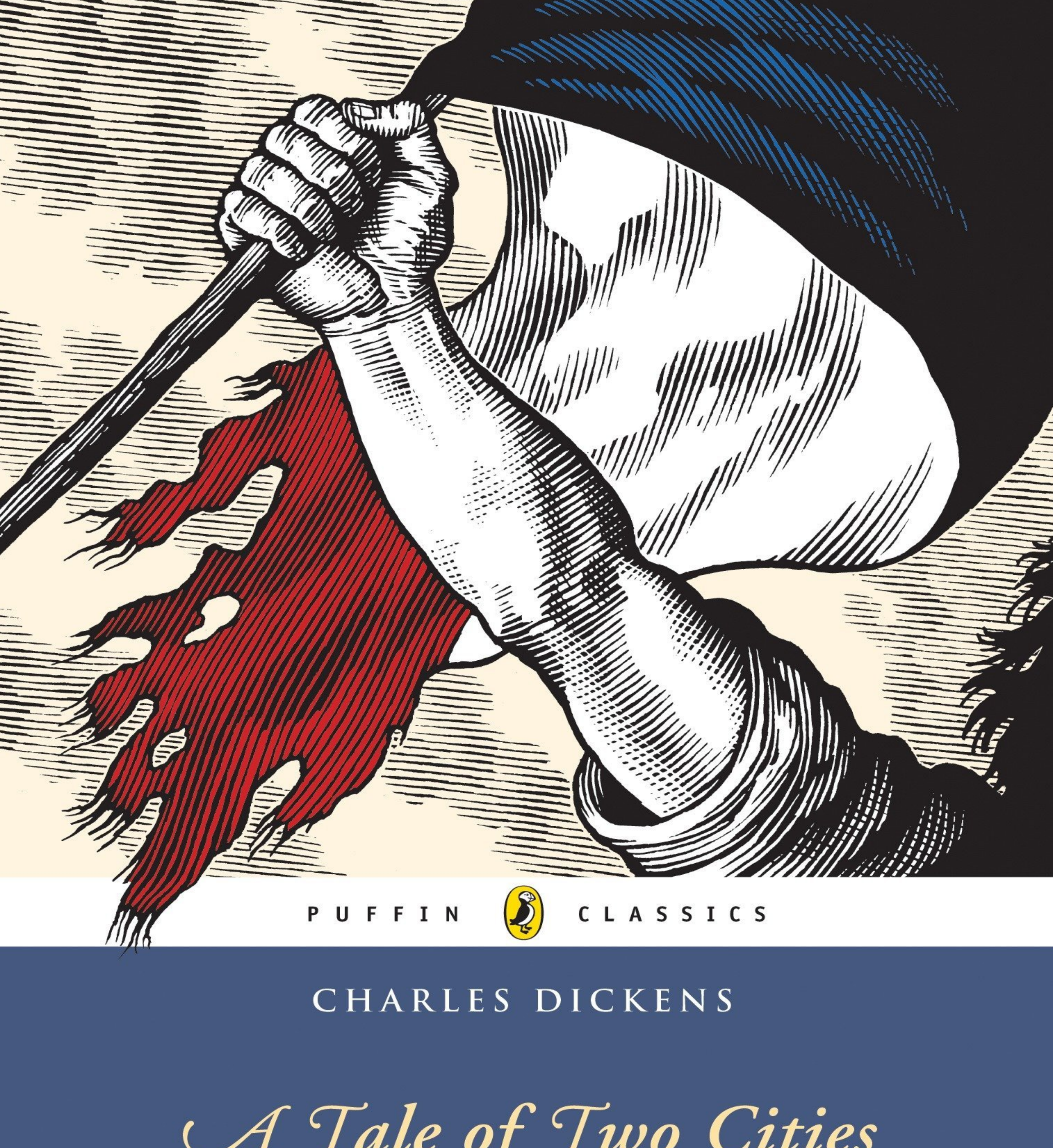


PUFFIN CLASSICS

CHARLES DICKENS

A Tale of Two Cities

INTRODUCED BY RODDY DOYLE

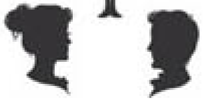
It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

There were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face, on the throne of England; there were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a fair face, on the throne of France.

It was the year of Our Lord one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five.

CHARLES DICKENS

A TALE of TWO CITIES



INTRODUCED BY
RODDY DOYLE

Abridged by LINDA JENNINGS

PUFFIN CLASSICS

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Introduction by Roddy Doyle

Charles Dickens wrote *A Tale of Two Cities* when he was forty-seven. More importantly, I read it when I was eleven. I remember it clearly – I think.

That's the problem with memory; we *think* we remember. But how can we be certain that we're not just making it up? I remember – I think – telling a friend of mine about a fight I'd seen outside a fish and chip shop near where I lived. I was halfway through describing the fight when I realized that I hadn't actually seen the fight at all, or not really. It was something I'd seen in a film, something so vivid and frightening it had gone into my head and become mine. Things we imagine, or things we see in films, the books we read, the stories we hear – these can become as real to us as the 'real' things that actually happen to us.

Charles Dickens was born in 1812. *A Tale of Two Cities* is set in London and Paris in the years just before, and during, the French Revolution, which started in Paris in 1789. Dickens wasn't there; he wasn't even born. The descriptions of the rioting and terror, the prisons, the guillotine, the nasty and the noble characters – he made them up. I think that's amazing. But I didn't think that when I was eleven, when I was reading *A Tale of Two Cities* – not at first. I didn't care who'd written the book. It was so vivid and brilliant, so dramatic and scary, I wasn't aware that anyone had written it. There was just me and the story. The characters were real people who were being carried to a real guillotine and their real heads were being chopped off. It was great. Heads were being chopped off – in a book! Like all good Irish boys, I loved a good execution. And death by guillotine was as good as it got, as exciting and as absolutely terrifying. Carts – *tumbrils* – full of people were being pulled through the crowded streets of Paris to the guillotine. Women sat knitting while they watched. Knitting! Like my mother! And that wasn't all. Graves were robbed, spies spied on other spies, coaches full of frightened men and women charged across the countryside – in much the same way that I charged through the book. I felt I had no choice. Somehow, if I finished the book in one sitting without going to the toilet or going outside to play football (badly), fewer people would die. The faster I read, the fewer heads would roll. I saved hundreds of lives that day but, by the time I had finished the book, I was bursting to go the toilet.

A Tale of Two Cities had a huge impact on me. When I'd finished it I paid proper attention to the name of the writer, Charles Dickens. I wanted to read more of his books: *Oliver Twist, Great Expectations, David Copperfield*. I read them, and Dickens became my favourite writer.

And then there was the knitting. Before I read *A Tale of Two Cities* knitting was something that mothers did, like cooking and ironing. My mother knitted. But after *A Tale of Two Cities* knitting became much more sinister. One of the book's best characters, Madame Defarge, knits while she watches the guillotine slice through the necks of hundreds of men and women. (To be fair to my mother, she never knitted while she watched heads being chopped off – as far as I know.) Earlier in the book, she – Madame Defarge, not my mother – knits the names of her enemies into whatever garment she's knitting. She even knits the name of a spy, John Barsad, as she's talking to him. The knitting is a code, a death sentence. Hidden in the wool is a list of people who are going to go to the guillotine. Something as innocent as knitting has become secret and frightening and absolutely brilliant.

It was then I realized that the story had actually been written, that a writer had invented the idea of the code in the wool, because it was too brilliant to be true. The plot, the characters, the big events and the tiny details had all been created by Charles Dickens, by writing words, by putting them on to a page, one after the other. It seemed as simple and as inviting as that. *A Tale of Two Cities* isn't Dickens's best book but it's still great, and it's the book that made me want to be a writer – I think.

Knitting still scares me. When I asked my wife to marry me I asked her another question first:

‘Do you like knitting?’

‘No.’

‘Will you marry me?’

‘OK.’

She doesn’t know it, but she was the fifteenth woman I asked to marry me that day. Knitting is very popular in Ireland. It’s a frightening place to live in. But at least it never rains.

Book One

RECALLED TO LIFE

1

The Period

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

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It was the year of Our Lord one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five.

France rolled with exceeding smoothness down hill, making paper money and spending it. Under the guidance of her Christian pastors, she entertained herself, besides, with such humane achievements as sentencing a youth to have his hands cut off, his tongue torn out with pincers, and his body burned alive, because he had not kneeled down in the rain to do honour to a dirty procession of monks. It is likely enough that, rooted in the woods of France and Norway, there were growing trees, when that sufferer was put to death, already marked by the woodman, Fate, to come down and be sawn into boards, to make a certain movable framework with a sack and a knife in it, terrible in history. It is likely enough that in the rough outhouses of some tillers of the heavy lands adjacent to Paris, there were sheltered from the weather that very day, rude carts, which the Farmer, Death, had already set apart to be his tumbrils of the Revolution.

In England, daring burglaries by armed men, and highway robberies, took place in the capital itself every night; families were publicly cautioned not to go out of town without removing their furniture to upholsterers' warehouses for security; thieves snipped off diamond crosses from the necks of noble lords at Court drawing-rooms; musketeers went into St Giles's, to search for contraband goods, and the mob fired on the musketeers, and the musketeers fired on the mob; and nobody thought any of these occurrences much out of the common way.

These things, and a thousand like them, came to pass in and close upon the dear old year one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five. Environed by them, while the Woodman and the Farmer worked unheeded, those two of the large jaws, and those other two of the plain and the fair faces, trod with stir enough, and carried their divine rights with a high hand. Thus did the year one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five conduct their Greatnesses, and myriads of small creatures – the creatures of this chronicle among the rest – along the roads that lay before them.

2

The Mail

It was the Dover road that lay, on a Friday night late in November, before the first of the persons with whom this history has business. The Dover road lay, as to him, beyond the Dover mail, as it lumbered up Shooter's Hill. He walked up-hill in the mire by the side of the mail, as the rest of the passengers did; because the hill, and the harness, and the mud, and the mail, were all so heavy, that the horses had three times already come to a stop.

Two other passengers, besides the one, were plodding up the hill by the side of the mail. Not one of the three could have said, from anything he saw, what either of the other two was like; and each was hidden under almost as many wrappers from the eyes of the mind, as from the eyes of the body, of his two companions. In those days, travellers were very shy of being confidential on a short notice, for anybody on the road might be a robber or in league with robbers.

The Dover mail was in its usual genial position that the guard suspected the passengers, the passengers suspected one another and the guard, they all suspected everybody else, and the coachman was sure of nothing but the horses.

'Wo-ho!' said the coachman. 'So, then! One more pull and you're at the top and be damned to you, for I have had trouble enough to get you to it!'

The emphatic horse made a decided scramble for it, and the three other horses followed suit.

The last burst carried the mail to the summit of the hill. The horses stopped to breathe again, and the guard got down to skid the wheel for the descent, and open the coach-door to let the passengers in.

‘Tst! Joe!’ cried the coachman in a warning voice, looking down from his box. ‘What do you say, Tom?’ They both listened. ‘I say a horse at a canter coming up.’

‘*I* say a horse at a gallop, Tom,’ returned the guard, leaving his hold of the door, and mounting nimbly to his place. ‘Gentlemen! In the king’s name, all of you!’

With this hurried adjuration, he cocked his blunderbuss, and stood on the offensive.

The passenger booked by this history, was on the coach-step, getting in; the two other passengers were close behind him, and about to follow. He remained on the step, half in the coach and half out of it; they remained in the road below him.

The sound of a horse at a gallop came fast and furiously up the hill.

‘So-ho!’ the guard sang out, as loud as he could roar. ‘Yo there! Stand! I shall fire!’

The pace was suddenly checked, and, with much splashing and floundering, a man’s voice called from the mist, ‘Is that the Dover mail?’

‘Why do you want to know?’

‘I want a passenger, if it is.’

‘What passenger?’

‘Mr Jarvis Lorry.’

Our booked passenger showed in a moment that it was his name. The guard, the coachman, and the two other passengers eyed him distrustfully.

‘Keep where you are,’ the guard called to the voice in the mist, ‘because, if I should make a mistake, it could never be set right in your lifetime. Gentleman of the name of Lorry answer straight.’

‘What is the matter?’ asked the passenger, then, with mildly quavering speech. ‘Who wants me? Is it Jerry?’

‘Yes, Mr Lorry.’

‘What is the matter?’

‘A despatch sent you from over yonder. T. and Co.’

‘I know this messenger, guard,’ said Mr Lorry, getting down into the road. ‘He may come close; there’s nothing wrong.’

‘I hope there ain’t, but I can’t make so ’Nation sure of that,’ said the guard, in gruff soliloquy. ‘Hallo you!’

‘Well! And hallo you!’ said Jerry.

The figures of a horse and rider came slowly through the eddying mist, and came to the side of the mail, where the passenger stood. The rider stooped and handed the passenger a small folded paper.

‘Guard!’ said the passenger, in a tone of quiet business confidence. ‘There is nothing to apprehend. I belong to Tellson’s Bank. I am going to Paris on business. A crown to drink. I may read this?’

‘If so be as you’re quick, sir.’

He opened it in the light of the coach-lamp on that side and read – first to himself and then aloud: ‘“Wait at Dover for Mam’selle.” It’s not long, you see, guard. Jerry, say that my answer was, RECALLED TO LIFE.’

Jerry started in his saddle. ‘That’s a Blazing strange answer, too,’ said he, at his hoarsest.

‘Take that message back, and they will know that I received this, as well as if I wrote. Make the best of your way. Good night.’

With those words the passenger opened the coach-door and got in; not at all assisted by his fellow-passengers, who had expeditiously secreted their watches and purses in their boots, and were now making a general pretence of being asleep.

The coach lumbered on again, with heavier wreaths of mist closing round it as it began the descent and the guard soon replaced his blunderbuss in his arm-chest.

Jerry, left alone in the mist and darkness, dismounted meanwhile, not only to ease his spent horse, but to wipe the mud from his face, and shake the wet out of his hat-brim. After standing with the bridle over his heavily-splashed arm, until the wheels of the mail were no longer within hearing and the night was quite still again, he turned to walk down the hill.

‘After that there gallop from Temple-bar, old lady, I won’t trust your fore-legs till I get you on the level,’ said this messenger, glancing at his mare. '"Recalled to life." That's a Blazing strange message. You'd be in a Blazing bad way, if recalling to life was to come into fashion, Jerry!'

3

The Night Shadows

A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other.

With the three passengers shut up in the narrow compass of one lumbering old mail-coach; they were mysteries to one another, as complete as if each had been in his own coach and six, or his own coach and sixty, with the breadth of a county between him and the next.

The messenger rode back at an easy trot, stopping pretty often at ale-houses by the way to drink, but evincing a tendency to keep his own counsel, and to keep his hat cocked over his eyes. He had eyes that assorted very well with that decoration, being of a surface black, with no depth in the colour or form, and much too near together. They had a sinister expression, under an old cocked-hat like a three-cornered spittoon, and over a great muffler for the chin and throat, which descended nearly to the wearer's knees.

'No, Jerry, no!' said the messenger, harping on one theme as he rose. 'It wouldn't do for you, Jerry. Jerry, you honest tradesman, it wouldn't suit *your* line of business! Recalled –! Bust me if I don't think he'd been a drinking!'

His message perplexed his mind to that degree that he was fain, several times, to take off his hat to scratch his head.

While he trotted back with the message he was to deliver to the night watchman in his box at the door of Tellson's Bank, by Temple-bar, who was to deliver it to greater authorities within, the shadows of the night took such shapes to him as arose out of the message. They seemed to be numerous, for she shied at every shadow on the road.

What time, the mail-coach lumbered, jolted, rattled, and bumped upon its tedious way, with its three fellow-inscrutables inside.

Tellson’s Bank had a run upon it in the mail. As the bank passenger – with an arm drawn through the leathern strap – nodded in his place, with half-shut eyes, the little coach-windows, and the coach-lamp dimly gleaming through them, and the bulky bundle of opposite passenger, became the bank, and did a great stroke of business. The rattle of the harness was the chink of money, and more drafts were honoured in five minutes that even Tellson’s, with all its foreign and home connexion, ever paid in thrice the time.

But, though the bank was almost always with him, and though the coach was always with him, there was another current of impression that never ceased to run, all through the night. He was on his way to dig some one out of a grave.

Now, which of the multitude of faces that showed themselves before him was the true face of the buried person, the shadows of the night did not indicate; but they were all the faces of a man of five-and-forty by years, and they differed principally in the passions they expressed, and in the ghastliness of their worn and wasted state. A hundred times the dozing passenger inquired of this spectre:

‘Buried how long?’

The answer was always the same. ‘Almost eighteen years.’

‘You had abandoned all hope of being dug out?’

‘Long ago.’

‘You know that you are recalled to life?’

‘They tell me so.’

‘I hope you care to live?’

‘I can’t say.’

‘Shall I show her to you? Will you come and see her?’

The answers to this question were various and contradictory. Sometimes the broken reply was, ‘Wait! It would kill me if I saw her too soon.’

Sometimes, it was given in a tender rain of tears, and then it was 'Take me to her.' Sometimes it was staring and bewildered, and then it was, 'I don't know her. I don't understand.'

After such imaginary discourse, the passenger in his fancy would dig, and dig, dig – now, with a spade, now with his hands – to dig this wretched creature out. The passenger would then start to himself, and lower the window, to get the reality of mist and rain on his cheek.

Yet even when his eyes were opened on the mist and rain, the night shadows outside the coach would fall into the train of the night shadows within. The real Banking-house by Temple-bar, the real business of the past day, and the real message returned, would all be there. Out of the midst of them, the ghostly face would rise, and he would accost it again.

'Buried how long?'

'Almost eighteen years.'

'I hope you care to live?'

'I can't say.'

Dig – dig – dig – until an impatient movement from one of the two passengers would admonish him to pull up the window.

The words were still in his hearing as just spoken when the weary passenger started to the consciousness of daylight, and found that the shadows of the night were gone.

'Eighteen years!' said the passenger, looking at the sun. 'Gracious Creator of day! To be buried alive for eighteen years!'