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Signet Classics

CHARLES DICKENS



David Copperfield

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD BY GISH JEN

As a child, **Charles Dickens** (1812–70) came to know not only hunger and privation, but also the horror of the infamous debtors' prison and the evils of child labor. A surprise legacy brought release from the nightmare of prison and "slave" factories and afforded Dickens the opportunity of two years' formal schooling. He taught himself shorthand and worked as a parliamentary reporter until his writing career took off with the publication of *Sketches by Boz* (1836) and *The Pickwick Papers* (1837). As a novelist and magazine editor, Dickens had a long run of serialized success through *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65). In later years, ill health slowed him down, but he continued his popular dramatic readings from his fiction to an adoring public, which included Queen Victoria. At his death, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* remained unfinished.

Gish Jen was born in New York, New York, and graduated from Harvard University. She is the author of the novels *Typical American* (1991), *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), and *The Love Wife* (2004), as well as the short story collection *Who's Irish?* (1999). Her shorter work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, and *The New York Times*, and in *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*.

*The Personal History, Adventures,
Experience & Observation of*

DAVID
COPPERFIELD

*The Younger
Of Blunderstone Rookery*

(Which He never meant to be Published on any Account)



CHARLES DICKENS

*With a New Afterword by
Gish Jen*

SIGNET CLASSICS

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Contents

A Note on the Text	9
Preface to the Charles Dickens Edition	11
CHAPTER I. I Am Born	13
CHAPTER II. I Observe	24
CHAPTER III. I Have a Change	38
CHAPTER IV. I Fall into Disgrace	53
CHAPTER V. I Am Sent Away from Home	72
CHAPTER VI. I Enlarge My Circle of Acquaintance	90
CHAPTER VII. My "First Half" at Salem House	97
CHAPTER VIII. My Holidays, Especially One Happy Afternoon	115
CHAPTER IX. I Have a Memorable Birthday	130
CHAPTER X. I Become Neglected, and Am Provided For	142
CHAPTER XI. I Begin Life on My Own Account, and Don't Like It	161
CHAPTER XII. Liking Life on My Own Account No Better, I Form a Great Resolution	177
CHAPTER XIII. The Sequel of My Resolution	186
CHAPTER XIV. My Aunt Makes Up Her Mind About Me	206
CHAPTER XV. I Make Another Beginning	221
CHAPTER XVI. I Am a New Boy in More Senses than One	231

CHAPTER XVII. Somebody Turns Up	252
CHAPTER XVIII. A Retrospect	270
CHAPTER XIX. I Look About Me, and Make a Discovery	278
CHAPTER XX. Steerforth's Home	294
CHAPTER XXI. Little Em'ly	303
CHAPTER XXII. Some Old Scenes, and Some New People	323
CHAPTER XXIII. I Corroborate Mr. Dick, and Choose a Profession	345
CHAPTER XXIV. My First Dissipation	360
CHAPTER XXV. Good and Bad Angels	368
CHAPTER XXVI. I Fall into Captivity	389
CHAPTER XXVII. Tommy Traddles	404
CHAPTER XXVIII. Mr. Micawber's Gauntlet	413
CHAPTER XXIX. I Visit Steerforth at His Home Again	432
CHAPTER XXX. A Loss	440
CHAPTER XXXI. A Greater Loss	448
CHAPTER XXXII. The Beginning of a Long Journey	457
CHAPTER XXXIII. Blissful	475
CHAPTER XXXIV. My Aunt Astonishes Me	491
CHAPTER XXXV. Depression	500
CHAPTER XXXVI. Enthusiasm	520
CHAPTER XXXVII. A Little Cold Water	537
CHAPTER XXXVIII. A Dissolution of Partnership	545
CHAPTER XXXIX. Wickfield and Heep	561
CHAPTER XL. The Wanderer	580
CHAPTER XLI. Dora's Aunts	589
CHAPTER XLII. Mischief	605
CHAPTER XLIII. Another Retrospect	624
CHAPTER XLIV. Our Housekeeping	632

CHAPTER XLV. Mr. Dick Fulfils My Aunt's Predictions	647
CHAPTER XLVI. Intelligence	662
CHAPTER XLVII. Martha	675
CHAPTER XLVIII. Domestic	686
CHAPTER XLIX. I Am Involved in Mystery	697
CHAPTER L. Mr. Peggotty's Dream Comes True	709
CHAPTER LI. The Beginning of a Longer Journey	719
CHAPTER LII. I Assist at an Explosion	736
CHAPTER LIII. Another Retrospect	759
CHAPTER LIV. Mr. Micawber's Transactions	764
CHAPTER LV. Tempest	779
CHAPTER LVI. The New Wound, and the Old	791
CHAPTER LVII. The Emigrants	797
CHAPTER LVIII. Absence	807
CHAPTER LIX. Return	814
CHAPTER LX. Agnes	830
CHAPTER LXI. I Am Shown Two Interesting Penitents	838
CHAPTER LXII. A Light Shines on My Way	850
CHAPTER LXIII. A Visitor	859
CHAPTER LXIV. A Last Retrospect	866
Afterword	871
Selected Bibliography	879

A Note on the Text

STRANGELY THIS IS THE FIRST TIME THAT *DAVID COPPERFIELD* has appeared almost in its entirety as Charles Dickens wrote it. The explanation, however, is simple. Like all except five of his novels, it originally came out as a monthly serial (between May 1849 and November 1850) in pamphlets having thirty-two pages of text. Sometimes, in setting up a number in type, it was found to be too long; Dickens dealt with the problem by making cuts. There was no implication that he thought the deleted passages bad—they were merely dispensable. But when the book was published later in bound volumes, they were not reinserted—perhaps Dickens had merely forgotten them.

Most of them seem to the editor well worth restoring. Except for a very small number of exceedingly brief ones, they are therefore printed in this edition as they appear in the original manuscript in the John Forster Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Their text we owe to the generous aid of John Butt, Regius Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature at the University of Edinburgh. To distinguish them from their contents, they are set off by square brackets.

All the great body of the text is taken from the "Charles Dickens" Edition of 1868–70, which Dickens himself revised for the press, striking out or altering occasional words and making other changes. A few obvious errors that escaped him have been corrected.

The editor has also thought that readers would find it useful to know where each of the original monthly installments ended. These have consequently been indicated by a row of asterisks.

Preface to The Charles Dickens Edition

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 favorite child. And his name is DAVID COPPERFIELD.

1869

CHAPTER I

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 sea-going 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 with-

drawn 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 grave-stone 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 sea-coast 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 favourite 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 here 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.