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Little Dorrit

CHARLES DICKENS

Stage 5 (1800 headwords)

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PEOPLE IN THIS STORY

Amy Dorrit (Little Dorrit)

William Dorrit her father

Fanny Dorrit her sister

Tip (Edward) Dorrit her brother

Frederick Dorrit her uncle

Arthur Clennam

Mrs Clennam Arthur's mother

Jeremiah Flintwinch Mrs Clennam's servant

Affery Flintwinch his wife, another servant

Mr Meagles Arthur's friend

Mrs Meagles his wife

Pet Meagles their daughter

Mr Chivery a jailer

Young John Chivery his son

Mr Tite Barnacle the head of the Circumlocution Office

Barnacle Junior his son

Mr Merdle a very rich businessman

Mrs Merdle his wife

Edmund Sparkler her son

Daniel Doyce an engineer and inventor

Mr Plornish a friend of the Dorrits

Mr Pancks a rent collector

Mr Casby a house owner at Bleeding-Heart Yard

Mr Rigaud a traveller

— PART ONE —

POVERTY



— CHAPTER ONE —

Home

It was a hot August day, and the city of Marseille lay burning in the sun.

‘We shall be out of quarantine today, Mr Meagles,’ said Arthur Clennam, as the two men looked over the wall at the city in the distance.

‘Out today!’ repeated Mr Meagles. ‘But what have we been in for?’

‘For no very good reason, I must say,’ said Arthur. ‘But since we have come from the East, the health officials are afraid we might be sick.’

‘I *am* sick now!’ said Mr Meagles, but with a playful smile on his face. ‘When I came here, I was as well as I have ever been in my life. But shut up here, I have been waking up, night after night, saying, “*Now* I am sick, *now* they will keep me here!”’

‘Well, Mr Meagles, say no more about it, now it’s over,’ said a cheerful woman.

It was Mrs Meagles who spoke. Like her husband, she was healthy and bright, with a pleasant, homely English face.

Her daughter, close behind her, touched Mr Meagles on the shoulder, and Mr Meagles immediately forgave Marseille from the bottom of his heart. Pet was about twenty – a lovely girl, with long brown hair and wonderful eyes.

‘Now, Pet, my dear,’ said Mr Meagles, ‘go with your mother and get ready for the boat. The health officials are coming to let us out at last.’

Arthur Clennam, a serious, dark man of forty, watched as

Mrs Meagles and Pet crossed the hot yard and disappeared through a white archway.

‘Now, Mr Clennam,’ said Mr Meagles, ‘may I ask if you have decided where to go next?’

‘I don’t belong anywhere,’ said Arthur. ‘I was sent away to the other end of the world with my father before I was twenty, and kept there until his death a year ago. I have always worked at a job I hated. I am the only child of a hard father and a hard mother. Punishment and terror – nothing gentle anywhere – that was my childhood.’

The picture made Mr Meagles very uncomfortable. ‘That was a difficult start,’ he said. ‘Now you must enjoy everything that lies beyond it.’

Arthur, with his serious smile, shook his head. ‘Enough about me. Here is the boat!’

The boat was filled with officials, and as it landed, they came up the steps. All the travellers came together in the yard, and then names were called and papers were produced and signed. Finally, everything was done and the travellers were free to go.

‘I always begin to forgive a place as soon as I have left it behind,’ said Mr Meagles. ‘I expect a prisoner begins to forgive a prison after he is let out.’



A few days later, Arthur Clennam, newly arrived from Marseilles, was walking through the streets of London. It was a Sunday evening, grey and tired. The rain began to fall, then umbrellas appeared, and wet skirts and mud. Arthur went down through the narrow streets, past silent buildings, until he came at last to the house he was looking for. An old

brick house, so dark and dirty it was almost black, with long, narrow windows. Many years ago, the house had nearly slid down sideways, and it was now supported by huge wooden posts.

‘Nothing changed,’ said Arthur. ‘Dark and miserable as ever.’

He went up to the door and knocked. There was a slow step on the stone floor inside, and the door was opened by an old man, bent and dried, but with sharp eyes.

‘Ah, Mr Arthur?’ he said, without any feeling. ‘You are here at last? Come in.’

Arthur stepped in and shut the door.

‘You’ve grown stronger,’ said the old man, looking at him and shaking his head, ‘but you aren’t as fine-looking as your father, in my opinion. Nor your mother, either.’

‘How is my mother, Mr Flintwinch?’

‘Same as she always is now. Hasn’t been out of her room fifteen times in fifteen years, Arthur.’

‘Can I see her tonight?’

‘Yes, Arthur, yes,’ said Jeremiah Flintwinch.

Mr Flintwinch was a short, bald man, and his head and body were bent to one side. Just like the house, he too seemed to be sliding down sideways.

Arthur followed him upstairs, into a dark bedroom, where his mother sat on a black sofa, in widow’s clothes. She gave him one glassy kiss, and touched his hand with her cold fingers. There was a fire in the fireplace, and the room was airless.

‘Mother, this is not your old, busy life!’

‘My world is now this narrow room, Arthur,’ she replied. Her hard voice reminded Arthur of his frightened, cold childhood. ‘I can’t walk now. I haven’t been outside this room for years.’ She

looked towards one corner of the room, where a chair on wheels stood in front of a desk. 'But I am able to carry out my business duties. I am glad of that. It is a bad night. Is it snowing?'

'Snow, Mother? It is only September!'

'All seasons are the same to me,' she said. 'I know nothing of summer and winter, shut up here.' On her little table lay two or three books, a pair of glasses, and an old gold watch.

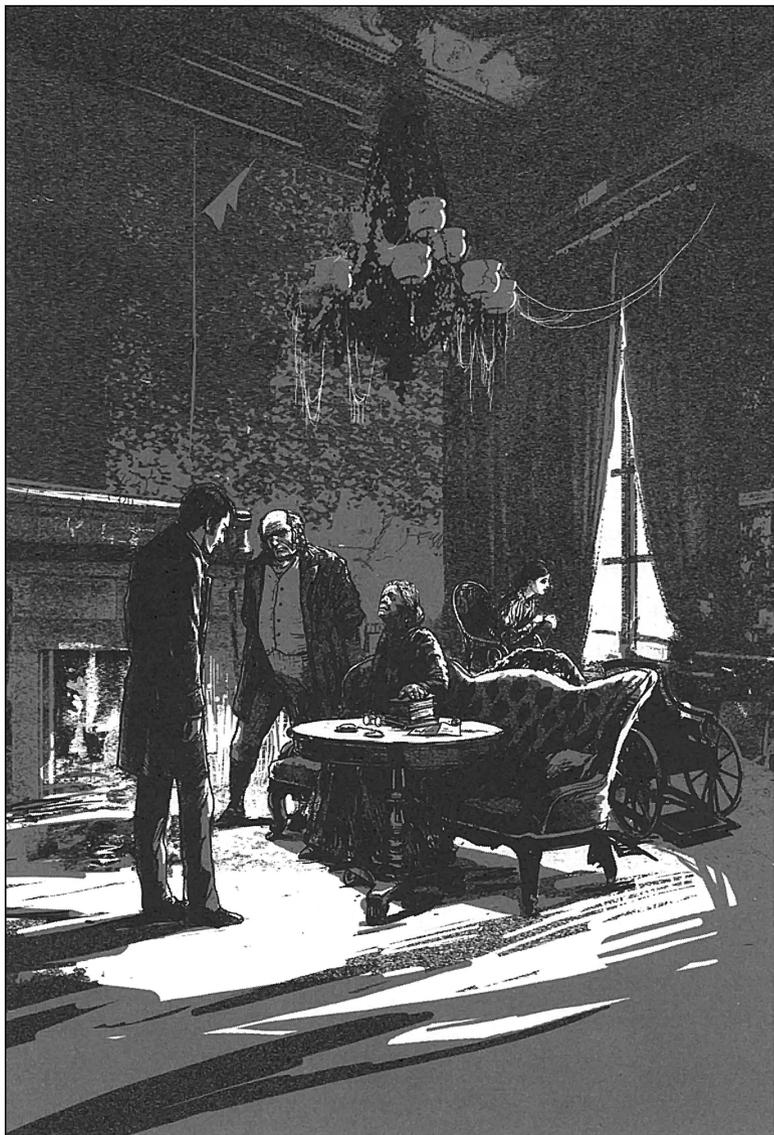
'I see that you received the watch I sent you,' said Arthur. 'My father was very worried about it. He wanted me to send it to you as soon as possible. But he only told me about it just before he died.'

'No talk about business today,' said Mrs Clennam. 'Affery, it is nine o'clock.'

An old woman came forward from a dark corner of the room, and Arthur saw that there was a young girl sitting there, too. He did not know the girl, but he remembered the woman well. It was Mrs Affery Flintwinch, his mother's old servant. Affery brought a plate of bread and butter, and a glass of hot water and sugar. Mrs Clennam ate her supper and then read aloud from her book for a few minutes. As she read, the years fell away from her son, and all the dark horrors of his childhood bedtimes seemed to swallow him up. She shut the book and was still for a time.

'Good night, Arthur,' she said. He touched her hand and left the room.

Affery collected sheets and blankets and Arthur carried them upstairs to the top of the house. Up and up they climbed, through the airless smell of the old house, to a large bedroom. It was full of ugly, broken old furniture: old chairs, an old table, and an old bed. Arthur opened the long, low window and looked out at the forest of chimneys, and the red sky.



*'All seasons are the same to me. I know nothing
of summer and winter, shut up here.'*

‘She’s awful hard, your mother,’ Affery said. ‘And he’s a hard one, too, my husband Mr Flintwinch. He tells her what he thinks sometimes. It makes me shake from head to foot when I hear him talk to her like that. Don’t you be afraid of them like me, Arthur.’

‘Affery, who was that girl in my mother’s room just now?’ said Arthur.

‘Girl?’ said Affery, sharply.

‘Yes, there was a girl, I saw her near you – she was almost hidden in the dark corner.’

‘Oh! Her? Little Dorrit? *She’s* nothing. Oh, Mr Flintwinch is coming!’

At the sound of footsteps on the stairs, Affery moved quickly away to the other end of the room. She was a tall, strong-looking woman, but before her sharp-eyed husband she was bent and fearful.

‘Affery, woman, what are you doing?’ Mr Flintwinch called through the door. ‘Make Arthur’s bed. Move yourself!’



At nine the next morning, Mrs Clennam sat in her chair on wheels. Old Mr Flintwinch pushed it across the room to her desk, and then he left the room in his sideways manner. Mrs Clennam opened a drawer in her desk. She took out some papers and began to read.

A little while later, Arthur knocked on the door. ‘Good morning, Mother. Are you feeling better this morning?’

She shook her head. ‘I shall never be better,’ she replied.

‘Can I talk to you about business, Mother?’ Arthur asked.

‘Your father has been dead for more than a year, Arthur. I have been waiting to speak to you ever since.’

‘There was a lot to do before I could leave,’ Arthur said. ‘And when I did leave, I travelled a little, to rest. Mother, for some years now, our business has been less and less successful. I am sorry to cause you disappointment, but I have decided to leave. I have worked for the business for half my life, and I’ve never before done anything against your wishes. I ask you to remember that.’

Mrs Clennam waited. ‘Have you finished, Arthur?’

‘No, Mother, I have something more to say. It has been on my mind, night and day, for a long time. It is far more difficult to say than what I have said.’

Mrs Clennam took her hands from the desk and looked at the fire.

Arthur continued slowly. ‘You were always stronger than my father. You sent him to China in order to take care of the business there, while you took care of it here. You decided that I would stay here with you until my twentieth year and then go to him.’ He lowered his voice, and said with difficulty, ‘I want to ask you, Mother, whether you ever suspected—’

At the word ‘suspected’, Mrs Clennam turned her eyes on her son with a fierce frown, and then looked back at the fire.

‘—whether you suspected that there was some secret that caused trouble in Father’s mind – that made him feel guilty?’

Again, Arthur paused, but his mother said nothing. ‘Is it possible, Mother,’ he whispered, putting his hand nervously on her desk, ‘is it possible that Father had done something wrong to somebody?’

Arthur stopped, hoping that his mother would speak. Mrs Clennam looked at him angrily, but gave him no reply.

‘Remember, Mother, I saw his face when he gave me the watch. He tried to write something to you, but he was too weak.

You can help me to discover the truth. Will you, Mother? If we owe money to anyone, let us find out and give the money back.'

Suddenly, Mrs Clennam turned and rang a bell on the wall. In a moment, Mr Flintwinch stood at the door.

'Flintwinch! Look at my son! He has only just arrived, and now he is accusing his father of wrongdoing. He suspects that our money is stolen money.' She was breathing quickly, but although she was terribly angry, her voice was low and clear. 'Yes, it's easy for you, Arthur, fresh from travelling the world and living a life of pleasure. But look at me, in prison in this room, in this chair! I have suffered without complaining for fifteen years!' She pointed at her son. 'Arthur, I tell you now, if you ever talk about this again, I will send you out through that doorway and never see you or know you again!'

Old Mr Flintwinch came across the room and stood beside Mrs Clennam. 'You suspect your own father, Arthur?' he said. 'You have no right to suspect him of any wrongdoing.'

'My son is leaving the business, Jeremiah,' said Mrs Clennam. 'You will now be my partner in the business and we shall swim – or drown – with it.'

The old man looked at Arthur, his eyes shining. 'Thank you, Mrs Clennam. I will never leave you. And Affery will never leave you, either. Now, twelve o'clock. Time for your lunch.'

Mr Flintwinch rang the bell, and the girl Arthur had seen the night before appeared with Mrs Clennam's lunch. Arthur now had the chance to look at her. She was about twenty-two, wearing a plain, shabby dress. She was so little and shy that she looked like a child, but there was too much anxiety in her face for a young girl.



It was so dull and dark at Mrs Clennam's house that after a few days, Arthur told his mother that he was going to stay at a hotel nearby. For a fortnight, he came every day to go through business papers and books with his mother and her new business partner. He saw Little Dorrit every day, sitting in a corner, her head bent over her sewing, her hands working quickly and busily. She worked almost every day from eight o'clock in the morning until eight o'clock in the evening, and was given lunch in the middle of the day. Arthur noticed that she always wanted to eat alone. She said that she was too busy to eat in the kitchen with Mrs Flintwinch.

As he watched Little Dorrit day after day, Arthur became curious about her. He began to wonder if she was connected with his father's secret. He decided to find out about Little Dorrit, and learn more of her story.

— CHAPTER TWO —

The Child of the Marshalsea

Not far from London Bridge, behind high walls with fierce iron spikes on the top, stood the Marshalsea Prison. Twenty-three years before, Mr William Dorrit had passed through its gates for the first time when his business failed and he lost all his money. Most prisoners left the Marshalsea after a few months, but Mr Dorrit was unable to pay his debts, and lived year after year in the prison, until the other prisoners began to call him ‘the Father of the Marshalsea’.

Mr Dorrit’s wife, his daughter Fanny, and his son Tip had come to live in the prison with him, and his younger daughter, Amy, was born there. But when Amy was only eight years old, her mother died.

Fanny became a wild girl, and Tip lazy; he went from job to job, saying that he was tired of everything, and at last became a debtor at the prison himself. But something in Amy, patient and serious, made her want to be useful for the family. She knew well that her father, who was so broken that he was the Father of the Marshalsea, could be no father to his own children. And so she learned to sew and began to go out to work. This Child of the Marshalsea grew into a woman, with no friend to help her, and soon became the head of the fallen Dorrit family.



This, then, was the life of Amy, known to all as Little Dorrit, who was now going home from Mrs Clennam’s house on a dull September evening, watched from a distance by Arthur

Clennam. She walked through the darkening streets and across London Bridge, then turned in through the heavy wooden gate of the Marshalsea.

Arthur stood in the street outside, and waited to ask someone what the place was. A few people had already walked past him, too busy to stop, when an old man came slowly along the street and stopped to go through the gate. He was dirtily and poorly dressed in an old coat, once blue, which reached to his ankles and buttoned to his chin. He wore a broken old hat over a confusion of grey hair; and his trousers were so long and loose, and his shoes so large, that he moved slowly along like an elephant.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ Arthur said. ‘What is this place?’

The old man stopped and looked at Arthur with weak grey eyes.

‘This place?’ replied the old man. ‘This is the Marshalsea.’

‘The debtors’ prison! Can anyone go in and visit the prisoners?’

‘Anyone can go *in*,’ said the old man, adding plainly, ‘but not everyone can go *out*.’

‘May I ask you one more question?’ said Arthur. ‘Do you know the name Dorrit here?’

‘My name, sir,’ replied the old man, most unexpectedly, ‘is Dorrit.’

Arthur took off his hat. ‘May I just say a few words? I was not expecting this at all. I have recently come home after many years abroad. I have seen at my mother’s – Mrs Clennam’s – a young woman working, who is spoken of only as Little Dorrit. I have felt sincerely interested in her, and have wanted very much to know something more about her. I saw her go in at that gate, not a minute before you came.’

‘Then you must come with me,’ said the old man, in a weak and trembling voice. ‘The young woman whom you saw go in here is my brother’s child, Amy. My brother is William Dorrit; I am Frederick. I am a musician at a theatre and I help my brother as much as I can.’

He went through the gate and across the yard, and Arthur walked with him.

‘My brother,’ said the old man, ‘has been here many years. Please say nothing about my niece working for your mother.’

The night was now dark, and the prison lamps in the yard and the candles in the prison windows did not seem to make it lighter. A few people stood about, talking quietly, but most of the prisoners were inside.

Frederick Dorrit turned in at one of the doors, went up the stairs, and paused for a moment before opening a door on the second floor. At once, Arthur saw Little Dorrit, and at once he understood why she always ate her dinner alone at his mother’s house. She had brought the meat home and was warming it over the fire for her father. Her father, wearing an old grey gown and a black cap, sat at the table waiting for his supper. There was a clean cloth on the table, with a knife, fork and spoon, salt, and a glass on it.

Little Dorrit looked up and her face turned pale.

‘This gentleman is Mr Clennam, son of Amy’s friend,’ Frederick told his brother. ‘He was at the gate and wanted to come and greet you.’ He turned to Arthur. ‘This is my brother William, sir.’

‘I have great respect for your daughter,’ said Arthur, unsure what to say. ‘That is why I wanted to meet you.’

But Mr Dorrit accepted the visitor easily. ‘Mr Clennam, you are welcome, sir. Please sit down.’ His voice was soft

but proud. 'I have welcomed many gentlemen to these walls. Perhaps my daughter Amy has mentioned that I am the Father of this place. You know, I am sure, that my daughter Amy was born here. A good girl, sir, a dear girl; for many years a comfort and support to me. Amy, my dear, put the dish on the table. Will you join me, sir?'

'Thank you,' said Arthur. 'Nothing for me.'

Arthur was astonished at the man's manner. He did not seem to think that talking so freely about the family history might make his daughter feel uncomfortable.

Little Dorrit filled her father's glass with water, put his supper on the table, and sat down beside him while he ate. The way she looked at her father, half proud of him, half ashamed of him, all loving, went deep into Arthur's heart.

'Everyone who comes to the Marshalsea visits me. As many as forty or fifty in a day,' said Mr Dorrit, anxiously pushing his knife and fork around his plate. 'You must know, Mr Clennam,' went on the Father of the Marshalsea, 'that sometimes people who come here offer a little – something – to the Father of the place.'

Little Dorrit looked down, and put her hand anxiously on her father's arm. Mr Dorrit's voice was still soft, but it became more hesitant. 'It is generally – ha – money. And it is – it is often – hem – acceptable. Yes, very acceptable. Only last month, a gentleman visited me and offered me – ahem – two guineas.'

Arthur was wondering what to say when a bell began to ring and footsteps came up to the door. A pretty woman and a young man stood there.

'Mr Clennam, this is Fanny, my older daughter, and my son, Tip,' said Mr Dorrit. 'The bell is a signal for visitors to leave the prison, and so they have come to say good night.'



'Everyone who comes to the Marshalsea visits me,' said Mr Dorrit.

'I only want my clean dress from Amy,' said Fanny.

'And I want my clothes,' said Tip.

Little Dorrit opened a drawer and brought out two little piles of clothes, which she gave to her brother and sister.

'Mended?' Arthur heard the sister ask in a whisper.

'Yes,' answered Little Dorrit.

While they were talking, Arthur stood up and looked around the room. Although it was small and poorly furnished, it was neat and even comfortable. Everything in it was shabby but clean.

The bell went on ringing, and Fanny hurried out of the room. 'Now, Mr Clennam,' said Frederick as he followed her, 'we must go quickly, sir, or we will be locked inside.'

Little Dorrit had left the room after the others, and Arthur now turned to the Father of the Marshalsea and put something into his hand.

'Mr Clennam,' said the Father. 'I am deeply, deeply—'

But Arthur had gone downstairs with great speed. He saw Little Dorrit by the gate.

'Please forgive me,' he said, 'for speaking to you here. Please forgive me for coming here at all! I followed you tonight because I want to help you and your family in some way. I could not speak to you at my mother's house.'

Little Dorrit looked a little afraid. 'You are very good, sir. But I – I wish you hadn't followed me. Mrs Clennam has been very kind to give me work, and I don't want to have a secret from her.'

'Have you known my mother long?' asked Arthur.

'Two years, I think. We have a friend, Father and I – Mr Plornish. I wrote out notices which said that I was available for sewing work, and Mr Plornish gave them to people for me. That's how your mother found me. She doesn't know that I live in the prison.'

Little Dorrit was trembling and anxious. The bell stopped ringing. 'You must go, sir. The gate will be locked!' And she turned away to go back to her father.

That night, as Arthur tried to sleep, he wondered if his mother had a reason for helping Little Dorrit. Perhaps something she or his father had done had made William Dorrit fall so low. Was this the secret that had made his father feel guilty?