

**This is not about Christmas:**

**Charles Dickens, seditious for our times**

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This Sands Films project was born of multiple frustrations. Frustration at how little Dickens is known for his frustration and magnificent rage at the absurdities, injustices, greed and indifference of his times. Frustration at today's same absurdities, greed and indifference to “evidence which is there to see for anyone who opens their eyes” as Professor Alston put it.

The coronavirus made the format of this project a necessity, and its purpose all the more urgent.

We owe a great debt to Professor Alston, and to the journalists who did open their eyes.

This is a piece for one actor, who is alternatively the Reader – and the Board, representing the voice of the Authorities.

Like all Theatres and Bookshops, the Calder Book Shop Theatre is closed. Inside, however, the ideas are still seething, dying to escape.

The Reader:

...., let's help one author escape the lock down – one author best known for a swarm of extraordinary characters, and sometimes convoluted plots. But through his work, there runs a magnificent anger, a violent rage at the absurdities, the injustices, greed – and indifference of his times

In his postface to “Our Mutual Friend” in 1864, our author, Charles Dickens remarked:

“There is sometimes an odd disposition in this country to dispute as improbable in fiction what are the commonest experiences in fact.”

Well, we could add that there is at present a widely held belief that many of our commonest experiences are deemed so improbable that they are described as belonging in the realm of fiction – Dickensian fiction.

We are told by the learned, the experienced, the wise and educated people who govern us that we are amongst the richest and happiest places on earth – and yet common sense – and the senses of the common people tell us something quite different.

There is, it seems to me, much denial, ignorance and indifference to evidence which is there to see for everyone who opens their eyes.

Maybe, as the coronavirus exposes everyday more cracks, more fault lines, more injustices, more greed, we might open our eyes?. Who knows?

The following is our of our author's best known set pieces, written in 1838.

The room in which the boys were fed was a large stone hall, with a copper at one end, out of which the master, dressed in an apron for the purpose, and assisted by one or two women, ladled the gruel at meal-times; of which composition each boy had one porringer, and no more – except on festive occasions, and then he had two ounces and a quarter of bread besides. The bowls never wanted washing. The boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again ; and when they had performed this operation (which never took very long, the spoon being nearly as large as the bowls), they would sit staring at the copper with such eager eyes as if they could have devoured the very bricks of which it was composed; employing themselves, meanwhile, in sucking their fingers most assiduously, with the view of catching up any stray splashes of gruel that might have been cast thereon. Boys have generally very excellent appetites. Oliver Twist and his companions suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months : at last they got so voracious and wild with hunger, that one boy, who was tall for his age, and hadn't been used to that sort of thing (for his father had kept a small cookshop), hinted darkly to his companions, that unless he had another basin of gruel *per diem*, he was afraid he might some night happen to eat the boy who slept next to him, who happened to be a weakly youth of tender age. He had a wild, hungry eye; and they implicitly believed him. A council was held; lots were cast who should walk up to the master after supper that evening, and ask for more; and it fell to Oliver Twist.

The evening arrived; the boys took their places. The master, in his cook's uniform, stationed himself at the copper; his pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him; the gruel was served out; and a long grace was said over the short commons. The gruel disappeared; the boys whispered to each other and winked at Oliver, while his next neighbours nudged him. Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table, and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said, somewhat alarmed at his own temerity:

'Please, sir, I want some more.'

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds, and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralysed with wonder; the boys with fear.

'What!' said the master at length, in a faint voice.

'Please, sir,' replied Oliver, 'I want some more.'

The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle, pinioned him in his arms, and shrieked aloud for the beadle.

The board were sitting in solemn conclave, when Mr Bumble rushed into the room in great excitement, and addressing the gentleman in the high chair, said, 'Mr Limbkins, I beg your pardon, sir! Oliver Twist has asked for more!' There was a general start. Horror was depicted on every countenance.

'For *more!*' said Mr Limbkins. 'Compose yourself, Bumble, and answer me distinctly. Do I understand he asked for more, after he had eaten the supper allotted by the dietary?'

'He did, sir,' replied Bumble.

'That boy will be hung,' said the gentleman in the white waistcoat; 'I know that boy will be hung.'

The Board: (is about to interrupt –)

The Reader: We are now in 2018. in a South London school canteen. This is Mandy: she is talking about the lady at the canteen checkout.

'So, when she was like, “You can't get that, you're free school meals”, like I was really embarrassed cos' people were waiting behind me, I was kind of like “Oh my God”. And I was like, “But I've technically got £2 on my account “. she was like, “No you can't get that at free school meals”. And it's like you're really restricted to what you can eat with free school meals. And it's like if you're saying £2 is on my balance surely I should be able to get something that's worth less than £2. So that really like got me, so now I just get what I know I'm safe with ... so a small baguette and carton of juice.'

The Board: ...an isolated case surely

The Reader: and this is Murad, also living in South London

'The baguettes you can tell in size which one's which. But like the sandwich boxes, the triangle sandwich boxes, one's black and one's brown, and I'm allowed the brown one, not the black one.

'But thing about the baguettes is that if you're not free school meals then you get to have bigger food ... which I don't see why. And also they have cheesecakes , so ... but there's like the smaller version and there's the bigger version. And if you're not free school meals you get to have the bigger version, and if you are you have to have the small version.'

Reader turns to Board: By what pernicious calculation is the means tested recipient of a school meal to get a smaller or inferior portion?

By the same calculation as Mr Bumble's when he suggested adding water

to the boys' gruel to improve the accounts.?

And what of the little boy of 8 stealing tomato sauce sachets at school to make himself soup at home? In 2018? Or others rifling through their school's dustbins?

The Board: You are talking of isolated cases. Look around you! Where is this poverty? I see no poverty! Look at the facts. The facts tell you: a strong economy, Fact: 700,000 families lifted out of poverty since 2010, Fact: the lowest level of unemployment since the 70s.

The Reader: The fact is that 14,000,000 people live in poverty, 1,500,000 hovered in and out of destitution in 2018.

The fact is that there were 350,000 rough sleepers in 2018 and 1,1 million households are on a social housing waiting list.

The fact is that during 2018/19 3,000,000 food parcels were distributed by food banks. The fact is that now food parcel distribution has gone up by 50 to 300%.

The fact is that 1,300,000 were unemployed in 2019. And a further fact is that of those employed, millions work only a few hours...

The Board: But ...

The Reader: (impatiently) Facts, facts, facts – “in this life we want nothing but facts, said Mr Bounderby of Coketown.” in “Hard times” - 1854.

Coketown, to which Messrs Bounderby and Gradgrind now walked, was a triumph of fact.

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage.

It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled.

It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.

These attributes of Coketown were in the main inseparable from the work by which it was sustained.

You saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful. If the members of a religious persuasion built a chapel there – as the members of eighteen religious persuasions had done – they made it a pious warehouse of red brick, with sometimes (but this is only in highly ornamented examples) a bell in a birdcage on the top of it.

All the public inscriptions in the town were painted alike, in severe characters of black and white. The jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared to the contrary in the graces of their construction. Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the



town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. The M'Choakumchild school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchasable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen.

The Board: Just so, my friend, you can't escape it: the market is a fact, and facts make the market and the market is the coming together of facts ... and the fact is that the market is the road to freedom, my friend, the road to self improvement, enterprise, success, initiative, innovation, renewal, regeneration, powerhouse of the North, West, East ... Space is next!

The Reader: A town like Coketown so sacred to fact, and so triumphant in its assertion, of course got on well . Why no – not quite well. No? Dear me!

No, Coketown did not come out of its own furnaces, in all respects like gold that had stood the fire. First the perplexing mystery of the place was: who belonged to the eighteen denominations. Because whoever did, the labouring people did not ...

The Reader: to audience: and your regeneration and your innovation and your renewal and your powerhouses, the perplexing mystery still remains: who actually benefits by them?

The Reader: It was very strange to walk through the streets of Coketown on a Sunday morning, and note how few of the labouring people the barbarous jangling of bells called away from their own quarters , from their own close

rooms, from the corners of their own streets, where they lounged listlessly, gazing at all the church and chapel going as at a thing with which they had no manner of concern.

Nor was it merely the stranger who noticed this, because there was a native organisation in Coketown itself, whose members were to be heard of in the House of Commons every session, indignantly petitioning for acts of parliament that should make these people religious by main force. Then came the Teetotal Society, who claimed that these same people *would* get drunk, and showed in statistical statements that they did get drunk, and proved at tea parties that no inducement, human or Divine would induce them to forego their custom of getting drunk.

The Board: These very same people will not work and idle away on benefits, at the hard pressed tax payers expense...

The Reader: Then came the chemist and druggist with other statistical statements, showing that when they didn't get drunk, they took opium.

The Board: ... and, of course, they smoke dope and shoot heroin...

The Reader: Then came the experienced chaplain of the jail, with more statistical statements, outdoing all the previous statistical statements, and showing that the same people *would* resort to low haunts, hidden from the public eye, where they heard low singing and saw low dancing, and may have joined in it.

The Board: And they miss school – when they haven't already been expelled –

and join gangs and run county lines.

The Reader: Then came Mr Gradgrind and Mr Bounderby, the two gentlemen at this present moment walking through Coketown, both eminently practical, who could, on occasion, furnish more statistical statements derived from their own personal experience and illustrated by cases they had known and seen, – that these same people were a bad lot altogether, gentlemen; that they were restless, gentlemen; that they never knew what they wanted; that they lived upon the best, and bought fresh butter; and insisted on Mocha coffee, and rejected all but prime parts of meat.

The Board: ... and they have Ipads and thirty inch TVs and don't pay their rent and cheat the benefit system.

The Reader: ... and yet these people are eternally dissatisfied and unmanageable ...

Who are these people, anyway?

In the hardest working part of Coketown; in the innermost fortifications of that ugly citadel, where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in; at the heart of the labyrinth of narrow courts upon courts, and close streets upon streets, which had come into existence piecemeal, every piece in a violent hurry for some one man's purpose, and the whole an unnatural family, shouldering and trampling, and pressing one another to death; lived the multitude of Coketown, generically called 'the Hands'.

Louisa knew of their existence by hundreds and by thousands. She knew what results in work a given number of them would produce in a given space of

time. She knew them in crowds passing to and from their nests, like ants or beetles. But she knew from her reading infinitely more of the ways of toiling insects than of these toiling men and women.

Something to be worked so much and paid so much, and there ended; something to be infallibly settled by laws of supply and demand; something that blundered against those laws, and floundered into difficulty; something that was a little pinched when wheat was dear, and over-ate itself when wheat was cheap; something that increased at such a rate of percentage, and yielded such another percentage of crime, and such another percentage of pauperism; something wholesale, of which vast fortunes were made; something that occasionally rose like a sea, and did some harm and waste (chiefly to itself), and fell again; this she knew the Coketown Hands to be. But, she had scarcely thought once of separating them into units, than of separating the sea itself into its component drops.

So many hundred Hands in this Mill, so many hundred horse Steam Power. It is known, to the force of a single pound weight, what the engine will do; but, not all the calculators of the National Debt can tell me the capacity for good or evil, for love or hatred, for patriotism or discontent, for the decomposition of virtue into vice, or the reverse, at any single moment in the meanest of them, for ever. Suppose we were to reserve our arithmetic for material objects, and to govern these awful unknown quantities by other means!

The Board: But we cannot govern without measurement, calculation and statistics!

The Reader: (impatiently) Just listen to Sissy Jupe in “Hard Times”.

Now Mr Choakumchild was explaining about National Prosperity. He said : take a nation, and there are fifty million of money in it. Isn't this a prosperous nation and a thriving state? Girl No.20, aren't you in a thriving state?

And I said I didn't know whether it was a prosperous nation, and whether I was in a thriving state or not unless I knew who had got the money and whether any of it was mine. But Mr Choakumchild said that wasn't in the figures at all – and he would try me again. He said: take an immense town , and in it are a million inhabitants, and only five and twenty are starved to death in the street in the course of a year, what is your remark on that proportion?

And my remark was – for I couldn't think of a better one – that I thought it must be just as hard upon those who were starved, whether the others were a million, or a million million.

The Board: This is insanely naïve! Dickensian sentimentality! Government is about weighty decisions, balancing a multiplicity of facts, informed by statistics ...

The Reader: Like unemployment figures are at their lowest since 1970

The Board: Yes, at 3.8%...

The Reader: And what is that 3.8% to the million three hundred thousand that are unemployed?

The Reader: 'And what.' repeated Mr Bounderby, folding his arms, 'do you people, in a general way, complain of?'

Stephen Blackpool looked at him with some little irresolution for a moment and then seemed to make up his mind.

'Sir, I were never good at showing o't, though I ha had'n my share in feeling o't. 'Deed we are in a muddle sir. Look round town – so rich as 'tis – and see the numbers o' people as has been broughten into bein here, fur to weave, an to card, an to piece out a livin', aw the same one way, somehows, twixt their cradles and their graves. Look how we live, and wheer we live, an in what numbers, an by what chances, and wi' what sameness, and look how the mills is awlus a goin, and how they never works us no nigher to ony dis'ant object – ceptin awlus, Death. Look how you considers of us, and writes of us, and talks of us, and goes up wi' yor deputations to Secretaries o' State 'bout us, and how yo are awludsd right, and how we are awlus wrong, and never had'n no reason in us sin ever we were orn. Look how this ha growen an growen, sir, bigger an bigger, broader an broader, harder an harder, fro year to year, fro generation unto generation. Who can look on 't, sir, and fairly tell a man 'tis not a muddle?'

'Of course,' said Mr Bounderby. 'Now perhaps you'll let the gentleman here know, how you would set this muddle (as you're so fond of calling it) to rights.?'

'I donno, sir, I canna be expecten to 't. 'Tis not me as should be looken to for that, sir. 'Tis them as is put ower me, and ower aw the rest of us. What do they tak upon themseln, sir, if not to do 't?'

The Board: But now we are a prosperous country, the fifth richest country in the world...

The Reader: Well listen now to Jeff Winter talking about his town of Rugeley (Yorkshire) in 2017. What is a decent job today? What have the mining companies become? If you went back forty years, and I know you can't, you had a pit which employed a lot of skilled men, and a lot of people providing good machinery to that pit as well; there was mechanics and there was electricians. They were labouring jobs at the pit but they were still good jobs – good good jobs. This was a happening place. The clubs were full every night. The pubs were full – and now what are we becoming?

The warehouse was empty for two years, then Amazon came in. But are we grovelling then? Are we grovelling by saying yes, we'll accept anything? Like Amazon? Because we are desperate for our people? ... you never saw that, years ago. I know it's changed, and I can accept it's changed – but that doesn't make it right.

And what does Amazon provide?

Zero hour contracts? You don't want these jobs, so you go to University and take on £30,000 of debt, fuelling capitalism. You buy the car on hire purchase – fuelling capitalism. And you are living with your parents because you can't get a house. There's no social housing – is that what we have accepted? It's a total wotsit from what happened in this town forty years ago.

It's a totally different society. And kids obviously don't know because they have never been part of that. But it don't make it right. It don't make what we have become right.

And what of Mr Plornish of the Bleeding Heart Yard in “Little Dorrit” - 1857

They was all hard up here. Mr Plornish said, uncommon hard up, the be sure. Well, he couldn't say how it was; he didn't know as anybody *could* say

how it was; all he know'd was, that so it was. When a man felt, on his own back and in his own belly, that poor he was, that man know'd well that he was poor somehow or another, and you couldn't talk it out of him, no more than you could talk Beef into him. Then you see, some people as was better off said, that they was 'improvident' (that was the favourite word) down the Yard. For instance, if they see a man with his wife and children going to Hampton Court in a Wan, perhaps once in a year, they says 'Hallo! I thought you was poor, my improvident friend!' Why, Lord, how hard it was upon a man! What was a man to do? He couldn't go molloncholy mad, and even if he did, you wouldn't be the better for it. In Mr Plornish's judgment you would be the worse for it. Yet you seemed to want to make a man molloncholy mad. You was always at it - if not with your right hand, with your left.

They was all hard up – and they was always squeezed. Mr Pancks – he was the rent collector that was squeezing them.

The proprietor of the Bleeding Heart Yard was a patriarchal gentleman – with an appearance of radiant benevolence.

'Mr Pancks,' said the patriarch, 'you have been remiss, sir, you have been remiss.'

'What do you mean by that,' was the brief retort.

'I mean, Mr Pancks, you must be sharper with the people. You don't squeeze them. Your receipts aren't up to the mark. You must squeeze them, sir, or the connection will not continue to be as satisfactory as I could wish it to be to all parties. All parties.'

'Don't I squeeze them,' retorted Mr Pancks, 'what else am I made for?'

'You are made for nothing else. Mr Pancks. You are made to do your duty, but you don't do your duty. You are paid to squeeze and you must



squeeze to pay

'Oh' said Mr Pancks. 'Anything more?'

'Yes, sir, yes, sir, something more. You will please, Mr Pancks, squeeze the Yard first thing on Monday morning.

You are paid to squeeze and must squeeze to pay.'

The Board: (laughs)

The Reader: There is a strange echo of this theme in Acton in 2018.

The Youth Club hasn't quite had its funding cut, but it is being squeezed into a smaller space. The young people who come here are squeezed into overcrowded housing. Their finances are squeezed through welfare cuts. Their will to do the right thing is squeezed by peer pressure to get rich, by any means, and escape.

The Board: We have the answer for that = law and order, punish the bad eggs, the preachers of hate, the rabble rousers ... and coffee shops to replace the youth centre.

The Reader: 'I'll tell you something, at any rate,' said Mr Bounderby, 'we will make an example of half a dozen rabble rousers. We will indict the black guards for felony and get them shipped off to penal settlements.'

'Don't tell me we won't, man,' said Mr Bounderby, 'because we will, I tell you!'

'Sir,' returned Stephen, with the quiet confidence of absolute certainty – if you was t'take a hundred of them rabble rousers an' was to sew 'em up in separate sacks, an sink 'em in the deepest ocean as were made, yo'd leave the

muddle just wheer 'tis. Rabble rousers and mischievous strangers!' said Stephen with an anxious smile; 'when ha we not heern , I am sure, sin ever we can call to mind, o' th' mischeevous strangers! 'Tis not by *them* the trouble's made, sir. 'Tis not wi' *them* 't commences. I ha no favour for 'em – I ha no reason to favour 'em – but it is hopeless and useless to dream ' takin them fro their trade, 'stead o' takin their trade fro' them!. Put that clock aboard a ship an pack it off to Norfolk Island, an the time will go on just the same. So 'tis wi' the rabble rousers every bit.'

'Sir, I canna, wi' my little learning an my common way, tell the genelman what will better aw this – but I can tell him what I know will never do 't. The strong hand will never do 't. Vict'ry and triumph will never do 't. Agreeing fur to mak one side unnat'rally awlus and for ever right, and toother side unnat'rally awlus and for ever wrong , will never, never do 't. Nor yet lettin alone will never do 't.

Most o' aw, rating 'em as so much Power, and rating 'em as if they was figures in a soom, or machines. Stastistics ... wi'out loves and likens , wi'out memories and inclinations, wi'out souls to weary and souls to hope – draggin on wi' 'em as if they'd nowt o' th' kind, and when aw goes onquiet, reproachin' 'em for their want o' sitch humanly feelins in their dealins wi' yo – this will never do 't, sir, till God's work is onmade.'

The Board: It is very disappointing - to say the least – to see the extraordinary political turn this is all taking. I suppose you are going to quote that UN chappie next, with his extraordinarily inappropriate language?

The Reader: Indeed. Professor Alston says: it might seem to some observers that the Department of Work and Pensions has been tasked with

designing a digital and sanitised version of the 19thC workhouse ... British compassion has been replaced by a punitive mean-spirited and often callous approach designed to impose a rigid order on the lives of those least capable of coping – “the state has become an instrument of punishment instead of support, shoving the blame onto the victims” ....Squeeze them..

The Reader: In “Our Mutual Friend” (1864) said Betty Higden:

'Do I never read in the newspapers how the worn out people that do come down to that, get driven from post to pillar and pillar to post, a purpose to tire them out! Do I never read how they are put off, put off, put off – how they are grudged, grudged, grudged, the shelter, or the doctor, or the drop of physic – or a bit of bread? Do I never read how they grow heartsick of it and give it up , after having let themselves drop so low, and how they after all die out for want of help? Then I say, I hope I can die as well as another, and I'll die without that disgrace.'

The Reader.. to the audience: And do we not read in the newspapers in 2017 of that wheelchair bound woman who lost her support because she couldn't get into the building for her assessment or the woman sanctioned for 229 days for missing her assessment appointment by having a miscarriage or the men and women dying in the street for want of shelter or care ...

The shameful accounts we read, every week, my lords, and gentlemen and honourable boards, the infamous records of small official inhumanity, do not pass by the people as they pass by us. And hence these irrational, blind, and obstinate prejudices, so astonishing to our magnificence, and having no more reason in them than smoke has in coming from fire! God Save the Queen and confound their politics.

The Board: This is inflammatory, political ... We strongly refute the claim that the design and delivery of welfare reforms are deliberately punishing.. Tackling poverty will always be a priority for this government.

The Reader: (with a laugh)

If I may I will quote Mr Podsnap here - from "Our Mutual Friend" (1864)

Thus happily acquainted with his own merit and importance, Mr Podsnap settled that whatever he put behind him he put out of existence. There was a dignified exclusiveness – not to add a grand convenience – in this way of getting rid of disagreeables which had done much towards establishing Mr Podsnap in his lofty place in Mr Podsnap's satisfaction. 'I don't want to know about it; I don't choose to discuss it; I don't admit it!' Mr Podsnap had even acquired a peculiar flourish of his right arm in often clearing the world of its most difficult problems, by sweeping them behind him (and consequently sheer away) with those words and a flushed face. For they affronted him.

The Reader: Are we too? Affronted?

Do we not see, or do we simply not want to see the houses built for one family let to 6 or 7 , the decaying bed-and-breakfasts, squashed close to polluting roads, surrounded by neglected, rat infested spaces, the damp, cold, mouldy rooms with decrepit fridges, and collapsing ceilings, housing ever so many children? Do we not see the tents, lined up by the vents at the back of office buildings, along the seafront of decaying resorts, or in every nook and cranny of railway stations?

Verily, my lords and gentlemen and honourable boards, when we have got things to the pass that with the enormous treasure at disposal to relieve the poor, the best of the poor detest our mercies, hide their heads from us, and shame us by starving to death in the midst of us, it is a pass impossible of prosperity, impossible of continuance.

This boastful handiwork of ours strikes with a cruel and a wicked stab. We must mend it, my lords and gentlemen and honourable boards, or in its own evil hour it will mar every one of us.

In 1847, London suffered a cholera epidemic, to poor sewage and predicted for a long time, not unlike the present pandemic.

And so “Bleak House” written in 1852 warns:

Jo lives – that is to say, Jo has not yet died – in a ruinous place known to the like of him by the name “Tom-all-Alone's.” It is a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people; where the crazy houses were seized upon, when their decay was far advanced, by some bold vagrants, who, after establishing their own possession, took to letting them out in lodgings. Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint than can be set right in five hundred years.

Much mighty speech making there has been, both in and out of Parliament, concerning Tom, and much wrathful disputation how Tom shall be

got right. Whether he shall be put into the main road by constables, or by beadles, or by bell ringing, or by force of figures, or by correct principles of taste, or by high church, , or by low church, or by no church; whether he shall be set to splitting trusses of polemical straws with the crooked knife of his mind, or whether he shall be put to stone-breaking instead. In the midst of which dust and noise, there is but one thing perfectly clear, to wit, that Tom only may and can, or shall and will, be reclaimed according to somebody's theory but nobody's practice. And in the hopeful meantime, Tom goes to perdition head foremost in his old determined spirit.

But he has his revenge. Even the winds are his messengers, and they serve him in these hours of darkness. There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. It shall pollute, this very night, the choice stream. There is not an atom of Tom's slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, not a brutality of his committing, but shall work its retribution, through every order of society, up to the proudest of the proud, and to the highest of the high. Verily, what with tainting, plundering, and spoiling, Tom has his revenge.

THE READER: to audience:

In a letter, at the time he was writing “Little Dorrit”, Dickens says: “I see an enormous black cloud of poverty in every town, which is spreading and deepening every day.

“Utilitarian economists, skeletons of schoolmasters, Commissioners of Fact, genteel and used-up infidels, gabblers of many little dog-eared creeds, the poor you have with you – take note of them, while there is time yet – on the day of your triumph, when gentleness is utterly driven out of their souls, and they and

a bare existence stand face to face, reality will take a wolfish turn and make an end of you. Is that what is to be?

Creeds from ancient times – and much more recent ones.....have it that all men are equal, that all men have rights, rights to shelter, warmth, food and knowledge – is that what is to be?

Let us cultivate the seeds that are in all men for understanding, compassion, sharing, gentleness, and kindness.

Dear Public it rests with you and me, whether in our fields of action, these things shall be or not. Let them be!”

**Extracts by Charles Dickens**

**from**

**“Oliver Twist” (1838)**

**“Bleak House” (1852)**

**“Hard Times” (1854)**

**“Little Dorrit” (1857)**

**“Our Mutual Friend” (1864)**

**Read by Daniel Kelly**

**Compiled by Christine Edzard**

**Edited by Olivier Stockman**

**Music by Michel Sanvoisin**

**with quotes from**

**James Bloodworth “Hired”: Undercover in low wage Britain**

**Atlantic Books 2019**

**Rebecca O'Connell, Abigail Knight and Julian Braman: Living Hand to Mouth  
Children and food in low income families**

**Child Poverty action Group 2019**

**Frances Ryan “Crippled”: Austerity and the demonisation of disabled people**

**Verso Books 2019**

**A statement on a visit to the UK by Professor Philip Alston**

**United Nations Special reporter**

**November 2018**

**An article by Robert Booth**

**“The Guardian” November 2018**

**Amber Rudd: Interview and Parliament**

**November 2018**

**Philip Hammond: Interview on Newsnight**

**November 2018**

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