

David Copperfield
Charles Dickens

The day David Copperfield is born, his rich, eccentric Aunt Betsey Trotwood storms away in disapproval because the new baby is not a girl. David is raised by his pretty young mother, widowed before he was born, and their loyal servant, Clara Peggotty. But this idyllic childhood is interrupted when black-whiskered Mr. Murdstone begins to court Mrs. Copperfield. David happily goes with Peggotty to visit her family in Yarmouth- her fisherman brother, Daniel, and his adopted nephew and niece, Ham and Little Em'ly. When David returns home, however, Murdstone and David's mother have married, and not long after, Murdstone's sister Jane moves in. The Murdstones intimidate David's mother and terrorize David, until one day he bites Mr. Murdstone's hand in a rebellious rage. As punishment, David is sent to Salem House, a boarding school near London, where he is miserable. However, he does make two friends- dull, decent Tommy Traddles, and brilliant James Steerforth, an older student whom David idolizes.

David's schooldays are interrupted by the news that his mother and her new baby have died. After their funeral, David is not sent back to Salem House but kept idle at home. Peggotty is fired and marries the local wagon-driver, Barkis. Eventually Murdstone announces that he has provided for David by getting him a job, working in the London warehouse of Murdstone's wine business. David, who is only ten, begins to work several hours a day, six days a week, alongside grimy, uneducated boys, for only a few shillings. The only light in this grim period is his friendship with the debt-ridden Micawber family, who rent a bedroom in their apartment to David. When the Micawbers leave London, David decides to run away to his Aunt Betsey, whom he has never met. On foot, penniless, beset by thieves and con men, David makes the journey to Aunt Betsey's cottage in Dover.

Though disconcerted by this ragged child on her doorstep, Betsey soon warms to him, especially after the Murdstones come to collect him and she sees what his alternative is. David settles happily into a new circle of friends: simpleminded Mr. Dick, who lives at Betsey's; Betsey's lawyer Mr. Wickfield, his sweet daughter Agnes, and his fawning law clerk Uriah Heep; the master of David's new school, Dr. Strong, his young wife Annie, and her flirtatious cousin Jack Maldon.

David grows to young manhood, and, once he has finished school, his aunt sends him to London to choose a career. In London, David runs into his old friend James Steerforth, who takes David home to meet his proud, possessive mother and her companion, the intense Rosa Dartle. In turn, David takes Steerforth with him to Yarmouth, to visit Peggotty and her family. Steerforth is a great hit with everyone, and he buys a boat so he can sail down there regularly.

Back in London, David and Betsey go to the law offices of Spewlow and Jorkins; in Doctors' Commons, where David is taken in as a trainee in the firm. David meets Mr. Spewlow's pretty daughter Dora and falls madly in love. He also meets Tommy Traddles again, and finds that he is boarding with the Micawbers! Then David is called to Yarmouth for Barkis' funeral. That night, Emily, who has been engaged to Ham, disappears, leaving a note that she has run off with Steerforth- with no plans to be married.

Aunt Betsey arrives in London with the news that she has lost all her money and is moving in to live with David on a tiny income. In spite of this setback, David continues to court Dora secretly

until, after Mr. Spewlow's sudden death, they can announce their engagement. But Mr. Spewlow left Dora penniless, and David must work hard to earn enough money to marry. He takes on a second job as secretary to his old schoolmaster, Dr. Strong, who has now moved to London. David also learns shorthand and begins working as a reporter covering parliamentary debates. He finally makes enough money to marry Dora, and they move into a cottage across the street from Aunt Betsey. David discovers that his adorable bride is totally unfit to manage a household, and, though he still loves her, he despairs about their domestic life. He throws himself into his work and begins to win some fame as a fiction writer. At about this time he witnesses a reconciliation between Annie and Dr. Strong, who have been unhappy together because of Jack Maldon's flirtations with Annie. As David hears Annie tell Dr. Strong how his love for her has given her strength and wisdom, David wonders if his own marriage will survive so well.

News from Canterbury, from David's old friends the Wickfields, becomes steadily gloomier. Mr. Wickfield, who is depressed and drinking too much, has had his business virtually taken over by Uriah Heep, who also has hopes of marrying Agnes. The usually unemployed Mr. Micawber now works for Heep, and his personality has become strangely secretive and harsh, to Mrs. Micawber's despair. David and Traddles meet Micawber in London, and learn that he, too, is in Heep's power. But he intends, with help, to expose the villain. While Traddles helps Micawber to uncover evidence against Heep, David helps Daniel Peggotty find Emily, who has returned, a ruined woman, to London. She and her uncle make plans to emigrate to Australia, where her past will be unknown.

Meanwhile, after a stillbirth, Dora has fallen gravely ill. David leaves her bedside to go to Canterbury to watch Micawber and Traddles confront Heep with their knowledge of his schemes. Heep is thrown out, Mr. Wickfield's name is cleared, and Betsey's "lost" investments are recovered. Betsey suggests to Micawber that he and his family emigrate to Australia, too, and lends him some money for a fresh start.

Back in London, David nurses Dora, but it is Agnes, sisterly and serene, who is with her when she finally dies. Numb with grief, David helps the emigrants prepare to leave, and agrees to take a letter from Emily to Ham. But a wicked storm hits Yarmouth that night, and David sees Ham, who seems indifferent to life now, swim out to save people from a shipwreck. David alone recognizes the ship's last victim as Steerforth. Ironically, Ham drowns trying to save the man who ruined his happiness. Steerforth's lifeless body is washed up on shore.

The emigrants leave for Australia, and David goes to Switzerland for several months to recover from his grief. Eventually he writes a novel about his experiences. He also thinks a lot about Agnes Wickfield, realizes that he has always been in love with her, and regrets that she has shown only sisterly feelings toward him. Returning to England, he finally confesses his feelings to Agnes and learns that she has always loved him, too. They marry, have children, and live happily ever after.