rookery?" said Miss Betsey. "Cookery would have been more to the purpose, if you had had any practical ideas of life, either of you."

"The name was Mr. Copperfield's choice," returned my