



OUR  
MUTUAL FRIEND

CHARLES DICKENS



*with an introduction by*  
JEROME K. JEROME



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# OUR MUTUAL FRIEND



CHARLES DICKENS

1812-1870

## CHARLES DICKENS

CHARLES JOHN HUFFAM DICKENS was born at Portsea on February 7th, 1812, the second child of John Dickens, a minor clerk in the Navy Pay Office (then at Portsmouth) and of his wife Elizabeth, née Barrow.

Owing to his father's congenial incapacity to manage his financial affairs, Charles Dickens' childhood was spent under the shadow of economic insecurity, a shadow that grew darker year by year as the family moved, first to London, then to Chatham and from there back to London, and which at one time (early in 1842) threatened to blot out for ever all prospects the boy might have had of a successful career. At that time the steadily declining family fortunes had reached their nadir with the arrest of John Dickens and his removal to the debtors' prison of the Marshalsea. Mrs. Dickens with four of her children went to join her husband in prison, and young Charles was sent to work at a blacking factory, where for six shillings a week he had to stick labels on pots of paste-blackening. Those few months were for Dickens a time of utter misery, humiliation and despair, the memory of which, as he later confessed, he could never quite shake off. However, a timely legacy came to the rescue. It enabled John Dickens to leave prison and to send his son to a school at Hampstead—he had had some previous schooling at Chatham—where he remained for two or three years.

In 1827, at the age of fifteen, he entered a solicitor's office as a junior clerk. This position, though by no means well paid, enabled him to establish a certain independence for himself, to make his own friends and to indulge his taste for the theatre which he was to retain all his life.

Having taught himself shorthand, he became (in 1829) a reporter in one of the offices of Doctors' Commons, advancing a year later to the position of a parliamentary reporter, and further still to that of a newspaper reporter on the *Morning Chronicle* at the respectable salary of five guineas a week.

In 1833 he wrote his first sketch for the *Old Monthly Magazine*; other sketches followed quickly, and a year later the name of 'Boz' was attached to them. In 1836 the first series of *Sketches by Boz* appeared in volume form. Their success was immediate. The same year Dickens married Catherine Hogarth. The same year also Chapman & Hall commissioned him to write the letter-



press for a projected series of Cockney sporting plates by the caricature artist Seymour. Dickens 'thought of Pickwick' and this was the origin of the *Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* by which Dickens established his fame for all time. They appeared first in twenty monthly instalments, beginning in April, 1836, and were subsequently published in book form in 1837.

Dickens' rise from obscurity and relative poverty to a position of unique eminence and of wealth was spectacular and dramatic in its suddenness. Within a very few years of the appearance of *Pickwick* he had become the most popular novelist this country had yet known; more than that, he had become a public institution. Book followed book, and his literary activity was henceforth not to cease until the very eve of his death some thirty years later.

*Oliver Twist* came out in 1838; *Nicholas Nickleby* followed a year later. *Master Humphrey's Clock*, in three volumes containing *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge* appeared in 1841.

In 1842 Dickens, accompanied by his wife, made his first tour to the United States and Canada. After his return in 1842 he published *American Notes* and in 1843 *Martin Chuzzlewit*, both works reflecting in a not very complimentary manner some of the author's impressions of America. 1843 also saw the appearance of *A Christmas Carol*, the first of Dickens' Christmas books which he continued later with *The Chimes*, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, etc.

Dickens lived with his ever growing family—in all ten children were born to him during his married life which ended in 1858 by separation from his wife—at successive residences in London, and finally at Gad's Hill near Gravesend which had been the dream place of his childhood.

He travelled a good deal abroad, staying at—among other places—Genoa (1844-45), Lausanne, Paris (1846) and Boulogne (during the summers of 1853-56).

He reached the height of his literary fame with *David Copperfield* in which he drew his father's caricatured portrait as Mr. Micawber. Shortly after its publication in 1849 Dickens re-entered journalism with the founding of the weekly magazine *Household Words* of which he was chief owner, editor and contributor. In 1859 he replaced the magazine by another almost identical one called *All the Year Round* which he continued to edit until his death.

His next main works after *David Copperfield* were *Bleak House* (1853), *Little Dorrit* (1857), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1860) *Great Expectations* (1861) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865).

In later years, under the relentless pressure of work and of the many activities which his restless nature imposed on him, his health began to suffer. In 1858 he had instituted public readings of his own works on a professional basis, a venture which proved an immediate and outstanding success but which perhaps more than anything else undermined his constitution. His second American tour as reader of his own works was one long triumphal—and exhausting—march. His health broke down completely in 1869, and he died from a cerebral stroke at Gad's Hill Place on June 9th, 1870, leaving behind unfinished his last work *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. He was buried in Westminster Abbey.

H. d. R.





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## CHARACTERS

YOUNG BLIGHT, a dismal office-boy and clerk.

NICODEMUS BOFFIN (*called 'Noddy,' also 'The Golden Dustman'*), an odd-looking old fellow, formerly confidential servant to the elder Mr. Harmon.

MR. CLEAVER ('Mr. Dolls'), a weak, wretched, drunken man.

MR. FLEDGEBY ('Fascination Fledgeby'), a doltish dandy.

BOB GLIDDERY, potboy at The Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters.

JOHN HARMON, *alias* JULIUS HANDFORD, *alias* JOHN ROKESMITH, heir to the Harmon estate.

BRADLEY HEADSTONE, a master in a school.

JESSE HEXAM ('Gaffer'), a Thames waterside man.

CHARLEY HEXAM, his son; a selfish and hard-hearted youth.

MR. INSPECTOR, a police-officer.

JOHNNY, an orphan grandson of Betty Higden.

ALFRED LAMMLE, an adventurer and a fortune-hunter.

MORTIMER LIGHTWOOD, a young solicitor and attorney.

THE REV. FRANK MILVEY, a curate with a large family.

MR. JOHN PODSNAP, a member of 'society,' and a pompous, self-satisfied man.

JOB POTTERSON, the steward of a ship.

MR. RIAH, a venerable Jew, of noble and generous nature.

ROGER RIDERHOOD ('Rogue'), a desperate waterside character.

GEORGE SAMPSON, a young man, intimate with the Wilfer family.

SLOPPY, a foundling, adopted by Betty Higden.

MR. MELVIN TWEMLOW, one of the poorer members of 'society,' and a friend of the Veneerings.

MR. HAMILTON VENEERING, a parvenu, tolerated by 'society' on account of his wealth.

MR. VENUS, a preserver of animals and birds.

SILAS WEGG, a balladmonger, and keeper of a fruit-stall.

REGINALD WILFER ('The Cherub'), a poor henpecked clerk.

EUGENE WRAYBURN, a briefless barrister, of a gloomy, indolent, unambitious nature.

MISS SOPHRONIA AKERSHEM, a fast young lady of 'society,' afterwards married to Mr. Alfred Lammler.

MRS. HENRIETTA BOFFIN, the cheerful wife of Mr. Nicodemus Boffin.

FANNY CLEAVER ('Jenny Wren'), a dolls' dressmaker.

LIZZIE HEXAM, the brave, devoted daughter of Jesse Hexam.

MRS BETTY HIGDEN, the keeper of a mangle and a 'minding-school.'

## CHARACTERS

- MRS. MARGARETTA MILVEY, a pretty, bright little woman; wife of the Rev. Frank Milvey.
- MISS EMMA PEECHER, a teacher in a school.
- MRS. PODSNAP, the majestic wife of Mr. John Podsnap.
- MISS GEORGIANA PODSNAP, her daughter; a shy, foolish, affectionate girl.
- MISS ABBEY POTTERSON, landlady of The Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters.
- PLEASANT RIDERHOOD, an unlicensed pawnbroker, and daughter of Roger Riderhood.
- LADY TIPPINS, a member of 'society,' and a friend of the Veneerings.
- MRS. ANASTATIA VENEERING, wife of Mr. Hamilton Veneering.
- MRS. WILFER, the tall, angular, stately wife of Reginald Wilfer.
- MISS BELLA WILFER, her daughter; a *protégée* of the Boffins.
- MISS LAVINIA WILFER, younger daughter of Mrs. Wilfer; a sharp, saucy, irrepressible girl.

## INTRODUCTION

I COULD not have been much more than ten years old, when I read, for the first time, *Our Mutual Friend*. My father thought I was too young for Dickens.

“He won’t see the humour,” said my father.

“Yes I will,” I assured him. “I thought *Pickwick* tremendously funny. I laughed ever so much when Mr. Pickwick went to sleep in the middle-aged lady’s bedroom; and when old Mr. Weller ducked Mr. Stiggins in the horse trough.”

“I am sorry he began with *Pickwick*,” said my mother. “Mr. Dickens can write such beautiful stories, when he likes. But I have always thought myself that *Pickwick* is a little vulgar.”

“Broad,” admitted my father, “a trifle broad. Shakespeare himself . . . .”

“I cannot see that two wrongs make a right,” replied my mother. “Everybody gets drunk, even Mr. Pickwick himself. I don’t think it at all a nice book.”

My father abandoned the defence.

“How about *Our Mutual Friend*?” he suggested. “Nobody gets drunk in that, except poor old Dolls, who comes to a bad end. And it’s all about the river. I could show him some of the places.”

My mother approved. She herself liked the Boffins. And the chapter where Johnny bequeaths a kiss to the Boofer Lady.

“I cried over that,” confessed my mother.

So that very next evening that was, my father brought home with him *Our Mutual Friend* in a green wrapper, with a picture of Mr. Dickens on the outside looking very bold and determined; and my mother covered it in brown paper and wrote my name inside; and after tea, it being then holiday time, I took it up with me into my own room, and read there till the shadows came.

We were living in a street off the East India Dock road; and my father, confident of making his fortune,—out of ironmongery, this time—had a warehouse in Narrow Street, down by the river. There I would meet him of an afternoon, taking *Our Mutual Friend* with me; and my father having locked the warehouse door, and put the great key in his pocket, we would set out upon our travels of discovery. We found Gaffer Hexam’s “Mill” near Shadwell stairs. My father was cocksure about it: a low, circular building, partly of brick and partly of wood, used for the storage of empty fish crates. But looking through a broken window, we saw sweet

Lizzie Hexam quite distinctly. She was sitting on the floor, beside a brazier, gazing into the glowing coals. It was my father who first saw her, and pointed her out to me, in a whisper.

The Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters, "impending over the water like some faint-hearted diver," we tracked to his hiding place at the end of a dark alley, just before you come to the swing bridges. The redoubtable Miss Abbey had departed. It had come down to be a lodging-house of sorts; its crazy wooden verandah serving chiefly for the drying of clothes.

The Police Station, "that might have been a monastery," was in Old Gravel Lane. My father entered, bold as brass, and introduced himself, together with a cigar, to Mr. Inspector, who, at first suspicious, thawed when my father mentioned Mr. Dickens; and led us to the "cool grot" at the end of the yard.

"That's where it must have lain," explained Mr. Inspector, as we peeped in through the door; "and here on this very spot they must all have stood, the Stranger and Gaffer with Lawyer Lightwood and that Wrayburn chap. Can't say I ever much cared for him. A bit too highy-tighty for my taste. But she seemed to fancy him alright."

"Meaning Lizzie," said my father. Mr. Inspector and my father agreed that Lizzie Hexam was not of a type common among the daughters of Wapping. My father was of opinion, that Mrs. Hexam, the mother, had been a superior sort of a woman. But then why have married the Bird of Prey?

"No accounting for women," commented Mr. Inspector, as he locked the door.

We tried to find Harmony Jail beyond Battle Bridge, which is King's Cross way. But the Great Northern Railway with its iron broom had swept it into limbo. We wanted to see those dust heaps, the smallest of which would have been a sufficient fortune for the Boffins. There were dust heaps that we knew of the other side of the River Lea. My father told me that, curious on the subject, he had inquired the price of them, and the gentleman who owned them, staring at him, had told him he could have the blank blank lot for a five pun note, if he'd promise to take them away before the end of the month.

"It's a mystery to me," confessed my father. We gave it up.

On the outskirts of Holloway, then a rising suburb, there were half a score of streets where the Wilfers might have lived. We selected a terrace of three-storied houses with bay windows and a basement; and looking down one evening—for the blinds had not been drawn—we saw them there at supper. Mrs. Wilfer sat facing us, a majestic lady. She was wearing gloves and had her head tied up in a pocket handkerchief. George Sampson was there, and