Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens

Book One: Recalled to Life
On a cold November night in 1775, Mr. Jarvis Lorry, who works for Tellson's Bank, tells a messenger who stops his mail coach to return with the message, "Recalled to Life," in A Tale of Two Cities. That evening in a Dover hotel he meets Miss Lucie Manette, a young woman whom Lorry brought to England as an orphaned child many years earlier and whom he is now to return with to France to recover her father, recently released from prison after eighteen years.

In Paris, Mr. Lorry and Miss Manette arrive at the wine shop of Madame and Monsieur Defarge. In a top floor garret room above the shop, sitting away at a shoemaker's bench, sits an old, white-haired man, too feeble and too altered to recognize his daughter. With the help of Lorry and Defarge, Lucie takes Dr. Manette away in a carriage to return him to London.

Book Two: The Golden Thread
On a March morning in 1780, Mr. Charles Darnay is being tried at the Old Bailey for treason. In the court as witnesses are Dr. Manette and his daughter Lucie, who testifies that on the night five years earlier when she was returning with her father from France, the prisoner comforted her and her father aboard the boat on which they crossed the channel. Darnay is acquitted after the counsel for the defense, Mr. Stryver, befuddles a witness by presenting Mr. Sydney Carton, who so closely resembles Mr. Darnay that the witness is unable to stand by his story. Mr. Jerry Cruncher, messenger for hire, rushes the news of the acquittal to Tellson's Bank, as he was instructed to do by Mr. Lorry. Outside the courtroom, everyone congratulates Darnay on his release.

In France, meanwhile, both the abuses of the aristocracy and the furor of the oppressed grow. Monseigneur, the Marquis St. Evremonde, "one of the great lords in power at the court," drives off in a gilded carriage and runs over a child. He tosses a gold coin to the child's grieving father, Gaspard. Someone throws a coin at the carriage, but when the Marquis looks to see who, he sees only Madame Defarge, knitting. She knits into a scarf growing longer by the day the names in symbols of those who will later die at the hands of the revolutionaries. Later at his chateau, the Marquis asks if "Monsieur Charles" has yet arrived from England. Charles Darnay, the nephew, tells the Marquis that he believes his family has done wrong and that he wishes to redress the wrongs of the past. The Marquis, who scorns Darnay's suggestions, is later found stabbed to death in his bed.

Lucie and her father live in a London apartment with her maid, Miss Pross. Darnay prospers as a teacher in France and visits England frequently. He speaks of his love of Lucie to Dr. Manette, who grants his permission for a marriage, although he refuses to hear until the wedding day the secret of his identity which Darnay tries to tell him. Sydney Carton, self-described wastrel and unsuccessful suitor, tells Lucie he is "a man who would give his life, to keep a life you love beside you."

At the Defarge wine shop, local anger over the execution of Gaspard and the news that Lucie Manette is about to marry Charles Darnay, a French Marquis, grows. All the women knit.

After Lucie and Darnay go off to honeymoon, Mr. Lorry discovers Dr. Manette making shoes, lapsed into an absent mental state which lasts for nine days while Lucie is away. On the tenth day of Dr. Manette's mania, he recovers, converses with Mr. Lorry about a "friend" who suffered similarly, and agrees to have the things of his old occupation—his shoemaking bench and tools which he had returned to in his distress—destroyed for his mental well-being.

On a July evening in 1789 Lucie Darnay, now the mother of a six-year-old girl, sits and worries over the future. Mr. Lorry speaks of the run on Tellson's Bank as a consequence of the turmoil in Paris. There citizens storm the Bastille to free its seven prisoners. Among them are Madame and Monsieur Defarge, who find Manette's old cell. The people of St. Antoine hang a man named Foulon, who had once told the starving people to eat grass. They seek out aristocrats with a frenzy. One evening they burn down the chateau of the Marquis.

The chateau was left to itself to flame and burn. In the roaring and raging of the conflagration, a red-hot wind, driving straight from the infernal regions, seemed to be blowing the edifice away. With the rising and falling of the blaze, the stone faces showed as if they were in torment. When great masses of stone and timber fell, the face with the two dints in the nose became obscured, anon struggled out of the smoke again, as if it were the face of the cruel Marquis, burning at the stake and contending with the fire.

In August of 1792, Mr. Lorry is about to embark on a trip to Paris to organize accounts there. Darnay learns from him that the bank has been holding an unopened letter addressed to "Monsieur Heretofore the
Marquis," whom he says he knows. The letter from Monsieur Gabelle, a servant, begs St. Evremonde/Darnay to come to France to free him from the mob who hold him. Darnay resolves to leave for France, for his honor demands it. He leaves a letter to Lucie, but he does not tell her his identity or purpose.

**Book Three: The Track of a Storm**

On his way to Paris, Darnay is captured, imprisoned, charged with being an aristocratic emigrant, now to suffer the justice of the revolution. Lucie and her father have also hastened to France to meet Mr. Lorry at Tellson's Paris bank. Dr. Manette uses his influence as one formerly imprisoned to calm the revolutionaries and to have Darnay's life spared during the Reign of Terror when the King and Queen and 1100 others lose their lives to the guillotine. Yet shortly thereafter, Darnay is again arrested, charged by the Defarges and "one other."

Miss Pross and Jerry Cruncher, with the Manettes in Paris, come upon a man on the streets whom they identify as Miss Press's lost brother. Sydney Carton then pursues the man's identity to reveal that he is John Barsad, who had been involved in Darnay's trial in England and who had spied for the English. Carton uses this knowledge as leverage to persuade Barsad, a turnkey at the prison, to work for him.

At the second trial, Darnay is denounced by the Defarges and "the other," who is no other than Dr. Manette himself. Defarge tells how when he stormed the Bastille, he found in Manette's old cell a paper in Manette's hand in a crevice in the wall. He proceeds to read the paper. Manette's story dates to 1857 when he was summoned by two men, the twin St. Evremondes, to attend to a dying peasant woman and a dying, peasant boy, wounded fighting in her defense. The woman had been raped by the two men. They tried to pay Manette off, but he refused; when he tried to write to authorities regarding their case, they destroyed his letter and threatened to kidnap his wife. He then denounced them and their descendants (and thus Charles Darnay). Darnay is condemned to die within 24 hours.

After Carton takes Lucie home, he visits the Defarges, where Madame Defarge reveals that the woman in Manette's story was her sister. He returns to the Manettes that evening to find that Dr. Manette has this time been unsuccessful in freeing Darnay. Carton instructs Lorry on plans to have the Manettes escape Paris the next day. "The moment I come to you," he says, "take me in and drive away." Carton enters the prison and Darnay's cell with the help of Barsad. He drugs Darnay, then exchanges clothes with him. Barsad carries Darnay out; Carton remains behind. The Manettes, Darnay, and Mr. Lorry all escape in a carriage. Miss Pross and Cruncher also devise a plan of escape. While Cruncher goes for a carriage, Madame Defarge, armed with a gun and a knife, comes to the apartment to execute Lucie and her daughter, confronts Miss Pross, and dies of a gunshot in the ensuing struggle. Miss Pross and Cruncher escape, the former forever after deaf. Carton is executed as Darnay, willingly giving his life for the one he loves.

**A Tale of Two Cities: Themes**

**Order and Disorder**

The story of *A Tale of Two Cities* takes place during the turbulent years of the French Revolution. Dickens stresses the chaos of Revolutionary France by using images of the ocean. He calls the Paris mob a "living sea," and compares Ernest Defarge to a man caught in a whirlpool. Defarge and his wife are both at the center of revolutionary activity in Paris, just as their lives are at the center of the whirlpool. Order breaks down once again in the second chapter of the third book, "The Grindstone." "Dickens deliberately set Darnay's return to Paris and arrest at the time of the September Massacres," writes Ruth Glancy in *A Tale of Two Cities: Dickens's Revolutionary Novel*, "a four-day execution of 1,089 prisoners from four Paris prisons, condemned in minutes each by … 'sudden Courts of Wild Justice.'" Contrast to the chaos of Paris is the order of England: Dr. Manette's peaceful home in Soho is a place of refuge for Darnay, Carton, and Mr. Lorry, while even Tellson's Bank serves as a center of calmness in the whirlpool of Revolutionary Paris.

**Death and Resurrection**

Death, burial, and resurrection are themes that Dickens returns to again and again in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The first book of the novel, "Recalled to Life," traces the resurrection of Dr. Manette, who has been held in prison for almost twenty years. Prisons, for Dickens, are symbolic of the grave—a comparison that he makes throughout his works, and which may be related to his father's imprisonment in the debtors' prison at Marshalsea. Mr. Lorry, who travels to Paris in 1775 to secure the doctor's release, views himself as literally digging up Dr. Manette's body. He fancies that the doctor has been buried for so long that he will fall to pieces upon being liberated: "Got out at last, with earth hanging around his face and hair, he would suddenly fall away to dust." Even the doctor's daughter Lucie, whom he has never seen, believes that the
person who will emerge from the prison will be a ghost rather than a living man. Like a man brought back
to life, Manette cannot quite shake the hold his burial and rebirth has on his mind. He reverts to his
cobbling—a sign of his madness contracted in prison—during periods of stress, but he is finally redeemed
by his daughter's love and his own forgiveness of Darnay for the crimes of the St. Evremondes.
Other characters are also absorbed in Dickens's death imagery. Jerry Cruncher, the Tellson's Bank
messenger, is also a "resurrection man"—a person who steals fresh corpses from graveyards and sells them
to medical schools for use as anatomy specimens. Charles Darnay is imprisoned and released twice in the
course of the novel; the second time, it takes another death, Sydney Carton's, to secure Darnay's freedom.
Madame Defarge, consumed by a desire for vengeance, finds her death in a tussle with Miss Pross. In
addition, in his final moments Carton foresees the deaths of a large number of minor characters, including
the spies Barsad and Cly, the revolutionary leaders Defarge and the woman known as The Vengeance, and
the judge and jury who condemned Darnay to death. Revolutionary anarchy and hatred consume these
people, but the Darnays, Dr. Manette, Mr. Lorry, and especially Carton, are redeemed through their love
and self-sacrifice.

**Memory and Reminiscence**

*A Tale of Two Cities* is a historical novel, about events approximately seventy years past when Dickens
wrote the work. For the author in *A Tale of Two Cities*, memory is often a trap, pulling people into an abyss
of despair. Madame Defarge's hatred of aristocrats in general and St. Evremonde in particular is based on
her memory of the rape and deaths of her siblings at his hands. However, it can also be a force for
redemption. It is Dr. Manette's memory of his dead wife, seen in his daughter's face, that begins his process
of resurrection from the grave of his prison and madness. "Darnay … listens to the voices from his past,"
states Ruth Glancy in *A Tale of Two Cities: Dickens's Revolutionary Novel*; "his desire to right the wrongs
of his family is primarily due to his mother's reliance on him to do so." Perhaps most interesting, however,
is Sydney Carton and his relationship to memory. His colleague C. J. Stryver calls him "Memory Carton"
for his brilliant legal mind. Dickens's portrayal of Carton, however, shows him inspired by the memory of
his love for Lucie to renounce his passive life. "When Carton dies with the words 'It is a far, far better thing
that I do, than I have ever done,' he is renouncing the mental prison that has prevented him from making
something of his life," writes Glancy; "he is living dynamically, as Doctor Manette does, and even if for
him the action will soon be over, its repercussions will be felt for as long as the Darnay family survives."

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