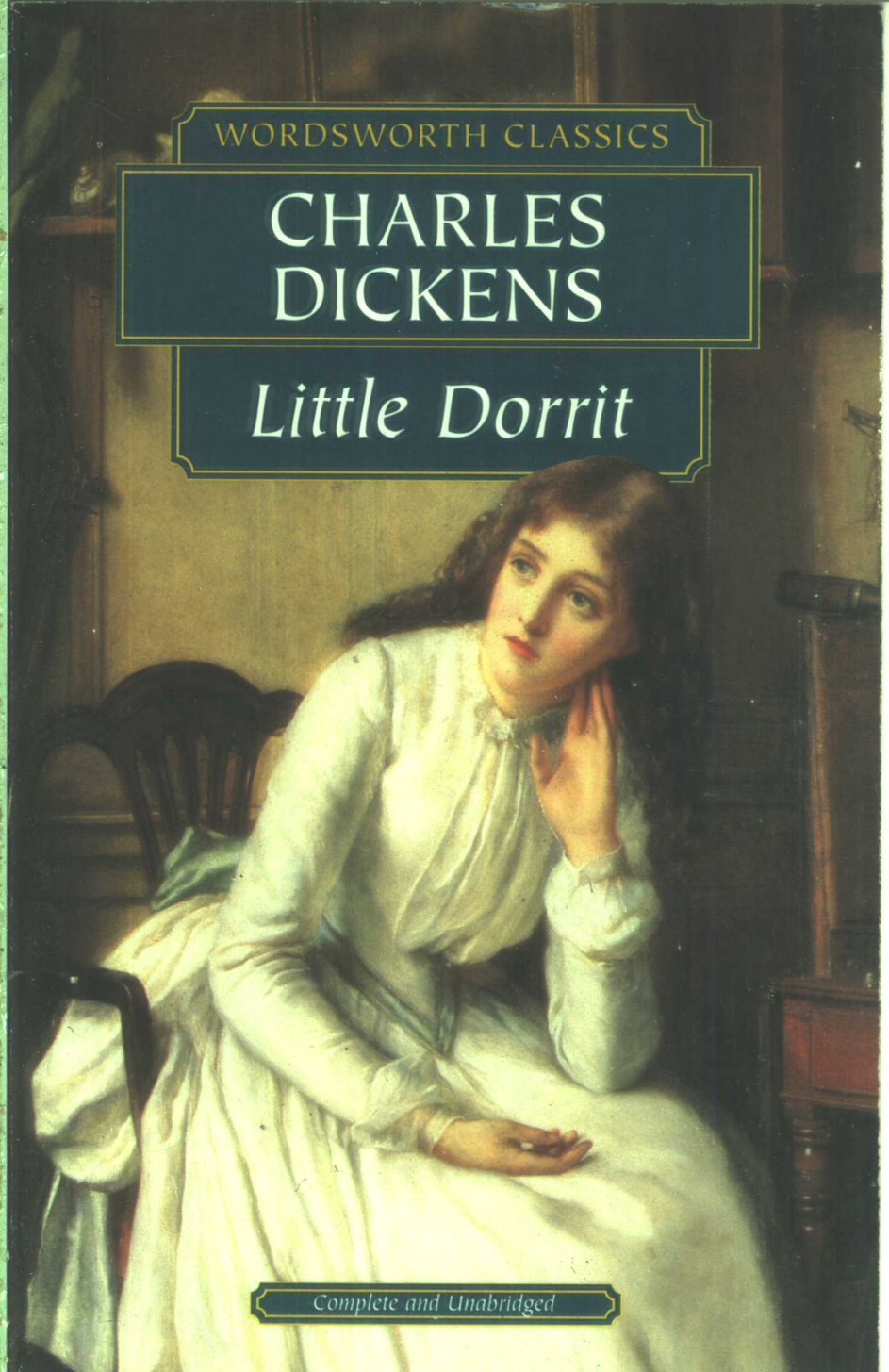
WORDSWORTH CLASSICS
CHARLES DICKENS
Little Dorrit
Complete and Unabridged

LITTLE DORRIT

Charles Dickens

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

INTRODUCTION

Little Dorrit, which was published in twenty monthly parts from December 1855 to June 1857, had as its working title *Nobody's Fault* and is a classic tale of both literal and symbolic imprisonment. William Dorrit, 'the Father of the Marshalsea', lives in Marshalsea prison, where he has been consigned for many years for debt, with his three children, Edward, Fanny and Amy – the diminutive, sweet, amiable and generous 'Little Dorrit'. Amy was born in the prison, spends most of her life there and in the end chooses to be married in custody. The children attempt to earn a living outside the prison, with Amy acting as a seamstress for the hypocritical Mrs Clennam. In a reversal of fortune, following an inheritance, the Dorrit family become wealthy, pretentious and as despicable as they were when previously pathetic objects of compassion. Of the family, only Amy retains her character and she falls in love, at first unrequitedly, with Mrs Clennam's middle-aged son, Arthur, who is newly returned from a long spell in China. Arthur's struggle with the Government's all-powerful 'Circumlocution Office' provides the perfect vehicle for a stinging attack by Dickens on bureaucracy and the practice of imprisonment for debt which had so cruelly blighted the author's own early life. In his turn, Arthur is cast into the Marshalsea prison following an epic fraud perpetrated on him by the supposedly eminent but crooked financier Merdle, and once there only the strength of Amy's character can possibly save him from sickness and despair.

The novel contains some of Dickens's most memorable characters, among whom are: 'Mr F's Aunt', Flora Finching (a satirical portrait of the author's early love, Maria Beadnell, in middle age), 'Young John' Chivery, the son of a Marshalsea warder and a despairing suitor of Amy, and the strictly correct governess-companion Mrs General, who instructs the newly-rich Dorrit family in the ways of fashionable society. Little Dorrit is full of psychological insights, is a feast of historical and social detail and is a dramatic *tour de force*, which qualities combine to make it one of Dickens's finest novels. In the opinion of George Bernard Shaw it was Dickens's 'masterpiece among many masterpieces', a view which has been shared and reinforced by many contemporary critics.

Charles Dickens was born at Landport (Portsea), near Portsmouth, Hampshire, on 7 February 1812. He was the second of eight children. His father, John, was a clerk in the Naval Pay Office at Portsmouth. The Dickens family, although not poor by the standards of the time, lived through a series of financial crises and the accompanying social insecurity. Dickens's childhood was spent in Portsmouth, London and Chatham in Kent, where there was a large naval dockyard. In 1822, facing financial ruin, the family moved to London and, on 5 February 1824, Charles began work in a blacking warehouse at Hungerford Stairs where he was employed to label bottles for six shillings a week. A short time previously Charles's father had been arrested for debt and the family, except for Charles, had joined their father in Marshalsea Debtors' Prison. The combination of this family trauma and his own menial job profoundly affected Charles's life and view of the world and was to haunt him for the rest of his days. John Dickens was released after three months in prison by having himself declared an Insolvent Debtor. Charles was sent to school at the age of twelve, where he did well, and at the age of fifteen he began work in the office of a legal firm in Gray's Inn. Here he taught himself shorthand, and eighteen months later started as a freelance reporter in the court of Doctors' Commons. In 1829 Dickens fell deeply in love with Maria Beadnell and the affair dragged on inconclusively until the summer of 1833. Meanwhile, Dickens's career was prospering, with his rapid and accurate reporting of debates in the House of Commons for the Morning Chronicle, *and good reviews for his literary work, which led to his being commissioned by the publishers, Chapman & Hall, to provide text in monthly instalments to accompany sporting plates by the artist Seymour. It was in this way that the hugely successful* Pickwick Papers *was published in 1836/7. In 1858 Dickens separated from his wife, by whom he had had ten children, and developed his friendship with a young actress called Ellen Ternan. Dickens's health, adversely affected by the strain of his very popular readings, which he instituted in 1858, and a demanding tour of America in 1867/8, began to fail in the late 1860s. He suffered a stroke at his home at Gad's Hill, near Rochester, Kent, on 8 June 1870, and died the next day.*

FURTHER READING

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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. But, as it is not unreasonable to suppose that I may have held its various threads with a more continuous attention than anyone else can have given to them during its desultory publication, it is not unreasonable to ask that the weaving may be looked at in its completed state, and with the pattern finished.

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 judgement 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 gaol 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 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. But, 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 Gaol; 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; and will stand among the crowding ghosts of many miserable years.

In the Preface to *Bleak House* I remarked that I had never had so many readers. In the Preface to its next successor, *Little Dorrit*, I have still to repeat the same words, deeply sensible of the affection and confidence that have grown up between us.

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 hillside, 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 cicada, 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 be 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 midday 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, seaman-like 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 gaoler and his keys is where I put this thumb; as 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 gaoler, 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 gaoler, 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 his face that was more remarkable than prepossessing. His moustache went up under his nose, and his nose came down over his moustache, in a very sinister and cruel manner.

'There!' said the gaoler, turning his basket upside down to beat the crumbs out, 'I have expended all the money I received; here is the note of it, and *that*'s a thing accomplished. Monsieur Rigaud, as I expected yesterday, the President will look for the pleasure of your society at an hour after midday today.'

'To try me, eh?' said Rigaud, pausing, knife in hand and morsel in mouth.

'You have said it. To try you.'

'There is no news for me?' asked John Baptist, who had begun contentedly to munch his bread.

The gaoler shrugged his shoulders.

'Lady of mine! Am I to lie here all my life, my father?'

'What do I know?' cried the gaoler, turning upon him with southern quickness, and gesticulating with both his hands and all his fingers, as if he were threatening to tear him to pieces. 'My friend, how is it possible for me to tell how long you are to lie here? What do I know, John

Baptist Cavalletto? Death of my life! There are prisoners here sometimes who are not in such a devil of a hurry to be tried.'

He seemed to glance obliquely at Monsieur Rigaud in this remark; but Monsieur Rigaud had already resumed his meal, though not with quite so quick an appetite as before.

'Adieu, my birds!' said the keeper of the prison, taking his pretty child in his arms, and dictating the words with a kiss.

'Adieu, my birds!' the pretty child repeated.

Her innocent face looked back so brightly over his shoulder as he walked away with her, singing her the song of the child's game:

'Who passes by this road so late?
Compagnon de la Majolaine!
Who passes by this road so late?
Always gay!'

that John Baptist felt it a point of honour to reply at the grate, and in good time and tune, though a little hoarsely:

'Of all the king's knights 'tis the flower,
Compagnon de la Majolaine!
Of all the king's knights 'tis the flower,
Always gay!'

Which accompanied them so far down the few steep stairs, that the prison-keeper had to stop at last for his little daughter to hear the song out, and repeat the Refrain while they were yet in sight. Then the child's head disappeared, and the prison-keeper's head disappeared, but the little voice prolonged the strain until the door clashed.

Monsieur Rigaud, finding the listening John Baptist in his way before the echoes had ceased (even the echoes were the weaker for imprisonment, and seemed to lag), reminded him with a push of his foot that he had better resume his own darker place. The little man sat down again upon the pavement, with the negligent ease of one who was thoroughly accustomed to pavements; and placing three hunks of coarse bread before himself, and falling to upon a fourth, began contentedly to work his way through them, as if to clear them off were a sort of game.

Perhaps he glanced at the Lyons sausage, and perhaps he glanced at the veal in savoury jelly, but they were not there long to make his mouth water; Monsieur Rigaud soon dispatched them, in spite of the President and tribunal, and proceeded to suck his fingers as clean as he could, and to wipe them on his vine-leaves. Then, as he paused in his drink to contemplate his fellow-prisoner, his moustache went up, and