

MACMILLAN READERS
INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

CHARLES DICKENS

David Copperfield

Retold by Elizabeth Walker



MACMILLAN

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My Early Days

My name is David Copperfield and I was born in the county¹⁰ of Suffolk, in the east of England. This book is the story of my life. Will I be the hero of my own story? You must read it and decide for yourself.

I never knew my father. He died before I was born. When this story begins, my mother had been a widow¹¹ for six months. She was living in our big old house in a little village called Blunderstone. One afternoon in March, my mother was sitting by the fire, crying quietly to herself. Her baby would be born soon – a baby that would never know its father. My mother felt lonely and sad.

The room was very quiet. Then, suddenly, there was a tapping sound at the window. My mother, who was easily frightened, looked up quickly.

There was an old lady in the garden. She was looking in at the window, with her face pressed against the glass. My mother stood up and her heart began to beat very fast. She was so frightened, that she almost fainted.

‘Who is it? What do you want?’ she whispered.

The old lady, who was tall and thin, tapped on the window again. She was wearing spectacles and her bonnet¹² was very old-fashioned. My mother, who had now recognized the old lady, hurried to open the front door.

The old lady spoke first.

‘You must be Clara – Mrs David Copperfield,’ she said in a sharp voice. ‘I am Miss Trotwood – Miss Betsy Trotwood. We haven’t met before. But I’m sure you have heard of me. I am your late husband’s aunt.’

‘Yes, yes, of course,’ my mother replied. ‘Please come in.’

Miss Betsy Trotwood followed my mother into the sitting-room and sat down by the fire.

‘Your husband told you about me, didn’t he?’ the old lady asked.

My mother nodded. ‘Yes, he did,’ she said. ‘My dear husband – your nephew – often talked about his Aunt Betsy. He spoke of you just before he ... died.’

My poor mother began to cry again.

‘Well, here I am,’ Miss Betsy said. ‘Sit down, child. Let me look at you.’

My mother was very pretty, with a sweet, pale face and long, fair curls.

Aunt Betsy shook her head sadly and gently touched my mother’s pretty hair. ‘When are you expecting your child¹³?’ the old lady asked. ‘You are not much more than a baby yourself.’

My mother began to cry more than ever. ‘Very soon,’ she said. ‘I am so frightened. I am afraid that I shall die and my baby too!’

‘Nonsense,’ Miss Betsy said. ‘You won’t die and neither will your little girl.’

‘The baby may be a boy,’ my mother said quietly.

‘I don’t think so,’ Miss Betsy replied. ‘I’m sure that the baby will be a girl. Her name will be Betsy Trotwood Copperfield. I will help you look after her, I will teach her to think for herself!’

‘Thank you,’ my mother whispered. ‘I am feeling rather faint,’ she went on. ‘Do you think ...?’

‘Of course, you need a cup of tea. I’ll call your servant. What’s her name?’

‘Peggotty.’

‘Peggotty? Who gave her that strange name?’ my Aunt Betsy asked.

‘It’s her family name,’ my mother explained. ‘Her first name is Clara, like mine. So we ... I ... call her Peggotty.’

My aunt shook her head sadly. Then she got up and opened the door. 'Peggotty!' she called. 'Bring some tea! Mrs Copperfield is not well!'

Peggotty arrived a few minutes later with tea and some lighted candles. Peggotty stared at my aunt and then looked anxiously¹⁴ at my mother.

'Something has upset you, ma'am,' Peggotty said.

'Oh, Peggotty,' my mother replied. 'I feel very ill. I was not expecting Miss Trotwood and she frightened me a little.'

Then my mother gave a cry of pain. 'Oh, Peggotty, help me,' she whispered.

Peggotty ran to my mother and held her hand.

'I think the baby's coming early,' my poor mother went on. 'Oh, Peggotty! The pain! It hurts so much!'

'Don't worry, ma'am,' Peggotty said. 'My nephew's in the kitchen. I'll send him for the doctor at once.'

When the doctor arrived, my mother was upstairs in her bedroom with Peggotty. Miss Betsy Trotwood stayed downstairs. She knew nothing about babies.

Soon my mother began to cry out in pain, over and over again. Miss Betsy took off her bonnet and put cotton wool¹⁵ in her ears. Sometimes she sat by the fire. Sometimes she walked up and down the room, holding her bonnet by its strings.

At half past twelve, the doctor came downstairs. He was smiling happily. He bowed¹⁶ to my aunt politely.

'I have good news, ma'am,' he said. 'Mother and baby are both well.'

'What? What did you say?' my aunt shouted, taking the cotton-wool out of her ears.

'It's good news,' the doctor repeated. 'Mrs Copperfield is resting and the baby is healthy. He -'

'He? What do you mean?' Miss Betsy cried. 'The baby's a *girl*. She must be. Her name is Betsy Trotwood Copperfield!'

'Ma'am, the baby is a boy,' the doctor said quietly.

My aunt stood up, swung her bonnet by its strings and hit the doctor hard on the head.

‘Boys cause nothing but trouble!’ she cried. Then she put the bonnet on her own head, walked out of the house and never came back.

My earliest memories are of two women – my dearest mother and dear Clara Peggotty. They both loved me very much. I remember that my young mother had a pale face and soft, pretty hair. Peggotty’s eyes and hair were very dark. Her face and arms were hard and red. I think that my mother and I were both a little afraid of Peggotty. But she was a kind woman and we loved her too.

The three of us lived together for seven happy years. During that time, I learnt to read. I read all my dead father’s story books again and again. And I was the hero of every story!

I remember the warm summers in our garden. There was an empty dog-kennel¹⁷ at one end and sweetly-smelling flowers grew everywhere. In the autumn, my mother and I picked fruit in the garden. In winter, we stayed indoors. I remember my mother dancing by herself in the candle-light. I remember the light shining on her pretty hair.

Then, one day, a tall, black-haired man came to see my mother. He stayed for about half-an-hour. He kissed my mother’s hand before he left and put his hand on my head. I did not like that and I moved away from him. Then he looked down at me with his hard, dark eyes and I felt afraid.

As time went on, the black-haired gentleman came nearly every day. His name was Mr Edward Murdstone and he was always very polite. He praised my mother’s beauty and made her blush¹⁸. I hated him for it and I think that Peggotty hated him too.

One evening, when Peggotty and I were alone she spoke to me gently. ‘Master Davy¹⁹,’ she said. ‘Would you like to visit

my brother's house in Yarmouth? I'll go with you and we could stay for two weeks.'

'Is your brother a nice man, Peggotty?' I asked.

'Oh, he's *such* a nice man. The nicest I know!' she exclaimed. 'He lives near the sea. You've never seen the sea, Master Davy. There'll be boats and fishermen and my nephew, Ham, lives there too.'

'But what about mama?' I asked. 'She can't live here by herself, can she?'

'Of course not,' Peggotty said quickly. 'Your dear mother will be staying with some neighbours.'

That made me happy and my mother looked happy too.

Peggotty and I were going to travel to Yarmouth in the carrier's cart. As the carrier put our boxes on his cart, my mother stood at the garden gate. She had come to say goodbye to us. I was happy to be leaving, but I suddenly began to cry. Then my mother cried too and I kissed her.

I got into the cart with Peggotty and looked back. Mr Murdstone was standing beside my mother now. She ran after the cart to kiss me one last time. Mr Murdstone frowned²⁰ but he could not stop her. My dear mother was laughing and crying at the same time.

The carrier's old horse began to pull the cart along the road. I waved²¹ goodbye to my mother, as I looked back at my happy home. I did not know then that I would never be happy there again.