

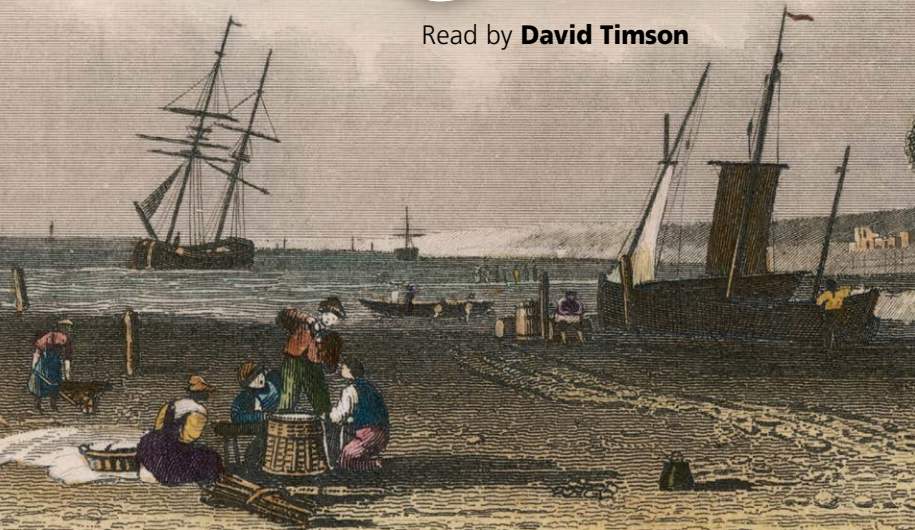
NAXOS
AudioBooks

CLASSIC
FICTION

Charles Dickens

Our Mutual Friend

Read by **David Timson**



CD 1

1	On the Look Out	6:13
2	The Man from Somewhere	7:08
3	The Veneering dinners are excellent dinners...	7:58
4	Another Man	7:11
5	'Am I to show the way?'	7:07
6	There being nothing more to be done...	6:55
7	The R. Wilfur Family	8:09
8	The young lady's lamentations were checked...	6:46
9	Boffin's Bower	7:08
10	'Now Weg,' said Mr. Boffin, hugging his stick closer...	7:33
11	The Bower was as difficult to find as Fair Rosamond's...	6:41

Total time on CD 1: 78:58

CD 2

1	Cut Adrift	5:43
2	The relief of hearing what she felt sure was a false suspicion...	7:20
3	Mr. Wegg Looks After Himself	6:31
4	Having so held and waved the candle...	7:00
5	Mr. Boffin in Consultation	7:03
6	The worthy Mr. Boffin jogged away...	5:37
7	Mr. and Mrs. Boffin in Consultation	7:15
8	'Oh-h!' said Mrs. Wilfur	6:07
9	A Marriage Contract	7:34
10	Ceremony performed, register signed...	6:49
11	The Sweat of an Honest Man's Brow	6:12
12	'Now,' began Lightwood, 'what's your name?'	6:04

Total time on CD 2: 79:23

CD 3

1	There was a silence...	7:55
2	Tracking the Bird of Prey	4:56
3	He could see the light of the fire...	5:59
4	The Bird of Prey Brought Down	4:17
5	'Hand me over those spare skulls of yours...'	4:36
6	Two New Servants	7:49
7	A gloomy house the Bower.	6:20
8	Mr. Wegg (who had had nothing else in his mind)...	6:50
9	Minders and Reminders	5:38
10	She was one of those women, was Mrs. Betty Higden...	6:01
11	This piece of business thus put in train...	6:20
12	A Dismal Swamp	1:58
13	Of an Educational Character	4:57
14	The boy knocked at a door...	5:19

Total time on CD 3: 79:02

CD 4

1	'Charley! You!'	6:53
2	The master and the pupil walked on...	4:46
3	Still Educational	7:01
4	Then he fell to talking playfully with Jenny Wren...	7:40
5	A Riddle Without an Answer	4:48
6	Very remarkably, neither Eugene Wrayburn nor Bradley...	5:11
7	'You think me of no more value than the dirt...'	5:59
8	In Which a Friendly Move is Originated	7:25
9	The palm of Silas Wegg descends with a sounding smack...	6:43
10	In Which an Innocent Elopement Occurs	6:29
11	'Ma,' said Bella, angrily, 'you force me to say...'	5:25
12	Back came her father, more like a boy than ever...	6:43
13	In Which the Orphan Makes His Will	4:20

Total time on CD 4: 79:32

CD 5

1	But on the way down they had stopped at a toy shop...	5:20
2	A Successor	5:17
3	Some Affairs of the Heart	8:37
4	The dolls' dressmaker sat with her attitude unchanged...	4:33
5	More Birds of Prey	6:32
6	The visitor first held the bottle...	6:07
7	A Solo and a Duet	7:06
8	'Now I pass to sick and deranged impressions...'	7:44
9	Arriving at the house, he found that Mr. and Mrs. Boffin were out.	4:33
10	Strong of Purpose	5:02
11	The Whole Case So Far	5:49
12	The powdered mortar from under the stone...	6:09
13	An Anniversary Occasion	3:14
14	A Happy Return of the Day	3:22

Total time on CD 5: 79:34

CD 6

1	'But what,' said Bella, as she watched the carving...	7:35
2	The Golden Dustman Falls into Bad Company	6:00
3	Somehow, Bella was not so well pleased...	5:50
4	'I don't mind telling you, Sophronia...'	5:50
5	The Golden Dustman Falls into Worse Company	6:06
6	Mr. Wegg and Mr. Venus looked at one another...	6:01
7	The instant Mr. Boffin was on the other side of the door...	6:33
8	The Friendly Move Takes up a Strong Position	5:33
9	Mr. Wegg thereupon made an easy, graceful movement...	5:54
10	The End of a Long Journey	4:52
11	She was gone out of the Lock-house...	5:33
12	Somebody Becomes the Subject of a Prediction	8:03
13	But for all that, they had a very pleasant walk.	5:01

Total time on CD 6: 79:00

CD 7

1	'You know all now,' said Lizzie...	4:05
2	Scouts Out	3:52
3	Eugene came back...	5:56
4	In the Dark	4:27
5	Bradley Headstone's face had changed...	5:07
6	Meaning Mischief	4:48
7	Mr. Wegg Prepares a Grindstone for Mr. Boffin's Nose	7:05
8	'Thank'ee, Venus!' said Mr. Boffin...	7:46
9	With this agreeable promise, Wegg stumped out...	5:11
10	The Golden Dustman at His Worst	7:36
11	'Our connexion being at an end, Mr. Boffin...'	6:28
12	John Rokesmith from his place in the room...	7:54
13	The Feast of the Three Hobgoblins	7:14

Total time on CD 7:77:39

CD 8

1	'We'll break it to you gently, dearest Pa...'	4:32
2	A Social Chorus	6:28
3	Setting Traps	5:29
4	The Golden Dustman Rises a Little	6:53
5	The Golden Dustman Sinks Again	8:53
6	A Runaway Match	3:31
7	Concerning the Mendicant's Bride	3:48
8	A Cry for Help	5:01
9	She had not been prepared for such passionate expressions...	5:46
10	Looking above, he found that the young moon was up...	7:04
11	Better to be Abel than Cain	4:42
12	He was a better follower than Bradley...	5:26
13	Two Places Vacated	2:34
14	The Dolls' Dressmaker Discovers a Word	5:03
15	But the watchful little dressmaker...	4:10

Total time on CD 8: 79:29

CD 9

1	Effect is Given to the Doll's Dressmaker's Discovery	5:06
2	They started directly, in a little carriage...	4:41
3	The Passing Shadow	7:22
4	A twilight calm of happiness then succeeding...	5:27
5	The three persons were Miss Abbey and two male guests.	5:48
6	Showing How the Golden Dustman Helped to Scatter Dust	6:45
7	With a start, Bella directed a hurried glance...	6:43
8	Checkmate to the Friendly Move	7:45
9	Wegg had repeated the word with a sneer...	6:33
10	What was Caught in the Traps that were Set	6:55
11	Not until the late daylight made the window transparent...	4:29
12	Persons and Things in General	4:02
13	The Voice of Society	7:06

Total time on CD 9: 78:51
Total time on CDs 1–9: 11:51:28

Charles Dickens

Our Mutual Friend

Dickens wrote *Our Mutual Friend* in 1865, and it was to be his last completed novel. His two previous novels had been hugely successful. Both were set in the past, *A Tale of Two Cities* during the French Revolution of 1789, and *Great Expectations* in the time of Dickens's own childhood, the 1820s. Now Dickens felt it was time to return to a contemporary setting and an examination of the social evils around him. He also wished to satisfy the public's current taste for 'sensation' novels of which his young friend Wilkie Collins was such a master. Collins's *The Woman in White* had been serialised by Dickens in his magazine '*All the Year Round*' from 1859–60.

In *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens continues with the social message he had begun in *Bleak House* in 1853, where he expressed the need for poverty and disease to be eradicated once and for all by improved sanitary conditions. Henry Mayhew's monumental '*London Labour and the London Poor*' had been published

in 1861–2, and its gruesome detail of the degrading levels of poverty existing in the metropolis was a revelation to many Londoners. One of Mayhew's articles was on the dust-contractors who recovered London's refuse, making a considerable fortune in the process. Some dust contractors apparently made between ten and forty thousand pounds a year. Mayhew quotes the official figures of 3,500,000 tons of coal per year being consumed, and implies that if the ashes and cinders weren't removed, London would be overwhelmed with 'dust'. Dickens freely adapted Mayhew's facts into fiction.

In *Our Mutual Friend* the prevailing images are of dust, dirt and rubbish, out of which the poor continue to make a living. The image of rubbish is echoed in the occupations of the lower classes depicted in the novel: Wegg, the seller of ballads full of romantic rubbish no one wants, Jenny Wren the maker of dolls' dresses, useless fripperies no one seems to buy, Venus, the

articulator of dead bones for no established purpose, and the ultimate occupation that makes something out of nothing; the sifter of other people's cast-offs – the dustman Boffin. By association money itself therefore is presented in the novel as contaminated with dirt and empty pointless activity. Money equals Dust. Those who have money in any quantity are presented as worthless, indolent, self-obsessed types – the Veneerings, the Podsnaps, Eugene Wrayburn, or young Charley Hexham who only sees in his education a means to escape from poverty and join the economic rat-race. The ethics of the pursuit of money for its own sake was an important question in Victorian London in the 1860s. Materialism appeared to be crippling any form of spiritual or imaginative life. Money-worship was to Dickens a form of death-in-life, and death lies like a heavy pall over this story. From the corpse in the first chapter, through the detailed death of orphan Johnny, by way of those who find life-in-death (John Harmon) to the grim satire of Riderhood's resurrection from drowning, (which leads to another kind of death-in-life,) the novel is never far away from the images of mortality and the

inevitable return of mankind to dust. Even the river Thames, which runs through this novel from beginning to end plays a sinister role. Water, usually regarded as a source of life, in this novel is corrupted too by man's abuses, by corpses and the detritus that lives off its pollution, men such as Gaffer Hexham and Riderhood.

Some of the morbid elements in this novel may be accounted for by Dickens's own near encounter with death whilst writing it. Having had a break on the continent to help his nerves, Dickens was involved on his return journey by train in an accident at Staplehurst in Kent. His train was derailed whilst travelling over a viaduct. Ten passengers were killed and forty seriously injured. Dickens heroically helped to rescue and comfort the injured, and risking his own life recovered the episode of *Our Mutual Friend* he had been writing from the shattered carriage he had been occupying. The memory of the accident was to affect him for the rest of his life, and coincidentally he died on its fifth anniversary.

Amid the wasteland of greed and selfishness that Dickens depicts in this novel there are however pockets of hope

– good people like the Jew, Riah, and others of his race, who help Jenny Wren and Lizzie Hexham from no motivation of personal gain, but from the promptings of a noble and generous heart. Dickens was at pains to show Jews in a positive light after receiving hostile reaction from the Jewish community for his exaggerated portrayal of Fagin in *Oliver Twist*.

Finally though it is money that affects the lives of every character in the book, from those who have acquired it like the members of the Veneering circle, where it engenders class snobbery; to those like Betty Higden who have never had money and fear their lack of it will inevitably lead them to the misery of the workhouse.

In Betty Higden's story, Dickens attacks the monstrous injustices of the Victorian Poor Law. His depiction of the fiercely independent Betty fighting to the bitter end against incarceration in the workhouse helped towards a revision of this Act, and as Dickens's friend and biographer John Forster observed in his review of the novel: '*Our Mutual Friend* finishes what *Oliver Twist* began.'

Dickens had supported the creation of the Hospital for Sick Children in 1858,

which he called 'a drop of the life-blood of the great compassionate public heart.' The caring tenderness and sympathy shown to the children in the novel when young Johnny is taken into hospital reflected this new enterprise. Dickens dwells on the details of Johnny's hospital care, which may be a surprise for modern readers unaware perhaps that such a compassionate institution was in existence at this time.

The dismemberment of society (with a small 's') through greed and selfishness is mirrored in the imagery of physical dismemberment occurring throughout the novel. Silas Wegg, most obviously, has a missing leg (though it still exists in Mr. Venus's chamber of articulated bones), but also the description of the face of Bradley Headstone is as if separated from his body, during his obsessive hunt after Wrayburn.

The narrative style too is fractured and inconsistent, mirroring the constantly shifting society of the Victorian age, and the two opening chapters prepare the reader for the novel's stylistic variety. Chapter 1 set on the river, is dark as it creates a mood of 'sensational' realism; while in Chapter 2 at the Veneering's dinner party the tone is highly ironic satire.

Dickens was under stress when writing *Our Mutual Friend*. His tour of public readings from his works was both physically and mentally tiring, and his secret liaison with the young actress Ellen Ternan, was proving to be emotionally draining. The relationship was not progressing smoothly, and at the age of 52, Dickens's creative impulses were slowing down. Writing a novel was proving to be hard work and it took him more time and effort to plan his many-threaded plot and intricate characterisations. The central plot of a young man wrongly thought to have died by drowning assuming another persona to observe and perhaps influence the effect of his death on the people most affected by it, must have appealed to Dickens enormously. Always one to cloak his life in mystery and enigma, the necessity of keeping his affair with Ellen a strict secret from his adoring public, led him to subterfuge, lying to all but a few close friends, and the use of false names and hidden rendezvous to sustain the relationship. Ellen, a shadowy figure, seems not to have responded to Dickens's feelings for her as he would have wished. She was, after all, only in her 20s and he was in his 50s. Maybe the

romance of Bella Wilfer and Rokesmith in *Our Mutual Friend* reflects the progress, or otherwise, of Dickens's own love-affair. The successful conclusion, with its details of the developing intimacy between Bella and John, represents perhaps a large dose of wishful thinking on the author's part. Likewise the other romantic thread of the novel where a working-class girl (Lizzie Hexham) is rescued from her poverty and background by a fine gentleman, (Wrayburn) could also be a delightful personal fantasy for Dickens:

'And oh, there are days in this life, worth life and worth death. And oh what a bright old song it is, that oh, 'tis love, 'tis love, 'tis love that makes the world go round!'

Notes by David Timson



David Timson has made over 1,000 broadcasts for BBC Radio Drama. For Naxos AudioBooks he wrote *The History of the Theatre*, which won an award for most original production from the Spoken Word Publishers Association in 2001. He has also directed for Naxos AudioBooks four Shakespeare plays, including *King Richard III* (with Kenneth Branagh), which won Best Drama Award from the SWPA in 2001. In 2002 he won the Audio of the Year Award for his reading of *A Study in Scarlet*. He also reads *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes I, II, III, IV, V* and *VI* and *The Return of Sherlock Holmes I, II* and *III*.

Credits

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Recorded at Motivation Sound Studios, London
Edited by Sarah Butcher
Abridged by David Timson
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