Hard Times: Part 11

Charles Dickens

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wpi.edu/hardtimes

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.wpi.edu/hardtimes/11
"On my friends, the down-trodden operatives of Coketown! Oh my friends and fellow-countrymen, the slaves of an iron-handed and a grinding despotism! Oh my friends and fellow-sufferers, and fellow-workmen, and fellow men! I tell you that the hour is come, when we must rally round one another as one united power, and crumble into dust the oppressors that too long have battened upon the plunder of our families, upon the sweat of our brows, upon the labor of our hands, upon the strength of our sinews, upon the God-created glorious rights of Humanity, and upon the holy and eternal privileges of Brotherhood!"

"Good!" "Hear, hear!" "Hurrah!" and other cries, arose in many voices from various parts of the densely crowded and suffocatingly close Hall, in which the orator, perched on a stage, delivered himself of this and what other froth and fume he had in him. He had declaimed himself into a violent heat, and crumble into dust the oppressors that too long have battened upon the plunder of our families, upon the sweat of our brows, upon the labor of our hands, upon the strength of our sinews, upon the God-created glorious rights of Humanity, and upon the holy and eternal privileges of Brotherhood!"

"Good!" "Hear, hear!" "Hurrah!" and other cries, arose in many voices from various parts of the densely crowded and suffocatingly close Hall, in which the orator, perched on a stage, delivered himself of this and what other froth and fume he had in him. He had declaimed himself into a violent heat, and crumble into dust the oppressors that too long have battened upon the plunder of our families, upon the sweat of our brows, upon the labor of our hands, upon the strength of our sinews, upon the God-created glorious rights of Humanity, and upon the holy and eternal privileges of Brotherhood!"

As he stood there, trying to quench his fiery face with his drink of water, the comparison between the orator and the crowd of attentive faces turned towards him, was extremely to his disadvantage. Judging him by Nature's evidence, he was above the mass in very little but the stage on which he stood. In many great respects, he was essentially below them. He was not so honest, he was not so manly, he was not so good-humoured; he substituted cunning for their simplicity, and passion for their safe solid sense. An ill-made high-shouldered man, with lowering brows, and his features crushed into an habitually sour expression, he contrasted most unfavorably, even in his mongrel dress, with the great body of his hearers in their plain working clothes. Strange as it always is to consider any assembly in the act of submissively resigning itself to the dreariness of some complacent person, lord or commoner, whom three-fourths of it could, by no human means, raise out of the slough of inanity to their own intellectual level, it was particularly strange, and it was even particularly affecting, to see this crowd of earnest faces, whose honesty in the main no competent observer free from bias could doubt, so agitated by such a leader.

"Good!" "Hear hear!" "Hurrah!" The eagerness, both of attention and intention, exhibited in all the countenances, made them a most impressive sight. There was no carelessness, no languor, no idle curiosity; none of the many shades of indifference to be seen in all other assemblies, visible for one moment there. That every man felt his condition to be, somehow or other, worse than it might be; that every man considered it incumbent on him to join the rest, towards the making of it better; that every man felt his only hope to be in his allying himself to the comrades by whom he was surrounded; and that in this belief, right or wrong (unhappily wrong then), the whole of that crowd were gravely, deeply, faithfully in earnest; must have been as plain to any one who chose to see what was there, as the bare beams of the roof, and the whitened brick walls. Nor could any such spectator fail to know in his own breast, that these men, through their very delusions, showed great qualities, susceptible of being turned to the happiest and best account; and that to pretend (on the strength of sweeping axioms, however cut and dried) that they went astray wholly without cause, and of their own irrational wills, was to pretend that there could be smoke without fire, death without birth, harvest without seed, anything or everything produced from nothing.

The orator having refreshed himself, wiped his corrugated forehead from left to right several times with his handkerchief folded into a pad, and concentrated all his revived forces in a sneer of great disdain and bitterness.

"But, oh my friends and brothers! Oh men and Englishmen, the down-trodden operatives of Coketown! What shall we say of that man—that working-man, that I should find it necessary so to libel the
himself aloof, and will not be one of those the proceedings, and this, functionary now took was pale and a little moved in the face—his the orator's side before the concourse. He violent scorn, "I do not wonder that you, the right hand at arm's length (as the manner of voice called out, "Is the man heer? If the him up for the condemnation of a man unheard. the general sense of honor was much too strong There were some groans and hisses, but the wait until there was a profound silence. Slackbridge, who may be a little over hetter office as your president, I ashes o' our friend the existence of such a man. But he who of a dead calm; "I ha' hed what's been spok'n with a round of applause. Slackbridge, the orator, looked about him with a withering smile; and, holding out his right hand at arm's length (as the manner of all Slackbridges is), to still the thundering sea, waited until there was a profound silence. "Oh my friends and fellow men!" said Slackbridge, shaking his head with violent scorn, "I do not wonder that you, the prostrate sons of labor, are incredulous of the existence of such a man. But he who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage existed, and Judas Iscariot existed, and Castle- reagh existed, and this man exists!"

Here, a brief press and confusion near the stage, ended in the man himself standing at the orator's side before the concourse. He was pale and a little moved in the face—his lips especially showed it; but he stood quiet, with his left hand at his chin, waiting to be heard. There was a chairman to regulate the proceedings, and this functionary now took the case into his own hands. 

"My friends," said he, "by virtue o' my office as your president, I ashes o' our friend Slackbridge, who may be a little over hetter in this business, to take his seat, whiles this man Stephen Blackpool is heern. You all know this man Stephen Blackpool. You know him awlung o' his misfort'us, and his good name."

With that, the chairman shook him frankly by the hand, and sat down again. Slackbridge likewise sat down, wiping his hot forehead—always from left to right, and never the reverse way. 

"My friends," Stephen began, in the midst of a dead calm; "I ha' hed what's been spok'n o' me, and 'tis lickly that I shan't mend it. But I'd liefer you'd hear the truth concern myself, fro my lips than fro omy other man's, though I never cud'n speak afore so munny, wi'out bein moyert and muddled.

Slackbridge shook his head as if he would shake it off, in his bitterness. "I'm th' one single Hand in Bounderby's mill, o' a the men there, as don't coom in wi' th' proposed reg'lations. I canna' coom in wi' em. My friends, I doubt their doin' yo own good. Licker they'll do yo hurt."

Slackbridge laughed, folded his arms, and frowned sarcastically. "But 'tant summuch for that as I stands out. If that were aw, I'd coom in wi' th' rest But I ha' my reasons—mine, yo see—for being hindered; not only now, but awius—awius—life long!"

Slackbridge jumped up and stood beside him, grasping and tearing. "Oh my friends, what but this did I tell you? my fellow-countrymen, what warning but this did I give you? And how shows this recreant conduct in a man on whom unequal laws are known to have fallen heavy? Oh you Englishmen, I ask you how does this subornation show in one of yourselves, who is thus consenting to his own undoing and to yours, and to your children's and your children's children's?"

There was some applause, and some crying of Shame upon the man; but the greater part of the audience were quiet. They looked at Stephen's worn face, rendered more pathetic by the homely emotions it evinced; and, in the kind ears of their nature, they were more sorry than indignant.

"'Tis this Delegate's trade for t' speak," said Stephen, "an he's paid for't, an he knows his work. Let him keep to't. Let him give no heed to what I ha'ad'n to bear. That's not for him. That's not for nobody but for me."

There was a propriety, not to say a dignity in these words, that made the hearers yet more quiet and attentive. The same strong voice called out, "Slackbridge, let the man be him give no heed to what I ha had'n to bear."

The audience were quiet. They looked at Slackbridge, who may be a little over hetter in this business, to take his seat, whiles this man Stephen Blackpool is beern. You all know this man Stephen Blackpool. You know him awlung o' his misfort'us, and his good name.

With that, the chairman shook him frankly by the hand, and sat down again. Slackbridge likewise sat down, wiping his hot forehead—always from left to right, and never the reverse way.

"My friends," Stephen began, in the midst of a dead calm; "I ha' hed what's been spok'n
There was an universal murmur to the same effect, though no man articulated a word. Every eye was fixed on Stephen's face. To repent of his determination, would be to take a load from all their minds. He looked around him, and knew that it was so. Not a grain of anger with them was in his heart; he knew them, far below their surface weaknesses and misconceptions, as no one but their fellow laborer could.

"I ha thowt on't, above a bit, sir. I simply caan coom in. I mun go th' way as lays afore me. I mun tak my leave o' aw here.

He made a sort of reverence to them by holding up his arms, and stood for the moment in that attitude; not speaking until they slowly dropped at his sides.

"Monny's the pleasant word as soon heer has spok'n wi' me; monny's the face I see heer, as I first seen when I were yoong and liv'd heart'ñ than now. I ha never had no fratch afore, and I never ha't no o' my like; Gonnaws I ha' none now that's o' my makin'. Yo'll ca' me traitor and that—yo I mean t' say," addressing Slackbridge, "but his easier to ca' than mak' out. So le've.

He had moved away a pace or two to come down from the platform, when he remembered something he had not said, and returned again.

"Haply," he said, turning his furrowed face slowly about, that he might as it were individually address the whole audience, those both near and distant; "haply, when this question has been tak'n up and discussed, there'll be a threat to turn out if I'm let to work among yo. I hope I shall die ere ever such a time cooms, and I shall work solitary among yo unless it cooms—truly, I mun do't, my friends; not to brave yo, but to among a familiar crowd. The stranger in the land who looks into ten thousand faces for some answering look and never finds it, is in cheering society as compared with him who passes ten averted faces daily, that were once the countenances of friends. Such experience was to be Stephen's now, in every waking moment of his life; at his work, on his way to it and from it, at his door, at his window, everywhere. By general consent, they even avoided that side of the street on which he habitually walked; and left it, of all the working men, to him only.

He had been for many years, a quiet, silent man, associating but little with other men, and used to companionship with his own thoughts. He had never known before, the strength of the want in his heart for the frequent recognition of a nod, a look, a word; or the immense amount of relief that had been poured into it by drops, through such small means. It was even harder than he could have believed possible, to separate in his own conscience his abandonment by all his fellows, from a baseless sense of shame and disgrace.

The first four days of his endurance were days so long and heavy, that he began to be appalled by the prospect before him. Not only did he see no Rachael all the time, but he avoided every chance of seeing her; for, although he knew that the prohibition did not yet formally extend to the women working in the factories, he found that some of them with whom he was acquainted were changed to him, and he feared to try others, and dreaded that Rachael might be even singled out from the rest if she were seen in his company. So, he had been quite alone during the four days, and had spoken to no one, when, as he was leaving his work that night, a young man of a very light complexion accosted him in the street.

not the Roman Brutus, oh my British countrymen, condemned his son to death; and had not the Spartan mothers, oh my soon to be victorious friends, driven their flying children on the points of their enemies' swords Then was it not the sacred duty of the men of Coketown, with forefathers before them, an admiring world in company with them, and a posterity to come after them, to hurl out traitors from the tents they had pitched in a sacred and a Godlike cause? The winds of Heaven answered Yes; and the sound, and took it up. Private feeling must yield to the common cause. Hurrah! The roof yet vibrated with the cheering, when the assembly dispersed.

Thus easily did Stephen Blackpool fall into the loneliest of lives, the life of solitude among a familiar crowd. The stranger in the land who looks into ten thousand faces for some answering look and never finds it, is in cheering society as compared with him who passes ten averted faces daily, that were once the countenances of friends. Such experience was to be Stephen's now, in every waking moment of his life; at his work, on his way to it and from it, at his door, at his window, everywhere. By general consent, they even avoided that side of the street on which he habitually walked; and left it, of all the working men, to him only.

He had been for many years, a quiet, silent man, associating but little with other men, and used to companionship with his own thoughts. He had never known before, the strength of the want in his heart for the frequent recognition of a nod, a look, a word; or the immense amount of relief that had been poured into it by drops, through such small means. It was even harder than he could have believed possible, to separate in his own conscience his abandonment by all his fellows, from a baseless sense of shame and disgrace.

The first four days of his endurance were days so long and heavy, that he began to be appalled by the prospect before him. Not only did he see no Rachael all the time, but he avoided every chance of seeing her; for, although he knew that the prohibition did not yet formally extend to the women working in the factories, he found that some of them with whom he was acquainted were changed to him, and he feared to try others, and dreaded that Rachael might be even singled out from the rest if she were seen in his company. So, he had been quite alone during the four days, and had spoken to no one, when, as he was leaving his work that night, a young man of a very light complexion accosted him in the street.
"Your name's Blackpool, ain't it?" said the young man.

Stephen colored to find himself with his hat in his hand, and his gratitude for being spoken to, or in the suddenness of it, or both. He made a feint of adjusting the lining, and said, "Yes."

"You are the Hand they have sent to Coventry, I mean?" said Bitzer, the very light young man in question.

Stephen answered "Yes," again.

"I supposed so, from their all appearing to keep away from you. Mr. Bounderby wants to speak to you. You know his house, don't you?"

Stephen said "Yes," again.

"Then go straight up there, will you?" said Bitzer. 'You're expected, and have only to tell the servant it's you. I belong to the Bank; so, if you go straight up without me (I was sent to fetch you), you'll save me a walk."

Stephen, whose way had been in the contrary direction, turned about, and betook himself as in duty bound, to the red brick castle of the giant Bounderby.

CHAPTER XXI.

"WELL Stephen," said Bounderby, in his windy manner, "what's this I hear? What have these pests of the earth been doing to you? Come in, and speak up."

Saying that, he closed the door and standing near it, with his hat in his hand.

"This is the man I was telling you about, Harthouse," said Mr. Bounderby. The gentleman he addressed, who was talking to Mrs. Bounderby on the sofa, got up, saying in an indolent way, "Oh really?" and dawdled to the hearthrug where Mr. Bounderby stood.

"Now," said Bounderby, "speak up!"

After the four days he had passed, this address fell rudely and discordantly on Stephen's ear. Besides being a rough handling of his wounded mind, it seemed to assume that he really was the self-interested deserter he had been called.

"What were it, sir," said Stephen, "as yo were pleased to want wi' me?"

"Why, I have told you," returned Bounderby.

"Speak up like a man, since you are a man, and tell us about yourself and this Combination."

"Wi' yer pardon, sir," said Stephen Blackpool, "I ha' nowt to say about it."

Mr. Bounderby, who was always more or less like a Wind, finding something in his way here, began to blow at it directly.

"Now, look here, Harthouse," said he, "here's a specimen of 'em. When this man was here once before, I warned this man against the mischievous strangers who are always about — and who ought to be hanged wherever they are found—and I told this man that he was going in the wrong direction. Now, would you believe it, that although they have put this mark upon him, he is such a slave to them still, that he's afraid to open his lips about them?"

"I sed as I had nowt to sen, sir; not as I was feare' o' openin' my lips."

"You said. Ah! I know what you said; more than that, I know what you mean, you see. Not always the same thing, by the Lord Harry! Quite different things. You had better tell us at once, that that fellow Slackbridge is not in the town, stirring up the people to mutiny; and that he is not a regular qualified leader of the people: that is, a most confounded scoundrel. You had better tell us so at once; you can't deceive me. You want to tell us so. Why don't you?"

"I'm as soory as yo, sir, when the people's leaders is bad," said Stephen, shaking his head. "They takes such as offers. Haply 'tis na' the smallest o' their misfortunes when they can't get no better."

The wind began to be boisterous.

"Now, you'll think this pretty well, Harthouse," said Mr. Bounderby. "You'll think this tolerably strong. You'll say, upon my soul, this is a tidy specimen of what my friends have to deal with; but this is nothing, sir! You shall hear me ask this man a question. Pray, Mr. Blackpool!—wind sprigging up very fast—"may I take the liberty of asking you how it happens that you refused to be in this Combination?"

"How? it happens?"

"Ah!" said Mr. Bounderby, with his thumbs in the arms of his coat, and jerking his head and shutting his eyes in confidence with the opposite wall: "how it happens."

"I'd leifer not coom to't, sir; but sin you put th' question—an not want'n t' be ill—how't happens?"

"I sed as I had nowt to sen, sir; not as I
that, ma'am. They'd be riven to bits, ere you and me, instead of taking the substance of it—for I know precious well, beforehand, what it will be; nobody knows better than I do, take notice!—instead of receiving it on trust, from my mouth.

Stephen bent his head to the gentleman from London, and showed a rather more troubled mind than usual. He turned his eyes involuntarily to his former refuge, but at a look from that quarter (expressive though instantaneous) he settled them on Mr. Bounderby's face.

"Now, what do you complain of?" asked Mr. Bounderby.

"I ha' not coom heer, sir," Stephen reminded him, "to complain. I coom for that I were sent for."

"What," repeated Mr. Bounderby, folding his arms, "do you people, in a general way, complain of?"

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

"Sir," I were never good at showin' 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 th' numbers o' people as has been broughten into bein heer, fur to weave, an to card, an to piece out a livin, aw the same one way, somehow, twixt their cradles an their graves. Look how we live, an wheer we we're, an on what numbers, an by what chances, an wi' what sameness; and look how the mills is awwus a goin, an how they never works us no higher to omny distant object—ceptin awwus, Death. Look how you considers of us, an writes of us, an talks of us, an goes up wi' yor deputations to Secretaries o' State 'bout us, an how yo are awwus right, an how we are awwus wrong, and never had'n no reason in us sin ever we were born. Look how this ha' grown an awn, sir, bigger an bigger, broader an broader, harder an harder, fro year to year, fro generation unto generation. Who can look o't, sir, and fairly tell a man 'tis not a muddle?"

"Of course," said Mr. Bounderby. "Now perhaps you'll let the gentleman 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, an ower aw the rest of us. What do they tak upon themsen, sir, if not to do't?"

"I'll tell you something towards it, at any rate," returned Mr. Bounderby, "We will make an example of half a dozen Slackbridges. We'll indict the blackguards for felony, and get 'em shipped off to penal settlements."

Stephen gravely shook his head.

"Don't tell me we won't, man," said Mr. Bounderby, by this time blowing a hurricane, "because we will, I tell you!"

"Sir," returned Stephen, with the quiet confidence of absolute certainty, "if yo was t' tak a hundred Slackbridges—aw as there is, an aw the number ten times towd—an was t' sew 'em up in separate sacks, an sink 'em in the deepest ocean as were made ere ever dry land coom to be, yo'd leave the
muddle just wheer 'tis. Mischeevous stran-
gers !" 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 favor
for 'em—I ha no reason to favor 'em—but
'tis hopeless an useless to dream o' takin
them fro their trade, 'stead o' takin their
trade fro them! Aw that's now about me in
this room were heer afore I coom, an will
be heer when I am gone. 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' Slackbridge every bit."

Reverting for a moment to his former
refuge, he observed a cautious movement
of her eyes towards the door. Stepping back,
he put his hand upon the lock. But, he had
not spoken out of his own will and desire;
and he felt it in his heart a noble return for
his late injurious treatment, to be faithful
to the last to those who had repudiated
him. He stayed to finish what was in his
mind.

"Sir, I canna, wi' my little learning an my
conversion, tell me what will better aw this—though some working-men o'
this town could, above my powers—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. Agrein 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. Let thousands upon
thousands alone, aw leadin the like lives
and aw faw'en into the like muddle, and they
will be as one, an yo will be as another, wi'
a black impassable world betwixt yo, just as |
and aw faw'en into the like muddle, and they

British Phenomena.

This is what I am told by a French writer:
"Generally the people of a nation are very
ignorant concerning the phenomena of their
own land; they must see them in foreign
countries, or in the form of tales. To assist my fellow-country-
men in this praiseworthy struggle to com-
prehend themselves I will faithfully set
down some few of the ideas I have obtained
from Monsieur Méry's Nuits Anglaises.

Our first study shall be Mr. William Shof-
field, a Birmingham cutter, who retired upon
fifteen thousand pounds a year to a house
in the county of Kent.

The retirement of Mr. Shoffield took place
in the year eighteen hundred and thirty-
four, and the establishment set up by
him consisted of two servants in blue
gloves, a berlin with three horses, and an
emancipated negro coachman—berlin, horses,
and coachman being sold to him by Mr.
Milne, the famous coachmaker of Edgar Rood
(called, in our ignorance, the Edgeware
Road). The Bethforth coach, passing his

remember, that I was up to the gold spoon
look-out."

"I were not up to't myself, sir; I do assure
you."

"Now, it's clear to me," said Mr. Bounderby,
"that you are one of those chaps who have
always had a grievance. And you go about,
sowing it and raising crops. That's the busi-
ness of your life, my friend."

Stephen shook his head, mutely protesting
that indeed he had other business to do for
his life.

"You are such a waspish, raspish, ill-con-
ditioned chap, you see," said Mr. Bounderby,
"that even your own Union, the men who
know you best, will have nothing to do with
you. I never thought those fellows could be
right in anything; but I tell you what! I so
far go along with them for a novelty, that I'll
have nothing to do with you either."

Stephen raised his eyes quickly to his face.

"You can finish off what you're at," said
Mr. Bounderby, with a meaning nod, "and
then go elsewhere."

"Sir, yo know weel," said Stephen express-
ively, "that if I canna get work wi' yo, I canna
get it elsewhere."

The reply was, "What I know, I know;
and what you know, you know. I have no
more to say about it."

Stephen glanced at Louisa again, but her
eyes were raised to his no more; therefore,
with a sigh, and saying, barely abov
his breath, "Heaven help us aw in this wo!
he departed."

"I will never do't.