

PROLOGUE

(DICKENS is sitting at a simple desk, writing - or trying to. He's having little success. The floor around him is strewn with crumpled paper. After a moment, he throws down his pen and reads.)

DICKENS. "Autobiography." These, then, are the facts. When I was twelve, my father was declared a bankrupt and incarcerated in the Marshalsea, the debtors' prison. Most of the family went with him. But his creditors determined that one of us had to earn wages to pay off the debt. So I was taken away and placed in a damp, lightless factory where they manufactured bootblackening. For twelve hours a day, I pasted labels on blacking jars. I was diligent in my work, and tried not to hear the incessant scurrying beneath the floorboards. Or I would close my eyes and pretend that it was rain on the window, and that I was safely home in bed. But when the noises began running squealing between my legs, even an imagination as resolute as mine could not make of them anything but what they were. Sometimes at mid-day, when the streets were full, the owner - my mother's cousin - would set me in a large window facing the street. Passersby could stop and admire the industrious little boy at work with his jars, brushes, and pot of glue. Later, he would report, with great satisfaction, that my performance was responsible for large purchases made by the lunch-hour crowds.

(By this point, THE CHILD has entered. He listens politely as DICKENS reads, and watches intently as DICKENS, upon finishing this part of his memoir, crumples it and tosses it to the