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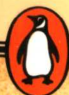
LITTLE DORRIT

CHARLES DICKENS



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LITTLE DORRIT

BY CHARLES DICKENS

CHARLES DICKENS (1812–70). Best known for his host of distinctively cruel, comic and repugnant characters, Charles Dickens remains the most widely read of the Victorian novelists.

Born in Portsmouth in 1812, Charles Dickens was the second child of a clerk in the Navy Pay-Office. His childhood, like many of those portrayed in his novels, was not a particularly happy one, owing in the main to his father's inability to stay out of debt. This led, in 1824, to his father's imprisonment in Marshalsea prison and Dickens being sent to work in a blacking warehouse. Memories of this time haunted him for the rest of his life. In defiance of his parents' failure to educate him, Dickens worked hard, becoming first a clerk in a solicitor's office, then in 1834 a reporter of Parliamentary debates for the *Morning Chronicle*. It is from here that Dickens's talent for portraits and caricatures stemmed, and his *Sketches by Boz*, which appeared in the *Monthly Magazine* and the *Evening Chronicle*, became immensely popular. Following on from this was *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–7), which made Dickens's characters the centre of a popular cult. With the serialization of *Oliver Twist* (1837–9) Dickens began his indictment of the cruelty that children suffer at the hands of society. While working on *Oliver Twist*, Dickens learned of the death of his beloved sister-in-law, Mary. The grief he displayed at this news seems to underline the less than loving relationship he had with his wife Catherine, from whom he was finally separated in 1858.

Dickens followed the success of *Oliver Twist* with *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41) and *Barnaby Rudge* (1841). He travelled to America later that year and while there his advocacy of an international copyright law and support for the abolition of slavery aroused the hostility of the American press. On his return to England, Dickens wrote *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–4) and the hugely popular *Christmas Books*. After the publication of *Dombey and Son* in 1846–8, Dickens's novels

became increasingly sombre, with his social criticism more radical and his comedy more savage. Between 1849 and his death in 1870 Dickens published *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*. His last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, was never completed and was later published posthumously. Public grief at Dickens's death was considerable and he was buried in Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey.

Little Dorrit (1857) was written not only at a time when Dickens was approaching the height of his creative powers, but also at a period of great turmoil in his personal and professional life. Often referred to as one of his 'dark' novels, *Little Dorrit* was heavily criticized on publication for its sombre tone and complex plot. George Bernard Shaw, however, has since called it Dickens's 'masterpiece among masterpieces'.

Readers may also find the following books of interest: Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (1990); John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens's Imagination* (1991); Philip Collins, *Dickens: The Critical Heritage* (1971); Fred Kaplan, *Dickens: A Biography* (1989); F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (1972); Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women* (1983); Stephen Wall, *Dickens: A Critical Anthology* (1971); and Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens* (1970).

PREFACE

I WAS occupied with this story, during many working hours of two years. I must have been very ill employed, if I could not leave its merits and demerits as a whole, to express themselves on its being read as a whole.

If I might offer any apology for so exaggerated a fiction as the Barnacles and the Circumlocution Office, I would seek it in the common experience of an Englishman, without presuming to mention the unimportant fact of my having done that violence to good manners, in the days of a Russian war, and of a Court of Inquiry at Chelsea. If I might make so bold as to defend that extravagant conception, Mr. Merdle, I would hint that it originated after the Railroad-share epoch, in the times of a certain Irish bank, and of one or two other equally laudable enterprises. If I were to plead anything in mitigation of the preposterous fancy that a bad design will sometimes claim to be a good and an expressly religious design, it would be the curious coincidence that such fancy was brought to its climax in these pages, in the days of the public examination of late Directors of a Royal British Bank. But, I submit myself to suffer judgment to go by default on all these counts, if need be, and to accept the assurance (on good authority) that nothing like them was ever known in this land.

Some of my readers may have an interest in being informed whether or no any portions of the Marshalsea Prison are yet standing. I myself did not know, until I was approaching the end of this story, when I went to look. I found the outer front courtyard, often mentioned here, metamorphosed into a butter shop; and I then almost gave up every brick of the jail for lost. Wandering, however, down a certain adjacent 'Angel Court, leading to Bermondsey,' I came to 'Marshalsea Place:' the houses in which I recognised, not only as the great block of the former prison, but as preserving the rooms that arose in my mind's-eye when I became Little Dorrit's biographer. The smallest boy I ever conversed with, carrying the largest baby I ever saw, offered a supernaturally intelligent explanation of the locality in its old uses, and was very nearly correct. How this young Newton (for such I judge him to be) came by his information, I don't know; he was a quarter of a century too young to know anything about it of himself. I pointed to the window of the

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room where Little Dorrit was born, and where her father lived so long, and asked him what was the name of the lodger who tenanted that apartment at present? He said, 'Tom Pythick.' I asked him who was Tom Pythick? and he said, 'Joe Pythick's uncle.'

A little further on, I found the older and smaller wall, which used to enclose the pent-up inner prison where nobody was put, except for ceremony. Whosoever goes into Marshalsea Place, turning out of Angel Court, leading to Bermondsey, will find his feet on the very paving-stones of the extinct Marshalsea jail; will see its narrow yard to the right and to the left, very little altered if at all, except that the walls were lowered when the place got free; will look upon the rooms in which the debtors lived; will stand among the crowding ghosts of many miserable years.

CHARACTERS

CLARENCE BARNACLE (*'Barnacle Junior'*), *son of Mr. Tite Barnacle; a young . gentleman employed in the Circumlocution Office.*

LORD DECIMUS TITE BARNACLE, *a peer, and highly placed in the Circumlocution Office.*

FERDINAND BARNACLE, *private secretary to the preceding; a good-looking, well-dressed, agreeable young fellow.*

MR. TITE BARNACLE, *a high official in the Circumlocution Office.*

BOB, *turnkey of the Marshalsea Prison; godfather to Little Dorrit.*

CHRISTOPHER CASBY, *landlord of Bleeding Heart Yard; a selfish, crafty imposter, who grinds his tenants by proxy.*

JOHN BAPTIST CAVALLETTO, *a fellow prisoner with Rigaud at Marseilles.*

JOHN CHIVERY, *a non-resident turnkey of Marshalsea Prison.*

YOUNG JOHN CHIVERY, *his sentimental son; a lover of Little Dorrit.*

ARTHUR CLENNAM, *the adopted son of Mrs. Clennam.*

EDWARD DORRIT (*'Tip'*), *son of Mr. William Dorrit; a spendthrift and an idler.*

MR. FREDERICK DORRIT, *brother to Mr. William Dorrit; a man of retired and simple habits, supporting himself as a clarionet player.*

MR. WILLIAM DORRIT, *a prisoner for debt in the Marshalsea; a shy, irresolute man, but a strong assertor of the 'family dignity'.*

DANIEL DOYCE, *an engineer and inventor.*

JEREMIAH FLINTWINCH, *servant and afterwards partner of Mrs. Clennam.*

HENRY GOWAN, *an artist.*

MR. MEAGLES, *a retired banker, of benevolent disposition.*

MR. MERDLE, *a popular financier on an extensive scale.*

JOHN EDWARD NANDY, *an old man with a weak voice.*

MR. PANCKS, *the agent who collects Mr. Casby's rents.*

MR. PLORNISH, *a plasterer; one of Mr. Casby's tenants.*

RIGAUD, alias BLANDOIS, alias LAGNIER, *a smooth, polished scoundrel.*

MR. RUGG, *a general agent, accountant, and collector of debts.*

MR. EDMUND SPARKLER, *a chuckle-headed young man; the son of Mrs. Merdle by her first husband.*

TINKLER, *Mr. William Dorrit's valet.*

MRS. BANGHAM, *a charwoman; nurse of Mrs. Dorrit in the Marshalsea.*

HARRIET BEADLE (*'Tattycoram'*), *a handsome, but headstrong and passionate girl; maid to Miss Minnie Meagles.*

MRS. CHIVERY, *wife of John Chivery, and keeper of a small tobacco-shop.*

MRS. CLENNAM, *an invalid; a hard, stern, austere woman.*

AMY DORRIT (*'Little Dorrit'*), *daughter of Mr. William Dorrit; a shy, retiring, affectionate little woman.*

FANNY DORRIT, *elder sister of the preceding, of proud and ambitious temper.*

MR. F.'s AUNT, *a severe, grim, taciturn old lady.*

MRS. FLORA FINCHING, *daughter of Christopher Casby; a well-to-do widow, sentimental and affected, but good-hearted.*

MRS. AFFERY FLINTWINCH, *wife of Jeremiah Flintwinch.*

MRS. GENERAL, *a widow lady, of imposing and dignified appearance.*

MRS. GOWAN, *a courtly old lady, of lofty manners.*

MAGGY, *granddaughter of Mrs. Bangham, and a protégé of Little Dorrit's.*

MRS. MEAGLES, *a comely and pleasant woman.*

MISS MINNIE MEAGLES (*'Pet'*), *her daughter; a fair, fresh, pretty girl.*

MRS. MERDLE, *a fashionable lady, of hard and unfeeling disposition.*

MRS. PLORNISH, *a young and somewhat slatternly woman.*

MISS ANASTATIA RUGG, *daughter of Mr. Rugg.*

MRS. TICKIT, *cook and housekeeper to Mr. Meagles.*

MISS WADE, *a sensitive woman, of sullen and ungovernable temper.*

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BOOK THE FIRST

POVERTY

CHAPTER I

Sun and Shadow

THIRTY years ago, Marseilles lay burning in the sun, one day.

A blazing sun upon a fierce August day was no greater rarity in southern France then, than at any other time, before or since. Everything in Marseilles, and about Marseilles, had stared at the fervid sky, and been stared at in return, until a staring habit had become universal there. Strangers were stared out of countenance by staring white houses, staring white walls, staring white streets, staring tracts of arid road, staring hills from which verdure was burnt away. The only things to be seen not fixedly staring and glaring were the vines drooping under their load of grapes. These did occasionally wink a little, as the hot air barely moved their faint leaves.

There was no wind to make a ripple on the foul water within the harbour, or on the beautiful sea without. The line of demarcation between the two colours, black and blue, showed the point which the pure sea would not pass; but it lay as quiet as the abominable pool, with which it never mixed. Boats without awnings were too hot to touch; ships blistered at their moorings; the stones of the quays had not cooled, night or day, for months. Hindoos, Russians, Chinese, Spaniards, Portuguese, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Genoese, Neapolitans, Venetians, Greeks, Turks, descendants from all the builders of Babel, come to trade at Marseilles, sought the shade alike—taking refuge in any hiding-place from a sea too intensely blue to be looked at, and a sky of purple, set with one great flaming jewel of fire.

The universal stare made the eyes ache. Towards the distant line of Italian coast, indeed, it was a little relieved by light clouds of mist, slowly rising from the evaporation of the sea, but it softened nowhere else. Far away the staring roads, deep in dust, stared from the hill-side, stared from the hollow, stared from the

interminable plain. Far away the dusty vines overhanging wayside cottages, and the monotonous wayside avenues of parched trees without shade, drooped beneath the stare of earth and sky. So did the horses with drowsy bells, in long files of carts, creeping slowly towards the interior; so did their recumbent drivers, when they were awake, which rarely happened; so did the exhausted labourers in the fields. Everything that lived or grew, was oppressed by the glare; except the lizard, passing swiftly over rough stone walls, and the cicala, chirping his dry hot chirp, like a rattle. The very dust was scorched brown, and something quivered in the atmosphere as if the air itself were panting.

Blinds, shutters, curtains, awnings, were all closed and drawn to keep out the stare. Grant it but a chink or keyhole, and it shot in like a white-hot arrow. The churches were the freest from it. To come out of the twilight of pillars and arches—dreamily dotted with winking lamps, dreamily peopled with ugly old shadows piously dozing, spitting, and begging—was to plunge into a fiery river, and swim for life to the nearest strip of shade. So, with people lounging and lying wherever shade was, with but little hum of tongues or barking of dogs, with occasional jangling of discordant church bells, and rattling of vicious drums, Marseilles, a fact to be strongly smelt and tasted, lay broiling in the sun one day.

In Marseilles that day there was a villainous prison. In one of its chambers, so repulsive a place that even the obtrusive stare blinked at it, and left it to such refuse of reflected light as it could find for itself, were two men. Besides the two men, a notched and disfigured bench, immovable from the wall, with a draught-board rudely hacked upon it with a knife, a set of draughts, made of old buttons and soup bones, a set of dominoes, two mats, and two or three wine bottles. That was all the chamber held, exclusive of rats and other unseen vermin, in addition to the seen vermin, the two men.

It received such light as it got, through a grating of iron bars, fashioned like a pretty large window, by means of which it could be always inspected from the gloomy staircase on which the grating gave. There was a broad strong ledge of stone to this grating, where the bottom of it was let into the masonry, three or four feet above the ground. Upon it, one of the two men lolled, half sitting and half lying, with his knees drawn up, and his feet and shoulders planted against the opposite sides of the aperture. The bars were wide enough apart to admit of his thrusting his

arm through to the elbow; and so he held on negligently, for his greater ease.

A prison taint was on everything there. The imprisoned air, the imprisoned light, the imprisoned damps, the imprisoned men, were all deteriorated by confinement. As the captive men were faded and haggard, so the iron was rusty, the stone was slimy, the wood was rotten, the air was faint, the light was dim. Like a well, like a vault, like a tomb, the prison had no knowledge of the brightness outside; and would have kept its polluted atmosphere intact, in one of the spice islands of the Indian ocean.

· The man who lay on the ledge of the grating was even chilled. He jerked his great cloak more heavily upon him by an impatient movement of one shoulder, and growled, 'To the devil with this Brigand of a Sun that never shines in here!'

He was waiting to be fed; looking sideways through the bars, that he might see the further down the stairs, with much of the expression of a wild beast in similar expectation. But his eyes, too close together, were not so nobly set in his head as those of the king of beasts are in his, and they were sharp rather than bright—pointed weapons with little surface to betray them. They had no depth or change; they glittered, and they opened and shut. So far, and waiving their use to himself, a clockmaker could have made a better pair. He had a hook nose, handsome after its kind, but too high between the eyes, by probably just as much as his eyes were too near to one another. For the rest, he was large and tall in frame, had thin lips, where his thick moustache showed them at all, and a quantity of dry hair, of no definable colour, in its shaggy state, but shot with red. The hand with which he held the grating (seamed all over the back with ugly scratches newly healed), was unusually small and plump; would have been unusually white, but for the prison grime.

The other man was lying on the stone floor, covered with a coarse brown coat.

'Get up, pig!' growled the first. 'Don't sleep when I am hungry.'

'It's all one, master,' said the pig, in a submissive manner, and not without cheerfulness; 'I can wake when I will, I can sleep when I will. It's all the same.'

As he said it, he rose, shook himself, scratched himself, tied his brown coat loosely round his neck by the sleeves (he had previously used it as a coverlet), and sat down upon the

pavement yawning, with his back against the wall opposite to the grating.

'Say what the hour is,' grumbled the first man.

'The mid-day bells will ring——in forty minutes.' When he made the little pause, he had looked round the prison-room, as if for certain information.

'You are a clock. How is it that you always know?'

'How can I say? I always know what the hour is, and where I am. I was brought in here at night, and out of a boat, but I know where I am. See here! Marseilles harbour;' on his knees on the pavement, mapping it all out with a swarthy forefinger; 'Toulon (where the galleys are), Spain over there, Algiers over *there*. Creeping away to the left here, Nice. Round by the Cornice to Genoa. Genoa Mole and Harbour. Quarantine Ground. City there; terrace gardens blushing with the bella donna. Here, Porto Fino. Stand out for Leghorn. Out again for Civita Vecchia. So away to——hey! there's no room for Naples;' he had got to the wall by this time; 'but it's all one; it's in there!'

He remained on his knees, looking up at his fellow-prisoner with a lively look for a prison. A sunburnt, quick, lithe, little man, though rather thick-set. Earrings in his brown ears, white teeth lighting up his grotesque brown face, intensely black hair clustering about his brown throat, a ragged red shirt open at his brown breast. Loose, seamanlike trousers, decent shoes, a long red cap, a red sash round his waist, and a knife in it.

'Judge if I come back from Naples as I went! See here, my master! Civita Vecchia, Leghorn, Porto Fino, Genoa, Cornice, Off Nice (which is in there), Marseilles, you and me. The apartment of the jailer and his keys is where I put this thumb; and here at my wrist they keep the national razor in its case—the guillotine locked up.'

The other man spat suddenly on the pavement, and gurgled in his throat.

Some lock below gurgled in *its* throat immediately afterwards, and then a door clashed. Slow steps began ascending the stairs; the prattle of a sweet little voice mingled with the noise they made; and the prison-keeper appeared carrying his daughter, three or four years old, and a basket.

'How goes the world this forenoon, gentlemen? My little one, you see, going round with me to have a peep at her father's birds. Fie, then! Look at the birds, my pretty, look at the birds.'

He looked sharply at the birds himself, as he held the child up

at the grate, especially at the little bird, whose activity he seemed to mistrust. 'I have brought your bread, Signor John Baptist,' said he (they all spoke in French, but the little man was an Italian); 'and if I might recommend you not to game——'

'You don't recommend the master!' said John Baptist, showing his teeth as he smiled.

'Oh! but the master wins,' returned the jailer, with a passing look of no particular liking at the other man, 'and you lose. It's quite another thing. You get husky bread and sour drink by it; and he gets sausage of Lyons, veal in savoury jelly, white bread, strachino cheese, and good wine by it. Look at the birds, my pretty!'

'Poor birds!' said the child.

The fair little face, touched with divine compassion, as it peeped shrinkingly through the grate, was like an angel's in the prison. John Baptist rose and moved towards it, as if it had a good attraction for him. The other bird remained as before, except for an impatient glance at the basket.

'Stay!' said the jailer, putting his little daughter on the outer ledge of the grate, 'she shall feed the birds. This big loaf is for Signor John Baptist. We must break it to get it through into the cage. So, there's a tame bird to kiss the little hand! This sausage in a vine leaf is for Monsieur Rigaud. Again—this veal in savoury jelly is for Monsieur Rigaud. Again—these three white little loaves are for Monsieur Rigaud. Again, this cheese—again, this wine—again, this tobacco—all for Monsieur Rigaud. Lucky bird!'

The child put all these things between the bars into the soft, smooth, well-shaped hand, with evident dread—more than once drawing back her own and looking at the man with her fair brow roughened into an expression half of fright and half of anger. Whereas she had put the lump of coarse bread into the swart, scaled, knotted hands of John Baptist (who had scarcely as much nail on his eight fingers and two thumbs as would have made out one for Monsieur Rigaud), with ready confidence; and, when he kissed her hand, had herself passed it caressingly over his face. Monsieur Rigaud, indifferent to this distinction, propitiated the father by laughing and nodding at the daughter as often as she gave him anything; and, so soon as he had all his viands about him in convenient nooks of the ledge on which he rested, began to eat with an appetite.

When Monsieur Rigaud laughed, a change took place in

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