***David Copperfield***

***Chapter 8 – My Holidays. Especially One Happy Afternoon***

***Summary:***

* David makes his way to an inn in London, where he catches the mail coach heading for Suffolk.
* Eventually, he finds himself back on Mr. Barkis's coach.
* David assures Mr. Barkis that he has passed on the message – "Barkis is willing" – to Peggotty.
* Mr. Barkis replies that, anyway, nothing came of it. Peggotty never answered him. And he's not willing to go speak to Peggotty directly about the matter.
* Mr. Barkis discovers that Peggotty's first name is not Peggotty, it's Clara (just like Mrs. Copperfield!)
* Mr. Barkis suggests that David tell Peggotty that he, Mr. Barkis, is waiting for an answer.
* David finds it very strange to be going home, where he remembers happy times with his mother and Peggotty that will never come again.
* David comes in to his old house and hears the sound of his mother singing.
* David enters the parlor to find his mother breast-feeding a baby: it is her new son.
* In that moment, David is as perfectly happy and good as he has ever been.
* Mrs. Copperfield embraces David, Peggotty comes running in, and everyone is overjoyed.
* Mr. and Miss Murdstone have gone out, so they have the house to themselves.
* They all dine together, and David tells Peggotty about Mr. Barkis's message.
* Peggotty laughs and throws her apron over her face.
* Peggotty tells Mrs. Copperfield that Barkis wants to *marry* her.
* Mrs. Copperfield says it would be a good match, but Peggotty says she won't do it.
* David notices that Mrs. Copperfield is looking thin, anxious, and tired.
* Finally, Mrs. Copperfield reaches out to Peggotty and asks her not to leave Mrs. Copperfield. She says ominously: "Don't leave me, Peggotty. Stay with me. It will not be for long, perhaps" (8.57)
* Peggotty promises that she will never leave Mrs. Copperfield, even though some might be pleased if she did.
* David tells them about how awful Mr. Creakle is, and how good Steerforth is.
* They are so happy and peaceful together that David can imagine the Murdstones had never come in to their lives.
* Suddenly, Peggotty wonders whatever became of David's great-aunt (that would be Miss Betsey Trotwood, who we met in the first chapter and never heard from again).
* Mrs. Copperfield tells Peggotty to put it out of her mind; it's not like they're likely to *see* Miss Betsey again (plot point!).
* Peggotty thinks that Miss Betsey might leave David something in her will if she were to die. Miss Betsey might be willing to forgive David for being born a boy now that he's got a brother.
* Mrs. Copperfield begins (kind of inexplicably) to cry. She tells Peggotty that she is being jealous and should go off and marry Mr. Barkis after all.
* Peggotty answers that it would make Miss Murdstone happy if she did.
* Mrs. Copperfield scolds Peggotty for her bad nature.
* Mrs. Copperfield accuses Peggotty of insinuating that neither Miss nor Mr. Murdstone have good intentions.
* Peggotty doesn't answer.
* Finally, Mrs. Copperfield winds down and suggests that she and Peggotty shouldn't argue anyway, because Peggotty is Mrs. Copperfield's true friend.
* Peggotty is quick to agree to this, and everyone seems happy again.
* At around 10 o'clock, they hear coach wheels: the Murdstones are back.
* David rushes off to bed before he can meet them.
* The next morning, David creeps into the parlor. He sees Mr. Murdstone and apologizes for having bitten him all that long time ago.
* Mr. Murdstone thanks David for his apology and shakes his hand – with the hand that David bit.
* David greets Miss Murdstone, whose only reply is that she's glad that a day of David's holiday has already passed (so they'll be rid of him soon).
* One day, David comes into a room where Miss Murdstone and Mrs. Copperfield are sitting with the baby.
* David picks up his brother, and Miss Murdstone gives a scream.
* Miss Murdstone has a huge fit because David has touched the baby. She insists that David can never be allowed to touch the baby again.
* Mrs. Copperfield weakly agrees with Miss Murdstone's order.
* On a later occasion, Mrs. Copperfield notices that the baby has the exact same eyes as David. She decides that their blue eyes must come from her side of the family.
* Miss Murdstone takes huge offense at this, calls Mrs. Copperfield a fool, and insists that David and his brother are completely and totally different in all ways.
* David continues to feel ashamed and excluded by everyone at the Rookery: those who like him are afraid to show it, and those who don't like him tell him so over and over again to his face.
* Because they don't like him and he seems to make them unhappy, David decides to keep as quiet and out of the way as he can.
* But he can't stay totally out of the way: the Murdstones make David sit with the family in the parlor in the evenings so that they can monitor Mrs. Copperfield's treatment of him.
* One evening, the two Murdstones comment that David has a sulky, sullen manner.
* For once, Mrs. Copperfield doesn't just go along with their bullying: she asks Miss Murdstone if she is sure that she understands David.
* But Miss Murdstone immediately shames Mrs. Copperfield into agreeing, again, as usual.
* And then the two Murdstones humiliate her further by calling into question her judgment: Mr. Murdstone calls Mrs. Copperfield "weak and inconsiderate" (8.139).
* Mr. Murdstone turns on David again.
* David says he hasn't meant to be sulky, and Mr. Murdstone calls him a liar with an attachment to "low and common company" (8.147) – in other words, servants like Peggotty. He forbids David from hiding away in his room or in the kitchen any longer.
* So, David has to spend all of his time in the parlor trying to avoid being yelled at.
* And so his holidays pass away.
* Finally, David gets to go back to school. He's sorry to leave his mother and baby brother, but still he's glad to be getting away from the Rookery.
* As David drives away with Mr. Barkis, he hears his mother calling.
* He looks over his shoulder and sees her looking at him care with her eyes, holding his baby brother up for him to see.

***Synopsis:***

David arrives home for the holidays to find that his mother has given birth to a baby boy. She has also fallen into bad health and does not seem likely to recover. David, his mother, and Peggotty spend a quiet evening together until the two Murdstones return from an outing. The bad relationship between David and the Murdstones resumes, with the addition of the Murdstones banning David from touching or even being near the new baby. David tries to avoid conflict by staying out of their way but they respond by ordering him to stay in the public rooms of the house where they can monitor him. His vacation passes slowly and is very emotionally painful for David as his mother draws away from him out of fear of her husband and sister-in-law. Finally David returns to Salem House, feeling both sorry to leave his mother again and relieved to escape from the cruelty of his stepfather. This chapter foreshadows the death of David's mother. It is clear that this will be the last time that David will see her alive. The change in their relationship in such as short time is very painful for David. In trying to please his mother, David falls further into the pattern of submission to weak-willed women who will dominate his adult love life. He forgives his mother's abandonment of him and concentrates all his negative feelings on his stepfather.

***Critical Analysis(Ch7-8):***

Mr. Creakle opens school the next day by switching a good number of the boys, including David, with a cane; "Half the establishment was writhing and crying before the day's work began," Dickens comments. The beatings are David's most vivid recollection of the school, along with the abuse suffered by poor Traddles who was "caned every day that half-year . . ."

The classes themselves are conducted within an atmosphere of noise and "sheer cruelty" in which boys are "too much troubled and knocked about to learn." One day the usually gentle Mr. Mell (to whom David is sympathetic) is conducting class and calls for silence in the room, particularly from Steerforth.

Steerforth begins to insult the schoolmaster, calling him a "beggar" and encouraging the other students to join the abuse. Mr. Creakle enters the room and takes Steerforth's side, adding further insult to the poor teacher. Steerforth tells everyone that Mr. Mell's mother is boarded in an alms-house (information which David had innocently told his friend). After further harassment, Mr. Creakle fires the schoolmaster on the spot.

One day, Mr. Peggotty and Ham visit David, bringing him an assortment of seafood and information about the health of the Peggotty household. David asks about little Em'ly, whom Mr. Peggotty describes as "getting to be a woman." Steerforth appears, and Mr. Peggotty and Ham invite him to visit them if he should ever come to Yarmouth.

The half-year passes, with summer days changing to frosty fall mornings, and David looks forward to the holidays when he can return home. Finally school is out, and David begins the long coach trip home to see his mother.

David spends the first night of his return journey at an inn in Yarmouth, where Mr. Barkis calls for him the next morning in his carrier. David tells the driver that he sent Peggotty the message that was requested, but Mr. Barkis replies that "nothing come of it." He asks David to repeat the message to her and to say that he is "a-waiting for an answer." David still does not realize that this is a marriage proposal. When David arrives home, he finds his mother in the parlor. He is surprised to find her holding an infant, which she introduces as his new brother.

The Murdstones being out on a visit, Peggotty, David, and his mother have supper together and spend a happy evening. David relates Barkis's message again and learns its meaning for the first time.

David's mother implores Peggotty to stay with her, and Peggotty vows that she will. David notices his mother's failing health — "her hand . . . so thin and white" — and her changed manner, "anxious and fluttered." But the familiar scene lulls away his anxiety, and he launches into stories about all that has happened.

The Murdstones return late that evening, and in the morning David apologizes to his stepfather for having been so disrespectful as to bite his hand during their last meeting. Later, however, David is set upon by Miss Murdstone for picking up his baby brother, and his mother is reprimanded for comparing the appearance of her two boys. David feels that he makes everyone, even his mother, uncomfortable with his presence, so he begins spending his evenings with Peggotty in the kitchen. However, he is told sternly "not to associate with servants" and not to retreat to his room during the day. In this way the holidays "lagged away," and David is not sorry when it is time to leave again for school. He will never see his mother again.

Chapter 7 further delineates the character of Steerforth, whom David admires, but who, in reality, is a rogue who uses other people for his own ends. David does not tell him about Em'ly, being "too much afraid of his laughing at me"; yet they will meet and Steerforth will bring about her destruction.

Steerforth's superficial, polished, and handsome appearance are weapons which he uses on people. Ham and Mr. Peggotty, like David, believe that he is a cultured gentleman. The unlucky Traddles, in all his misfortune, proves to be the most humane of all the boys.

The wretchedness of the school headed by the cruel Mr. Crealde is Dickens' protest against many schools of that period. Dickens attended Wellington Academy in North London, and this is probably a disguised account of his own schooling.

In Chapter 8, the main emphasis is on the fact that David is deeply torn between his love for his mother and the desire to be near her, and his terrible dislike for the Murdstones. The Murdstones completely dominate David's mother and have such control over her that she ends up defending the Murdstones in an argument with Peggotty. David's realization that the gulf between him and his mother cannot be bridged under these conditions is a stage in his slowly developing maturity.

***Critical Study:***

Barkis picks up David at Yarmouth in his horse cart to take him back to Blunderstone and he asks David to remind Peggotty he's still waiting for an answer to the message "Barkis is willin'." David arrives at Blunderstone to find, to his delight, he has a baby brother. The Murdstones are out for the evening, so David, his mother, and Peggotty enjoy a pleasant reunion. David delivers Barkis's message and realizes for the first time it means he wishes to marry Peggotty, who declares she won't have him, or anyone, because she won't leave Clara and David. The remainder of David's visit, though, is uncomfortable. Mr. Murdstone forbids David from escaping to his room to read. Noting David's "attachment to low and common company," Mr. Murdstone also forbids him from spending time with Peggotty. Dismayed by his mother's complete submission to the Murdstones, David is glad to return to school in spite of Creakle's beatings.

***Significance:***

On the day that David arrives home for the holidays, Mr. and Miss Murdstone are away. David, his mother, and Peggotty have supper and pass an evening the way they used to do before his mother remarried. David’s mother has a new child, and David loves the child dearly. The three laugh about Mr. Barkis’s proposal to Peggotty, and Peggotty vows never to leave David’s mother. Peggotty and David’s mother quarrel briefly over David’s mother’s marriage to Mr. Murdstone. David’s mother argues that Mr. Murdstone is just trying to improve her character. She feels that she should be grateful to him. David observes that Peggotty only provokes his mother so that she might feel better by providing these justifications.

The next morning, David apologizes to Mr. Murdstone for biting his hand. Later, he picks up the baby. Miss Murdstone flies into a rage, telling David never to touch the child again. To David’s surprise, his mother sides with Miss Murdstone. David’s mother observes that her two children have the same eyes. Miss Murdstone shrieks that such a comparison between the wretched David and her knightly brother’s child is utterly foolish. Mr. Murdstone forces David to remain in the company of the adults, even though they never speak to him. Mr. Murdstone says that David’s habit of reading in his room is evidence of his sullenness.

When David’s holiday is over, Mr. Barkis picks him up. As they drive away, David turns around and sees his mother standing in the road and holding up her child to him.

***Summary and analysis Part by Part:***

***Summary Part 1:***

The coach deposits [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) at an inn in Yarmouth, and the next morning, [Mr. Barkis](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-barkis) arrives to bring him the rest of the way home. David tells Barkis that he relayed his message to [Peggotty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/peggotty) and is surprised at Barkis's "gruff" response. David presses Barkis further, and Barkis says Peggotty has not given him an answer and that he does not intend to press her for one. However, he asks David to tell Peggotty that he is waiting for a response.

***Analysis Part 1:***

David's confusion during this exchange with Barkis is not simply the result of his romantic inexperience; Barkis's method of courting Peggotty is idiosyncratic, and mostly played for comic relief.

***Summary Part 2:***

[David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) is overcome by a "strange feeling" as he approaches his home; he realizes that it is no longer the happy place he remembers, and thinks it might have been better to stay at Salem House. Pushing aside his fear of [Mr. Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-murdstone) and [Miss Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/miss-murdstone), David enters the house only to hear [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield) singing. The sound makes David think of his early childhood, and he approaches to find her singing to a baby. When she sees David, Clara embraces him and introduces him to his baby brother. David is so happy that he later wishes he "had died" during the reunion.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Despite David's misgivings, he actually is able in this scene to briefly return to the home he has otherwise lost: the image of David with his mother and younger brother is one of perfect domestic bliss. It's significant, however, that David feels as though the moment is also a return to the past, and even more significant that he wishes to die then and there. Even if the Murdstones weren't a factor, this kind of "infantine" happiness is not something that can last indefinitely; the only way to remain a baby in his mother's arms forever, as David puts it, is to die.

***Summary Part 3:***

[Mr. Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-murdstone) and [Miss Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/miss-murdstone) are out, so [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield), [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield), and [Peggotty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/peggotty) spend a happy afternoon together. Over dinner, he relays [Barkis](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-barkis)'s message to Peggotty, who laughs and grows flustered as she denies having any intention of marrying him. Clara teases her, but David notices that she also looks "anxious" and "careworn." Eventually, she asks Peggotty not to leave her, and Peggotty swears not to, though there are "some Cats that would be well enough pleased if she did."Home and Family Theme Icon

***Analysis Part 3:***

Peggotty's position as Clara's housekeeper limits her ability to marry and establish a household of her own. Although the novel justifies this by attributing it to loyalty (and therefore Peggotty's own wishes), a real-life servant might be equally constrained by considerations like financial necessity.

***Summary Part 4:***

[David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield), [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield), and [Peggotty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/peggotty) continue to chat after dinner, David describing his experiences at school and reveling in the apparent return to older, happier times. Suddenly, Peggotty asks what has happened to [Miss Betsey](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/miss-betsey-trotwood), and then wonders whether she might leave anything to David in her will. Clara is skeptical, but Peggotty continues to press the issue, saying Miss Betsey might "forgive" David (for being born a boy) now that he has a brother.Home and Family Theme Icon

***Analysis Part 4:***

Even as David is enjoying the return of his old life, Peggotty breaks the mood by reminding him and Clara of how David's position in the household has now changed: her question about Miss Betsey's will is a veiled reference to the fact that David is now unlikely to inherit anything, since Mr. Murdstone will presumably leave everything to his new son.

***Summary part 5:***

This upsets [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield), who accuses [Peggotty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/peggotty) of being jealous of the baby, and suggests that she should marry [Barkis](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-barkis) after all. Peggotty retorts that that would make [Miss Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/miss-murdstone) happy, and the two women get into an argument, with Clara defending Miss Murdstone's place in the household on the basis of her (Clara's) incompetence. She also accuses Peggotty of "insinuating" that [Mr. Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-murdstone) is cruel to [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield), and defends her own "submissiveness" to her husband. David writes that he later suspected Peggotty provoked this argument in order to allow his mother to vent her feelings.

***Analysis Part 5:***

Clara's defensiveness suggests that she's aware on some level that the Murdstones are treating her and David poorly. With that said, there's an element of truth to her excuse-making: by the standards of the day, Clara is correct when she says she ought to be "submissive," though for a modern reader, the way in which Murdstone exploits Clara's submissiveness is likely to be an argument against it. Furthermore, Peggotty seems to share Clara's assessment of herself as childish and incompetent, since she provokes the whole argument to humor her mistress.

***Summary Part 6:***

That evening proves to be the "last of its race," and it is cut short by [Mr. Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-murdstone) and [Miss Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/miss-murdstone) arriving home. [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield) sends [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) to bed, however, and he does not see the Murdstones until the following morning. At breakfast, David apologizes for biting Mr. Murdstone and asks for his forgiveness. Miss Murdstone then asks how long David will be visiting, and begins to cross off the days on a calendar. Later that same day, David upsets Miss Murdstone by holding the baby, and Clara eventually concedes that Miss Murdstone is right to disapprove.

***Analysis Part 6:***

Just as Peggotty hinted, the birth of Clara and Murdstone's child has pushed David further outside the family than ever. By crossing off the days until David's departure, Miss Murdstone clearly indicates that David is just a visitor (and an unwelcome one at that). He isn't even allowed to hold his own brother, presumably because doing so would imply that he had some recognized relationship to the baby.

***Summary Part 7:***

A few days later, [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield) makes the mistake of comparing [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) to the baby and remarking that they look similar. [Miss Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/miss-murdstone) retorts that the two children do not resemble each other at all and storms out of the room. This incident, and others like it, chip away at David's self-esteem. He notices, for instance, that everyone becomes anxious when he enters a room, and he realizes that his mother is afraid that the Murdstones will lash out at one or both of them.

***Analysis Part 7:***

Miss Murdstone's reaction to Clara's offhand remark emphasizes how unwilling she is to acknowledge David as a member of the family; even a reminder that David and his brother are related is unacceptable in Miss Murdstone's eyes. In a more subtle way, the family's reactions when David enters the room also underscore his status as an outsider. Although it seems unlikely that David is ever interrupting a truly happy scene, his appearance constantly disrupts whatever domestic harmony does exist in the household.

***Summary Part 8:***

Partly in an attempt to protect [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield), [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) avoids his mother, spending many evenings with [Peggotty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/peggotty). This also attracts [Mr. Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-murdstone)'s disapproval, however—ostensibly because David is "sullen," but really because Mr. Murdstone needs David around to use as leverage with Clara. Clara attempts to question the Murdstones' characterization of David, but backs down when her husband and [Miss Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/miss-murdstone) imply that she is challenging their judgment. After scolding Clara for being "weak and inconsiderate," Mr. Murdstone orders David to spend his free time with the rest of the family. He also chastises David for his relationship with Peggotty, whom he describes as "low and common company."

***Analysis Part 8:***

The fact that Mr. Murdstone uses Clara's love for David as a way of manipulating her becomes even more villainous in the context of the time: Victorian England idealized mothers and motherhood, so Murdstone's willingness to use it against Clara is especially underhanded. Meanwhile, he noticeably does not consider Peggotty a part of the family in the way that David and Clara do, solely on account of her class status.Home and Family Theme Icon

***Summary Part 9:Womanhood and Gender Roles Theme Icon***

David complies with [Mr. Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-murdstone)'s wishes, and consequently spends most of his time feeling unwanted—or, as he puts it, "a blank space […] which everybody overlooked, and yet was in everybody's way." He is therefore relieved to return to school, though it pains him to say goodbye to his mother and new brother. As [Barkis](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-barkis) and [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) drive away, [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield) calls out to her son one more time and holds the baby up so that David can see him. David implies that this was the last time he ever saw his mother, and says the image remained in his mind long afterwards.

***Analysis Part 9:***

At its worst, the Murdstones' treatment of David not only makes him feel like an intruder, but threatens to erase his own sense of self: he is treated as though he were invisible, and consequently begins to feel as though he truly is just a "blank space" with no identifiable features. His mother's actions as he leaves seem intended to remind him of who he is in relation to her and the baby, which is perhaps one reason why the moment makes such an impression on him: it marks the end of his childhood family.

***Quotations:***

***Quotation 1:***

Me leave you? I think I see myself. Peggotty go away from you? I should like to catch her at it [...] I'll stay with you till I am a cross cranky old woman. And when I'm too deaf, and too lame, and too blind, and too mumbly for want of teeth, to be of any use at all, even to be found fault with, than I shall go to my Davy, and ask him to take me in. (8.60)

***Explanation:***

Peggotty seems to regard Mrs. Copperfield as her own. She swears never to leave her, and she keeps that promise, even though she has received a proposal of marriage and sharing the house with Jane Murdstone is agony. What do you guys think about this idea that servants can be part of the family? Can they truly belong to the family that employs them? And how do the other characters in the novel feel about Peggotty's place in the Copperfield-Murdstone household?

***Quotation 2:***

God knows how infantine the memory may have been, that was awakened within me by the sound of my mother's voice in the old parlour, when I set foot in the hall. She was singing in a low tone. I think I must have lain in her arms, and heard her singing so to me when I was but a baby. The strain was new to me, and yet it was so old that it filled my heart brim-full; like a friend come back from a long absence. (8.34)

***Explanation 2:***

David hears Mrs. Copperfield singing to his nameless baby brother and immediately starts remembering how Mrs. Copperfield used to sing to David himself. David's baby brother isn't really an independent figure in the book. He represents David's own vanishing childhood trust and innocence. Once Mrs. Copperfield dies and David is left alone with Mr. Murdstone, it makes narrative sense that this symbol of David's own infancy must also die, to underline David's transition to a new phase of his life.