

# Wanting More

## Hunger and anger in the works of Charles Dickens

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“Everything that happens [...] shows beyond mistake that you can’t shut out the world; that you are in it, to be of it; that you get yourself into a false position the moment you try to sever yourself from it; that you must mingle with it, and make the best of it, and make the best of yourself into the bargain.”<sup>1</sup>

Charles Dickens, 1812–70

1839 and was published in book form in 1838. An orphan whose mother died when he was young and about whose father nothing is known, Oliver is brought up by a surrogate mother until the age of nine, and then put in a workhouse to earn his keep. The child inmates are kept in a state of near starvation:

“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 mealtimes. Of this festive composition each boy had one porringer,<sup>3</sup> and no more – except on occasions of great public rejoicing, when 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 spoons 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 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 cook-shop), 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 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,



The young Charles Dickens at his desk, shortly after the success of *Oliver Twist*. Portrait by Daniel Maclise, 1839.

Charles Dickens depicted what is arguably the most famous scene in English literature with six syllables: “Please, sir, I want some more.”<sup>2</sup>

The words are spoken by Oliver Twist, the hero of Dickens' second novel, which appeared in serial form between 1837 and



Oliver asks for more in George Cruikshank's iconic illustration of Dickens' single most famous scene.

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."

### A hunger still unassuaged

This account is full of the almost hallucinatory detail which characterizes all of Dickens' work. On "occasions of great public rejoicing," the boys receive an extra two *and a quarter* ounces of bread. The specification of the extra quarter-ounce of bread (c. 7 g) ironically emphasizes the parsimony of the workhouse regime and the contempt in which the boys are held by the authorities that run it. The bowls never need washing because they are polished clean by the boys' spoons as they scrape up every last bit of food available to them. The spoons they use are almost as large as the bowls themselves, giving a vivid impression of how small the bowls must be. On finishing their tiny portion of gruel, the boys stare compulsively at the pot in which it was cooked, sucking their fingers in search of any splashes of the mixture that may have landed on them while it was being served out. And one boy, "tall for his age" (and therefore obviously not stunted – the inference being that many of his companions are), whose father used to operate a small food retail business and who is therefore used to better fare, threatens to resort to cannibalism itself to assuage his hunger – the most desperate of responses imaginable. Piled one upon another with extravagant assiduousness, these details are designed to shock the reader – and they still do, even after 180 years. But more shocking still is the combination of

humility and directness in Oliver's plea: "Please, sir, I want some more." All the boy is asking for is a little more gruel. That is why we remember his words, and why they are so often quoted verbatim. Of course, Oliver does not get his extra helping. He is actually turned out of the workhouse for his impudence. But his six brave words still hang in the air today, emblematic of a hunger that is still unassuaged and an indifference that is still unchanged in many parts of the world – developing and developed alike.

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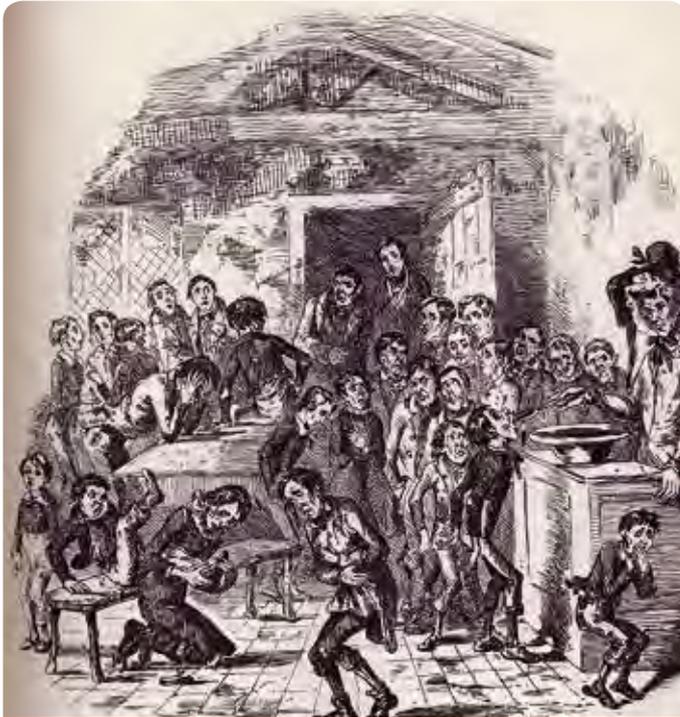
### The boot blacking factory

Dickens may not have experienced actual starvation as a child, but he famously suffered poverty and the humiliation that so often accompanies it. His father, John Dickens (1785–1851), a clerk in the Navy Pay Office, created a pleasant and comfortable life for his family, but he lived beyond his means and fell into debt. In 1824, when Charles was 12 years old, John was forced by his creditors into the Marshalsea debtors' prison in Southwark, London. Separated from his family – who joined John Dickens in the Marshalsea – the young Charles boarded with an impoverished female relative. To pay his lodging and help support his family, he left school and took a job at Warren's Blacking Warehouse, in London's Charing Cross area. He earned six shillings a week (equivalent to USD 32.07 in today's values<sup>4</sup>) pasting labels on pots of boot blacking. Harold Dent eloquently explained the defining nature of this trauma in his critical biography *The Life and Characters of Charles Dickens*:

'Thus it came to pass that when Mr. John Dickens' financial embarrassments became acute again, and finally overwhelmed him altogether, Charles knew not only the actual taste of poverty, but, what was far worse to one of his sensitive understanding, felt all the bitterness of its degradation, and realized to the full the awful narrowness and hopelessness of the life of the very poor. Had he known nothing but poverty all his life, he would have grown up more hardened to it. There can be little doubt that it was the fearful mental shock caused by a descent from comfortable prosperity into privation and neglect, rather than actual physical suffering, which hurt him, and which was instrumental in turning him into "the friend of the poor."' <sup>5</sup>

### Food spikes then and now

The financial vicissitudes that undid his father affected many of Dickens's contemporaries. Imprisonment for debt was common in Great Britain throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the society into



Another iconic image of systematic child abuse: At the Yorkshire School Dotheboys Hall, a boarding institution, the pupils are forced to eat brimstone and treacle [sulfur and molasses] – a laxative believed in Victorian times to cleanse the blood. Served directly before a small breakfast of porridge and bread, it also acts as appetite suppressant. Illustration by George Cruikshank from Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–39).

which Dickens was born was highly unstable. As Laton Blacklands wrote in his foreword to Harold Dent's biography:

'During Dickens' boyhood the land seethed with economic unrest and discontent, brought about by diminishing wages, the high price of food, and unemployment. Riots broke out, and in order to prevent mass agitation large meetings were forbidden without official sanction. A heavy stamp duty rendered propaganda by print an expensive matter. Children of six worked in the mills, though merciful legislation allowed apprentices to labour for a mere twelve hours a day. By 1833 social progress had made such rapid strides that the hours were limited to nine a day or forty-eight per week for juveniles under eleven, and twelve a day or sixty-nine per week for those under eighteen, and inspectors were appointed to see that these regulations were observed.'<sup>6</sup>

One notes the Dickensian irony in the observation that "social progress" permitted the introduction of a 48-hour working week for children under the age of nine. One also notes that some of the conditions referred to by Blacklands exist in parts of the world today. As the 2015 FAO Statistical Pocketbook on World Food and Agriculture puts it:

'Over the last ten years, food and agricultural markets have entered an unexpectedly turbulent phase, character-

ized by large supply shortfalls, price swings. Political and economic uncertainties, coupled with extreme weather conditions, can have direct and adverse impacts on food security. The poorer the household, the stronger the impact of external shocks, as poor households spend a proportionally higher share of their incomes on food.'<sup>7</sup>

The FAO's wording is characteristically considered. Many commentators would trace a stronger link between the food spikes that helped trigger the Arab Spring and the violence and turmoil that are now gripping parts of the Middle East.

### Hunger and revolution

Dickens published the book version of *Oliver Twist* in 1838, the same year that saw the abolition of slavery in the British Empire and the launch of the reformist Chartist movement, "the most significant radical pressure group of the 19<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>8</sup> Queen Victoria had been on the throne for just a year and the French Revolution of 1789–99 could still be remembered by some of the author's contemporaries. Like many Britons of the day, Dickens had a horror of the mob. Yet he felt a deep compassion for the individuals within it. This paradoxical position is well illustrated by a passage in his 1859 novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, which treats of the French Revolution. A large cask of red wine drops off a cart somewhere in pre-revolutionary Paris, and its contents spill across the cobbled street. "All the people within reach" suspend their business to drink the precious wine, scooping it up from the puddles in the stones in an orgy of opportunism, a type of feeding frenzy that prefigures the bloody excesses that are to come during the Revolution. The narrator describes the crowd's desperation to consume every last drop of the wine, observing with that hallucinatory Dickensian eye that after the wine was gone, "the places where it had been most abundant were raked into a gridiron-pattern by fingers." Then the narrator pauses to reflect on the people who have been overtaken by such uncontrollable greed:

'The mill which had worked them down, was the mill that grinds young people old; the children had ancient faces and grave voices; and upon them, and upon the grown faces, and ploughed into every furrow of age and coming up afresh, was the sigh, Hunger. It was prevalent everywhere. Hunger was pushed out of the tall houses, in the wretched clothing that hung upon poles and lines; Hunger was patched into them with straw and rag and wood and paper; Hunger was repeated in every fragment of the small modicum of firewood that the man sawed off; Hunger stared down from the smokeless chimneys, and started up from the filthy street that had no offal, among its refuse, of anything to eat. Hunger was the inscription on the baker's shelves, written in every small loaf of his scanty stock of bad bread; at the sausage-shop, in every dead-dog preparation that was offered for sale. Hun-

ger rattled its dry bones among the roasting chestnuts in the turned cylinder; Hunger was shred into atomics in every farthing porringer of husky chips of potato, fried with some reluctant drops of oil.’<sup>9</sup>

.....

“The children had ancient faces and grave voices; and upon them, and upon the grown faces, and ploughed into every furrow of age and coming up afresh, was the sigh, Hunger”

.....

“Very like the dog”

The same mixture of compassion and horror is experienced by the seven-year-old Pip, the orphan hero of Dickens’s 1861 novel *Great Expectations*. On Christmas Eve around 1812, Pip encounters an escaped convict in the village churchyard where he has gone to visit the graves of his parents and siblings. The convict, named Magwitch, who has broken out of a prison ship moored in the Thames Estuary off the North Kent Marches, terrifies the young Pip into bringing him a file to cut off his shackles and some food to eat:

‘I was soon at the Battery after that, and there was the right man, – hugging himself and limping to and fro, as if he had never all night left off hugging and limping, – waiting for me. He was awfully cold, to be sure. I half expected to see him drop down before my face and die of deadly cold. His eyes looked so awfully hungry too, that when I handed him the file and he laid it down on the grass, it occurred to me he would have tried to eat it, if he had not seen my bundle. He did not turn me upside down this time to get at what I had, but left me right side upwards while I opened the bundle and emptied my pockets.

“What’s in the bottle, boy?” said he.

“Brandy,” said I.

He was already handing mincemeat down his throat in the most curious manner, – more like a man who was putting it away somewhere in a violent hurry, than a man who was eating it, – but he left off to take some of the liquor. He shivered all the while so violently, that it was quite as much as he could do to keep the neck of the bottle between his teeth, without biting it off.

“I think you have got the ague,”<sup>11</sup> said I.

“I’m much of your opinion, boy,” said he.

“It’s bad about here,” I told him. “You’ve been lying out on the meshes,<sup>12</sup> and they’re dreadful aguish. Rheumatic too.”

“I’ll eat my breakfast afore they’re the death of me,” said he. “I’d do that, if I was going to be strung up to that there

gallows as there is over there, directly afterwards. I’ll beat the shivers so far, I’ll bet you.”

He was gobbling mincemeat, meatbone, bread, cheese, and pork pie, all at once: staring distrustfully while he did so at the mist all round us, and often stopping – even stopping his jaws – to listen. Some real or fancied sound, some clink upon the river or breathing of beast upon the marsh, now gave him a start, and he said, suddenly, –

“You’re not a deceiving imp? You brought no one with you?”

“No, sir! No!”

“Nor giv’ no one the office to follow you?”

“No!”

“Well,” said he, “I believe you. You’d be but a fierce young hound indeed, if at your time of life you could help to hunt a wretched warmint hunted as near death and dunghill as this poor wretched warmint<sup>13</sup> is!”

Something clicked in his throat as if he had works in him like a clock, and was going to strike. And he smeared his ragged rough sleeve over his eyes.

Pitying his desolation, and watching him as he gradually settled down upon the pie, I made bold to say, “I am glad you enjoy it.”

“Did you speak?”

“I said I was glad you enjoyed it.”

“Thankee, my boy. I do.”



A left-over fragment of Victorian London. Dickens was both fascinated and horrified by the power of capital cities, and was famous for restlessly pacing the streets of London to help clear his mind as well as to search for new inspiration for his work. “If I could not walk far and fast,” he once wrote, “I think I should just explode and perish.”<sup>10</sup>



A photographic portrait of the mature Charles Dickens.

I had often watched a large dog of ours eating his food; and I now noticed a decided similarity between the dog's way of eating, and the man's. The man took strong sharp sudden bites, just like the dog. He swallowed, or rather snapped up, every mouthful, too soon and too fast; and he looked sideways here and there while he ate, as if he thought there was danger in every direction of somebody's coming to take the pie away. He was altogether too unsettled in his mind over it, to appreciate it comfortably I thought, or to have anybody to dine with him, without making a chop with his jaws at the visitor. In all of which particulars he was very like the dog.<sup>14</sup>

### Journalist and activist

Dickens himself, although a sensitive and impressionable boy who was so scarred by his experience of the boot blacking factory that he did not tell his wife about it until long after they were married, was himself to turn into a "fierce young hound." Starting as a solicitor's assistant at the age of 15, he progressed to become first a freelance reporter of law cases, then a parliamentary reporter, then a short story writer, and then an overnight sensation as the author of *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), his first novel, and *Oliver Twist*. He remained a journalist all his life and became the joint owner of a weekly journal, *Household Words*, in 1850, and then of its successor, the monthly periodical *All The Year Round*, in 1859. Dickens used both his creative fiction and his journalism to campaign against institutional oppression, attacking abusive "Yorkshire schools" in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839),

slavery in *American Notes* (1842) and the British legal system itself in *Bleak House* (1853). In today's parlance, he would be called an investigative reporter and activist who campaigned on topics as diverse as homelessness, workhouses for the poor, schools and schooling, conditions in the armed forces and for veterans; and prisons and punishment.<sup>15</sup> He was an advocate with every breath of his being.

Amazingly, Dickens is still associated in the collective consciousness not just with deprivation and hunger but also with generosity and plenty, as is most eloquently expressed by his 1843 *A Christmas Carol*, a fable of kindness overcoming parsimony which helped to essentially define the modern Christmas. So much is he associated with good fare, in fact, that his great-grandson Cedric Dickens (1916–2006) published a cookery book in 1984 entitled *Dining With Dickens*<sup>16</sup> – described on its title page as "a ramble through Dickensian foods" and being replete with Victorian recipes and observations by Cedric Dickens on his great-grandfather's characters and their relationship with food. According to Cedric, "Dickens enjoyed simple food but ate sparingly. He loved parties, not so much for the food, but more for the happiness parties engendered."<sup>17</sup>

### "Generously angry"

Dickens was not a revolutionary. As George Orwell observed in his magisterial essay *Charles Dickens* of 1940, "Dickens's criticism of society is almost exclusively moral. Hence the utter lack of any constructive suggestion anywhere in his work. He attacks the law, parliamentary government, the educational system and so forth, without ever clearly suggesting what he would put in their places. Of course it is not necessarily the business of a novelist, or a satirist, to make constructive suggestions, but the point is that Dickens's attitude is at bottom not even destructive. There is no clear sign that he wants the existing order to be overthrown, or that he believes it would make very much difference if it were overthrown. For in reality his target is not so much society as 'is human nature'."<sup>18</sup> Thus Orwell – the left-wing author of *Animal Farm* and *1984*, who was very interested in how societies might be reshaped – saw Dickens in his mind's eye as "... a man of about 40, with a small beard and a high colour. He is laughing, with a touch of anger in his laughter, but no triumph, no malignity. It is the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is *generously angry*."<sup>19</sup>

That deep generosity of spirit is echoed in Harold Dent's assessment of Dickens's achievement: "It was his business to tell of [the people's] joys and their sorrows, to picture their daily life in all its drabness and its heroism, to laugh at their oddities and chide gently their failings, to raise outcry against the wrongs which oppressed them, to hurl mighty bolts of ridicule and indignation at the foul abuses and injustices and cruelties that rode

### A London Particular (Pea Soup)

Few now will remember what a real thick London Pea Souper<sup>21</sup> was like, when you couldn't see your hand in front of your face! That "pea souper" became known as a "London Particular" after Charles Dickens wrote *Bleak House* in the mid-1800s. "This is about a London particular now, ain't it, miss?" Mr Guppy seemed quite delighted with the dense fog on Miss Summerson's account. It is very unfair to the soup, which is the opposite to acrid and clammy. Try this recipe:

**4 oz [c. 110 g] bacon**

**3 quarts [c. 3 l] green peas**

**2 quarts [c. 2 l] good broth**

**pepper, salt and a little sugar to season bread**

**4 oz [c. 110 g] butter**

**a little milk**

**1 pint [c. 0.5 l] young peas**

Put the butter and the bacon in a saucepan over low heat with the three quarts of peas to sweat them, adding a little milk to prevent the peas getting dry. Add the broth or stock and let boil for 10 mins. Strain and mash well with the broth. If it be too thick add a little more broth. Season to taste. Blend a little flour with a little milk and stir into soup, and boil it up. Cook the young peas, very green and add the soup just before serving.

Don't fry the bread: dry it before the fire and then dice.

**Source:** Cedric Dickens, *Dining With Dickens*, Elvendon Press: Goring-on-Thames, England, 1984. P.133.

roughshod over them and trampled them down into the mire and the filth. This was the destiny he took upon himself ... From the moment of the success of 'Pickwick', whether he knew it or not, Dickens ceased to be his own master and became the servant of his people."<sup>20</sup>

Writing in the 1930s, Harold Dent placed Dickens very much within the context of the British nation. Today, hunger and malnutrition are rightly seen as global issues that have no borders and require multinational solutions. One wonders if the injustices of today's world might one day give rise to a global Dickens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**“Dickens ceased to be his own master and became the servant of his people”**

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