A Tale of Two Cities

As its title promises, this brief chapter establishes the era in which the novel takes place: England and France in 1775. The age is marked by competing and contradictory attitudes—“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”—but resembles the “present period” in which Dickens writes. In England, the public worries over religious prophecies, popular paranormal phenomena in the form of “the Cock-lane ghost,” and the messages that a colony of British subjects in America has sent to King George III. France, on the other hand, witnesses excessive spending and extreme violence, a trend that anticipates the erection of the guillotine. Yet in terms of peace and order, English society cannot “justify much national boasting” either—crime and capital punishment abound.

On a Friday night in late November of 1775, a mail coach wends its way from London to Dover. The journey proves so treacherous that the three passengers must dismount from the carriage and hike alongside it as it climbs a steep hill. From out of the great mists, a messenger on horseback appears and asks to speak to Jarvis Lorry of Tellson’s Bank. The travelers react warily, fearing that they have come upon a highwayman or robber. Mr. Lorry, however, recognizes the messenger’s voice as that of Jerry Cruncher, the odd-job man at Tellson’s, and accepts his message. The note that Jerry passes him reads: “Wait at Dover for Mam’selle.” Lorry instructs Jerry to return to Tellson’s with this reply: “Recalled to Life.” Confused and troubled by the “blazing strange message,” Jerry rides on to deliver it.

Important quotes:

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 epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, 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. . . .