



*The*  
**VICTORIAN  
CITY**

EVERYDAY LIFE  
*in*  
DICKENS' LONDON

JUDITH FLANDERS



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# The Victorian City

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Judith Flanders, a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Buckingham, is the author of the bestselling *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed* (2003); the critically acclaimed *Consuming Passions: Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain* (2006); *A Circle of Sisters* (2001), which was nominated for the *Guardian* First Book Award; and, most recently, *The Invention of Murder* (2011). She lives in London.



ALSO BY JUDITH FLANDERS

*The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed*

*Consuming Passions: Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain*

*A Circle of Sisters: Alice Kipling, Georgiana Burne-Jones, Agnes Poynter and Louisa Baldwin*

*The Invention of Murder*

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ATLANTIC BOOKS  
LONDON

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*For Ravi*  
*With thanks*

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One may easily sail round England, or circumnavigate the globe. But not the most enthusiastic geographer...ever memorised a map of London...For England is a small island, the world infinitesimal amongst the planets. But London is illimitable.

FORD MADDOX FORD, *The Soul of London*

Cityful passing away, other cityful coming, passing away too: other coming on, passing on. Houseful lines of houses, streets, miles of pavements, piled up bricks, stones. Changing hands. This owner, that Landlord never dies they say. Other steps into his shoes when he gets his notice to quit...Pyramids of sand. Built on bread and onions. Slaves. Chinese wall. Babylon. Big stones left. Round towers. Rubble, sprawling suburbs, jerrybuilt...built of breeze. Shelter for the night.

No one is anything.

JAMES JOYCE, *Ulysses*

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## A NOTE ON CURRENCY

Pounds, shillings and pence were the divisions of the currency. One shilling is made up of twelve pence; one pound of twenty shillings, i.e. 240 pence. Pounds are represented by the £ symbol, shillings as 's', and pence as 'd' (from the Latin, *denarius*). 'One pound, one shilling and one penny' is written as £1 1s 1d. 'One shilling and sixpence', referred to in speech as 'one and six', is written as 1s 6d, '1/6'.

A guinea was a coin to the value of £1 1 0. (The actual coin was not circulated after 1813 although the term remained and tended to be reserved for luxury goods.) A sovereign was a twenty shilling coin, a half-sovereign a ten shilling coin. A crown was five shillings, half a crown 2/6, and the remaining coins were a florin (two shillings), sixpence, a groat (four pence), a threepenny bit (pronounced 'thrup'ny'), twopenny (pronounced tuppence), a penny, a halfpenny (pronounced hayp'ny), a farthing (a quarter of a penny) and a half a farthing (an eighth of a penny).

Relative values have altered so substantially that attempts to convert nineteenth-century prices into contemporary ones are usually futile. However, the website <http://www.ex.ac.uk/~RDavies/arian/current/howmuch.html> is a gateway to this complicated subject.









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## INTRODUCTION

‘A Dickensian scandal for the 21st century’ blares one newspaper headline. ‘No one should have to live in such Dickensian conditions,’ says another. Today ‘Dickensian’ means squalor, it means wretched living conditions, oppression and darkness.

Yet Dickens finished his first novel with a glance at the sunny Mr Pickwick and his friend Sam. ‘There are dark shadows on the earth, but its lights are stronger in the contrast. Some men, like bats and owls, have better eyes for the darkness than for the light. We, who have no such optical powers, are better pleased to take our last parting look at the visionary companions of many solitary hours, when the brief sunshine of the world is blazing full upon them.’ The brief sunshine of the world blazed on in full in Dickens’ work and, early in his career in particular, that was the way his contemporaries saw it. For them, ‘Dickensian’ meant comic; for others, it meant convivial good cheer.<sup>1</sup> It was not until the twentieth century, as social conditions began to improve, that ‘Dickensian’ took on its dark tinge. In Dickens’ own time, the way that people lived was not Dickensian, merely life.

The greatest recorder the London streets has ever known – through whose eyes those streets have become Dickensian – was not born in London at all, but in Portsmouth, on 7 February 1812, where his father, a clerk in the navy pay office, was working. Apart from a brief foray to the capital as a toddler, Dickens moved to the city that gave meaning to his life and his fiction only when he was ten, arriving from Chatham, where his father had been posted, on the Commodore stagecoach, ‘packed, like game and forwarded, carriage paid’, at the coaching inn in the heart of Cheapside, in the City of London.<sup>2</sup> In 1815, he and his family had lodged in Norfolk Street, near Tottenham Court Road, just steps away from the grim-faced Cleveland Street Workhouse. On their return to London in 1822, they moved to the newly developing, lower-middle-class district of Camden Town slightly to the north. Bayham Street was still rural enough for grass to grow down the centre of the road, and the houses that lined the street were new. This is not to say the Dickenses lived lavishly. Dickens’ parents, five children, a servant and the stepson of Mrs Dickens’ deceased sister were all crammed into the little two-storey yellow-brick house. Dickens’ authorized biographer and lifelong friend, John Forster, called Camden Town ‘about the poorest part of the London suburbs’ and described the house as a ‘mean small tenement, with a wretched little back-garden abutting on a squalid court’. (The word ‘court’ in nineteenth-century London always meant a dead-end alley that housed slum lodgings.) Yet the residents listed by one of Dickens’ childhood neighbours – small shopkeepers; the local building contractor – do not bear this out, nor does the rent of £22 per annum – well beyond the reach of the washerwoman Forster claimed was their nearest neighbour. It seems as if, unconsciously, ‘Dickensian’, meaning the dark without the light, was retrospectively being imposed on Dickens himself.

The dark came soon enough. In December 1823, the Dickens family moved to Gower Street North, to a house double the size of the one in Bayham Street. Mrs Dickens was hoping to start a school for young ladies to supplement John Dickens’ income. While not poor, the Dickenses had by now an even larger family – seven children – and could never manage to live within their income. In the quasi-autobiographical *David Copperfield*, Mr Micawber – a surprisingly affectionate portrait

John Dickens from an author more usually exasperated or enraged by his feckless father – famous pronounced, ‘Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery.’<sup>3</sup> And despite the comically pompous tone, the Dickenses’ lives were indeed made miserable, particularly young Charles’s. As the debts mounted, Mrs Dickens’ step-nephew offered to help. He was the new office manager of Warren’s Blacking Factory, near the Strand, which manufactured shoe polish and the blackleading applied to fire grates and kitchen ranges.

And so, sometime around his twelfth birthday, Charles was taken out of school and sent to work in a factory for 6s a week. Less than a month later, his father was arrested for debt, and by April 1824 the household in North Gower Street was broken up. The novice child-worker lived alone in lodgings in Little College Street in Camden Town, while, to save money, the rest of the family moved into the Marshalsea prison nearly four miles away, where John Dickens was already incarcerated. David Copperfield once more speaks for the boy Charles, abandoned as he appeared to be: ‘I know enough of the world now, to have almost lost the capacity of being much surprised by anything; but it is matter of some surprise to me, even now, that I can have been so easily thrown away at such an age. A child of excellent abilities, and with strong powers of observation, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt, bodily or mentally, it seems wonderful to me that nobody should have made any sign in my behalf. But none was made; and I became, at ten years old, a little labouring hind.’<sup>4</sup>

The labouring hind had no idea when, or even if, this purgatory, his being ‘thrown away’, would ever to end. There was every possibility that he would be a factory-hand for the rest of his life. At some point in his life Dickens attempted to write an autobiography. It was never finished, but he handed what he had written to John Forster, to be used in his friend’s biography of him after his death. In this fragment, in his novels and, most likely, in his own mind, Dickens backdated the episode so that it occurred not when he was twelve, but when he was ten, making him more pathetic and defenceless still. The trauma to the child endured. That terrible year, 1824, is the central date not only of the child labour episode in *David Copperfield*, but also of key sections of *Little Dorrit* and *Great Expectations*. For Dickens, until the old market at Hungerford, where Warren’s was located, had been rebuilt (see Plate 14), until ‘the very nature of the ground changed, I never had the courage to go back to the place where my servitude began...For many years, when I came near...I crossed over to the opposite side of the way’, while the route past the Marshalsea ‘made me cry’ long into adulthood. It may be that the confusion over the status of Bayham Street can be attributed to this long-lasting distress. When the Dickens family lived there, it was a respectable lower-middle-class street; by the time John Forster saw it, it had become a slum. Dickens knew that it had been different in his childhood, but the worse it was perceived, the more he had achieved: the squalor of the area was a mark of how far he had come.

By 1825, John Dickens had been released from prison and the family was once more in decent lodgings in north London, with Charles back at school. But within two years John Dickens was back in financial difficulties again, and the young Dickens, still only fifteen, left school for the final time. This time, his prospects were more hopeful. Mrs Dickens’ family was again called on, and her aunt’s lodger, a young solicitor named Blackmore, hired the boy as a clerk. Now his fierce determination to get on his feet put the blacking factory behind him had an outlet. After leaving the Navy Office, John Dickens had found work as a parliamentary reporter, and in 1828 Charles followed suit, becoming successful enough in less than a year to leave clerking behind and set up as a freelance shorthand-writer. In 1830 when he was just twenty-one, his first story, ‘A Dinner at Poplar Walk’, was published in the *Month Magazine*. The would-be author had sent it in anonymously, and when he found it printed, ‘I walked down to Westminster Hall, and turned into it for half an hour, because my eyes were so dimmed with joy and pride.’ Soon he was producing newspaper and magazine sketches regularly, under the



pseudonym Boz. (Boz, pronounced today with a short 'o', was probably pronounced by Dickens 'Boze'. He had given his youngest brother the nickname Moses, which the toddler then mangled 'Boses', and soon the family shortened it to Boz.)

In 1834, at the age of twenty-two, Dickens started work at the *Morning Chronicle*, ultimately earning five guineas a week, or £273 per annum, a decent middle-class salary.<sup>5</sup> In 1836, his first novel, a series of comic sketches about the doings of Mr Pickwick and his friends, was published. The additional £14 a month that it brought in gave him the security he needed to marry Catherine Hogart, the daughter of the editor of the *Evening Chronicle*, who was publishing his 'Sketches of London' (later expanded into *Sketches by Boz*). By June 1836, the serial had become an unprecedented triumph: each issue, which had initially sold 400 copies monthly, was now selling 40,000. In July, Boz was revealed to be Charles Dickens and, as Byron had done before him, he awoke to find himself famous.

Dickens now did something extraordinary. Nine months before he finished *Pickwick Papers*, the man of prodigious energy, only twenty-five years old, began to write *Oliver Twist*, one of the world's most famous novels, whose 'Please, sir, I want some more' is familiar even to the millions who have never read it. And then, five months after he completed *Pickwick*, he started his third novel, *Nicholas Nickleby*, before *Oliver Twist*, his second, had reached its halfway point.<sup>6</sup>

This energy, this amazing outpouring of imaginative literature, suited the age. *Oliver Twist* was being read while William IV was still on the throne, for Dickens, contrary to our easy assumption, was not a Victorian, or not solely a Victorian. He was born in the reign of George II, although by 1830 the old king was permanently mad, as well as deaf and blind: the Regency had been declared the previous year, and the Prince Regent set the rackets and louche tone of the upper reaches of society. In 1820, when Dickens was still a boy in Chatham, the Prince Regent inherited the throne as George IV. Dickens was nineteen when the old stone London Bridge, a symbol of London for 600 years, was replaced. Even as his writing career took off, the new era had not properly begun: as Bill Sikes was hunted down at the end of *Oliver Twist*, his pursuers demand that a door be opened 'in the king's name'. By the time the eighteen-year-old Victoria came to the throne in 1837, Dickens was twenty-five, an established author, a magazine editor and a married man with a family. And when he died in 1870, the Victorian age still had thirty years to run. But although he was therefore not purely Victorian, Dickens' life – and Dickens' London – form a perfect optic through which to see the city's transformation. His was the London of dubious beginnings, of Regency grandiosity, as well as of early Victorian earnestness and endeavour, expansionism and technological advancement.<sup>7</sup>

Dickens would describe all these qualities as though no one had ever seen them before. And after he described them, no one would be able to see them again except through his eyes. Throughout his life, peripatetic residentially as well as psychologically – living at over two dozen London addresses in a half-century – Dickens covered the whole of London, from the East End and the City, north to Camden, through Westminster and west to Hammersmith, south along the shores of the river. Even when he was officially settled, he frequently maintained several addresses at once, some known to his friends and family, others more or less kept hidden. In the 1850s, the Dickens family home was in Bloomsbury, with a country house in Kent. Dickens was proprietor and editor of the magazine *Household Words* from 1850 to 1859, and of *All the Year Round* from 1859 to his death in 1870. Both magazines had offices in Covent Garden with rooms where he stayed overnight; and Ellen Ternan, his secret mistress, lived at first close to his early childhood home in Camden Town, then in the suburb south of the river. Dickens could be different people at different times in different places, changing course as he strode from one to another.

Dickens' London was a place of the mind, but it was also a real place. Much of what we take today to be the marvellous imaginings of a visionary novelist turn out on inspection to be the



reportage of a great observer. In 1853, Dickens published an essay, 'Gone Astray', in which the narrator tells of a day when, as 'a very small boy indeed', he is taken to see St Giles' Church, lying between Covent Garden and the present-day Charing Cross Road, then on the edge of the fearsome slum of St Giles. From there his adult companion takes him to Northumberland House, which closes off the south side of what became Trafalgar Square, in a 'narrow, crowded, inconvenient street'. Then the boy-narrator loses his accompanying adult and is off on his own, walking along the Strand, down Fleet Street, past Temple Bar – the Wren-designed stone gateway where the Strand and Fleet Street meet, which was the formal demarcation line between the West End and the City – seeing from there the great dome of St Paul's.<sup>8</sup> He wanders through the City, past the Royal Exchange, then the Mansion House, home of the City's Lord Mayor, and finally reaches Whitechapel: 'This is literally and exactly how I went astray.' It also, 'literally and exactly', covers the heart of Dickens' London, the streets he walked compulsively, obsessively, before transforming them into art until his death at only fifty-eight. One journalist, a protégé of Dickens, described how the author regularly appeared like the pantomime demon, popping up anywhere and everywhere: 'A hansom whirled you by the Bell and Horns in Brompton, and there he was, striding out, as with seven-league boots, seemingly in the direction of the North-end, Fulham. The Metropolitan Railway sent you forth at Lisson-grove, and you met him plodding speedily towards the Yorkshire Stingo [pub]. He was to be met rapidly skirting the grim brick wall of the prison in Coldbath-fields, or trudging along the Seven Sisters-road at Holloway, or bearing, under a steady press of sail, underneath Highgate Archway, or pursuing the even tenor of his way up to the Vauxhall-bridge-road.'<sup>9</sup>

The younger man found Dickens' appearance as he walked the streets 'decidedly "odd" and delighting as he did in bright colours and clothes cut with dramatic flair. This was frequently commented on later in the nineteenth century by younger men who were unaware that Dickens had retained to the end of his life the Regency's love of bright colours and dandified attitudes. (He shared this trait with another colourful dresser, Disraeli, eight years his senior.) As he walked along, the small, fine-boned man presented himself with a 'slight flavour of the whipper-snapper', a dashing air and 'remarkably upright' carriage. Over the years, the impression he made on the street shifted from that of a 'pretty-boy-looking sort of figure' to 'A man of sanguine complexion, deeply lined and scantily bearded...countenance alert and observant, scornful somewhat and sour'; yet even then, when he was ageing, he kept his 'light step and jaunty air'. With a 'brand new hat airily cocked on one side' he continued to march along at breakneck pace through the city streets well into his final years.

These walks were in part a way of processing his work, thinking out his fiction with his feet. In Switzerland, he lamented to John Forster, 'The absence of any accessible streets continues to worry me...at night I want them beyond description. I don't seem able to get rid of my spectres unless I can lose them in crowds.' The narrator who opens *The Old Curiosity Shop* has much in common with his author: 'Night is generally my time for walking...it affords me greater opportunity of speculating on the characters and occupations of those who fill the streets...a glimpse of passing faces caught by the light of a street-lamp or a shop window is often better for my purpose than their full revelation in the daylight.'

But other types of walks had other purposes. There was the 'straight on end to a definite goal at a round pace' walk, and the 'objectless, loitering, and purely vagabond' walk: walking to get places, and walking for the fun of it, for looking, and for being looked at. Many people did both, but it may be that Dickens wrote more about walking and wandering than anyone else. 'Whenever we have an hour or two to spare, there is nothing we enjoy more than a little amateur vagrancy – walking up one street and down another, and staring into shop windows, and gazing about as if, instead of being on intimate terms with every shop and house...the whole were an unknown region to our wandering mind.' According to his contemporaries, he was 'on intimate terms' with almost every district. A man who

had worked with him when he had been an adolescent solicitor's clerk said, 'He knew it all from Bow to Brentford.' Four decades later, at the end of his life, they were saying the same: give Dickens the name of almost any street and he could 'tell you all that is in it, what each shop was, what the grocer's name was, [and] how many scraps of orange-peel there were on the pavement'. His London, in the words of a reviewer, was described 'with the accuracy of a cabman'.

Walking kept the author himself anchored to the great city. In his youth, Dickens described 'lounging one evening, down Oxford-street'; later, as a magazine editor, he recommended to his journalists that they actively choose their subjects in the city that he still found a daily novelty. 'Suggest to him Saturday night in London, or London Markets...the most extraordinary men...the most extraordinary things...the strangest Shows – and the wildest'. In the decade before his death, he assumed the guise of 'The Uncommercial Traveller' (a 'traveller' being a travelling salesman) 'always on the road...I travel for the great house of Human Interest Brothers...I am always wandering here and there...seeing many little things, and some great things, which, because they interest me, I think may interest others.'

Previous essays about London, by authors such as Charles Lamb and Leigh Hunt, had been filled with history, with learned asides, with a great panoply of education. Dickens, from the first, with *Sketches by Boz*, truly did sketch what he saw: the people of the streets and the world that these people lived in. *Pickwick Papers* had originally been planned as a series of vignettes 'illustrative of manners and life in the country', as the Londoner Mr Pickwick makes tours into different parts of the country. In the fourth instalment the cockney servant Sam Weller appeared at the White Hart Inn, in the Whitechapel Borough, south of the river. His knowledge of London was much like that of his creator, 'extensive and peculiar', and with him Dickens found his subject and his audience – for it was with this issue that the sales took off and success was assured.

For the rest of his career, Dickens continued to find his subjects in the streets, or in journalistic descriptions of the streets. In *Dombey and Son*, Rob the Grinder is a working-class boy sent to a school through a charity that obliged him to wear a specific old-fashioned uniform. The *Illustrated London News* printed engravings of these outfits four years before the novel was begun. In *Our Mutual Friend* Gaffer Hexam, who dredges corpses out of the river, the dustmen who collect household waste and Betty Higden, the itinerant pedlar, all have their street equivalents in Henry Mayhew's great compendium of the London street workers, *London Labour and the London Poor*. And in *Household Words* Dickens remembered a woman who had roamed Berners Street in his childhood, and who was said to have lost her mind when abandoned by her fiancé, wearing her wedding dress ever after – the inspiration for Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, found on the London streets.

These streets that Dickens drew on his whole life were a hive of activity, a route for commuters, a passage from home to work and from work to home. But they were also a place of work itself, as well as one of leisure and amusement. The streets had purpose to them; they were a destination as well as a means of reaching a destination.

'The streets' were not, however, a stable entity throughout the century. They, like London, were undergoing an unprecedented transformation: they were old, with much of London dating to its reconstruction after the Great Fire of 1666; and they were new, as modernity gathered pace and changed the face of the city, bringing railways, street lighting and other innovations; they were constantly renewing – London was, for most of the century, one never-ending building site. In 1800 London was already the largest city ever known, double the size of Paris with more than 1 million inhabitants, living in 136,000 houses; by 1851 nearly 3 million people occupied 306,000 houses; at the end of the century, that figure had more than doubled again, to 6.5 million people, and 6 million houses had gone up over the previous seventy-five years. These statistics omit the new roads that had

been constructed, the shops that had been built, the offices, the railway and underground stations, the sewers, the water mains and all the other infrastructure of modernity that had been added to the essentially seventeenth-century city that London had been in 1800.

And within the single entity called London, many Londons existed simultaneously. At two in the morning at a street vendor's coffee stall, young men on a night out might look for prostitutes, among the milliners' drudges returning home after another sixteen-hour day, who themselves had passed street children sleeping on doorsteps and under the railway arches. They, in their turn, foraged for their breakfast at four in the morning among market refuse, nimbly avoiding the carriages of the wealthy, who were returning home from assemblies and balls. These vehicles crossed the paths of the watercress sellers heading for the markets before dawn, so that they could be on their suburban selling routes by six, to supply breakfast greens to the households of the now-sleeping young men. Similar London could be measured in time as well as space, physically and metaphorically. Covent Garden was the location of the market and the thriving vice trade; it was the centre that fed the populace and the location of two of London's most important theatres. Drury Lane, behind the market, was a byword for poverty and filth, while the Lowther Arcade, a few hundred yards away, was the haunt of the wealthy who lounged their days away shopping for luxury goods.

The economist and journalist Walter Bagehot encapsulated Dickens' encyclopaedic embrace of the city in a neat metaphor: 'London is like a newspaper. Everything is there, and everything is disconnected...As we change from the broad leader to the squalid police report, we pass a corner and we are in a changed world.' Dickens' critics complain that his characters are caricatures, with mannerisms and tics substituting for personality and emotion. But Dickens was capturing actual people as they flitted along the streets, their phrases overheard, their characters snatched on the hoof as they passed each other in London's hurly-burly. He created, he said, a 'fanciful photograph in my mind'. 'I couldn't help,' he wrote, 'looking upon my mind...as a sort of capially prepared and highly sensitive [photographic] plate. And I said, without the least conceit...“it really is a pleasure to work with you, you receive the impression so nicely”.'<sup>10</sup>

Whilst these impressions were real, they were also radically reworked by Dickens' imagination to create new realities, well recognized by his fellow artists. Henry James described Dickens' type of fiction, with its real places and real street names, as having the 'solidity of specification'; Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke of Dickens' 'London tracts'. So real were these tracts that when the American historian Francis Parkman arrived in London, 'I thought I had been there before. There, in flesh and blood, was the whole host of characters that figured' in Dickens – the people, the traffic: everything he marvelled.

Details that Londoners didn't even notice they were noticing were given a place in the sharp-eyed author's books. Like foreigners, Dickens noted the native customs: he reproduced them faithfully for the locals, just as the visitors reported them to their audiences at home. In *À Rebours* (1884), by the French decadent novelist J.-K. Huysmans, the hero drifts into a daydream in an English bar in Paris, peopling the Parisian cellar with customers culled from his favourite Dickens novels. 'He settled down comfortably in this London of the imagination...believing for a moment that the distant hootings of the tugs behind the Tuileries were coming from boats on the Thames.' As Walter Benjamin quoted half a century later, 'Dickens did not stamp these places on his mind; he stamped his mind on these places.' Dickens created London as much as London created Dickens.

As the city changed, what was imagination and what reportage has blurred and become hard to distinguish. Jokes that Dickens' readers understood, dry asides on the streets that he and they walked so regularly, for us lie deeply buried. This book is an attempt to bring these details to the surface once more, to look at the streets of London as Dickens and his fellow Londoners saw it, to examine its workings, to take a walk, in effect, through the city as it appeared in Dickens' lifetime, from 1812

1870.

~~Mr Micawber, the young David Copperfield's feckless but faithful friend, offered his services on~~  
David's first day in London: 'Under the impression...that your peregrinations in this metropolis have  
not as yet been extensive, and that you might have some difficulty in penetrating the arcana of the  
Modern Babylon...in short...that you might lose yourself – I shall be happy to call this evening, and  
install you in the knowledge of the nearest way.'

The arcana of the modern Babylon: like Mr Micawber, Dickens reveals to his readers the occult  
secrets of London, installing in us, his readers, the knowledge of the nearest, and best, way. The least  
we can do is follow him.

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