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Opening extract from

Hard Times

Written by

Charles Dickens

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CONTENTS

The Characters 4
Hard Times 7
Taking things further 55

THE CHARACTERS

Louisa Gradgrind

Louisa has been brought up by strict logic. Will her natural energy and passion be her downfall?

Tom Gradgrind

Louisa's brother.
Tom is unhappy, bored and selfish, but is he a criminal?

Mr Gradgrind

A powerful man. He runs a school with Bounderby. Will his practical, logical approach help him to control his children?

Mr Bounderby

A wealthy factory owner.
Can anybody be free or happy when he is around?

Sissy Jupe

A clown's daughter.
Will her father ever return?
Will she and Louisa ever be friends?

Stephen Blackpool and Rachael

Thoroughly good but very poor people. Can such people ever find happiness?

James Harthouse

A handsome, clever young gentleman. Will he lead Louisa to shame and ruin?

HARD TIMES

The flame flared, then died immediately as the man put it into his mouth. Its reflection still flickered in Louisa's fascinated eyes. Everything on the other side of the fence was colour and sound – a pony trotted past, ribbons flying and bells tinkling; the fire-eater's fierce flame roared again. Nearby, a girl of about fourteen was helping a clown to dress. She was painting a wide red smile onto his sad white face. Next to them, a child was singing a song that was new to sixteen-year-old Louisa.

'Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are.'

Louisa heard her brother Tom gasp beside her. As she strained to see what wonderful sight had caught his eye, an iron-like hand clasped her shoulder.

Louisa realised her mistake. 'Father!' The fire died in her eyes. Like machines, she and

Tom allowed their father to lead them silently back to Stone Lodge.

Once home, Mr Gradgrind stood solidly before his two children. 'Those people are worthless vagabonds. You two have had a thorough, practical education in our school. What can you possibly find of interest in that dreadful circus?'

Tom stared at the floor, but Louisa raised her eyes proudly to meet her father's. 'We were just wondering what ... '

'Wondering!' exclaimed Mr Gradgrind in disbelief, 'No child of mine has been taught to wonder! Never wonder, it is idle imagination and serves no logical purpose. I won't have any wondering here. All I want is facts, facts, facts.

Louisa rolled her eyes at Tom. As her father continued in his inflexible, dry tone, Louisa thought how well his opinions matched his square body. His shoulders, his forehead, even the end of the finger he was wagging at

them, were all square. Even his mouth rarely deviated from a perfect straight line.

'You have both had an eminently practical education. I am, after all, an eminently practical man. In this life we need nothing but facts; isn't that right, Louisa?

Louisa felt the familiar sensation of her life draining from her.

'Louisa?'

'I am tired, father,' she complained.

'Tired? Of what?'

'I don't know. Of everything.'

Concern flashed briefly across Mr Gradgrind's face. He was an affectionate father, but he was also an eminently practical man.

'You can never tire of facts,' he stated firmly. In case that didn't quite settle the matter, he added, 'What would Mr Bounderby say?'

Later that evening, as Louisa gazed at the fire's dying flames, 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star' repeated itself over and over in her head. Her wondering was interrupted by Tom's discontented voice grumbling from his bed. 'I'm tired too, Loo. I wish I could collect all the facts in the world and blow them up with gunpowder. I hate everything and everybody. Except you.'

'Oh Tom,' sighed Louisa, 'I wonder what we have missed. We have never read a story or played a childish game.'

Louisa smiled. ‘I wonder about dear Tom. Where did he go? Does he ever look up at the stars?’

A tear appeared in Mr Gradgrind’s eye.

That very night, far away, Tom Gradgrind looked up from his sickbed at the very stars that were twinkling above Louisa. After many years of loneliness, his body was weak with disease and his mind tortured by remorse. As his eyesight faded, he searched for his sister’s face in the stars. His dying word was: ‘Louisa’.

TAKING THINGS FURTHER

The real read

This *Real Read* version of *Hard Times* is a retelling of Charles Dickens’ magnificent work. If you would like to read the full novel in all its original splendour, many complete editions are available, from bargain paperbacks to beautifully bound hardbacks. You may well find a copy in your local charity shop.

Filling in the spaces

The loss of so many of Charles Dickens’ original words is a sad but necessary part of the shortening process. We have had to make some difficult decisions, omitting subplots and details, some important, some less so, but all interesting. We have also, at times, taken the liberty of combining two events into one, or of giving a character words or actions that originally belong to another. The points below will fill in some of the gaps, but nothing can beat the original.

- A man called Mr M'Choakumchild runs Mr Gradgrind's school. A boy called Bitzer is a model pupil, in stark contrast with Sissy. He develops into a heartless character.

- Mrs Sparsit looks after Mr Bounderby's home. Jealous of Louisa, it is she who gleefully imagines Louisa descending the staircase towards ruin. She spies on Louisa and Harthouse.

- Mr Bounderby frequently boasts of having raised himself from rags to riches. This is later exposed as a lie.

- A mysterious poor lady called Mrs Peglar visits Coketown once each year in the hope of catching sight of Mr Bounderby. We later discover that she is his mother.

- On her deathbed, Mrs Gradgrind hints to Louisa that she too feels that something has always been missing, suggesting that she understands some of her daughter's sadness.

- After Louisa's return, Sissy tells Harthouse to leave and never to return. He is humiliated but powerless to resist.

- Stephen is married to a drunken wife who is rarely in Coketown. On one occasion, Rachael saves his wife's life. He dreams of how happy he and Rachael could be, and asks Mr Bounderby to help him divorce his wife. Bounderby refuses.

- Sissy and Rachael find Stephen down Old Hell Shaft. He is brought to the surface before he dies. He tells Rachael to ask Tom to clear his name. Sissy warns Tom, who escapes, blaming Louisa for his troubles.

- We learn that Sissy's father is dead.

- Dickens ends the book by showing the future of the major characters. Bounderby dies; Gradgrind becomes a charitable man; Sissy marries and has children who grow to love Louisa as a second mother; Louisa experiences the joy and wonder of childhood through Sissy's children.

Back in time

Victorian England was a period of great transition. The discovery of steam-power and the many inventions that followed meant that work could be done more quickly, people could travel more quickly, and money could be made more quickly than ever before. This was both exciting and terrible.

As machinery began to replace people, many manual workers in the countryside were made redundant. At the same time, huge factories were developing which needed workers to operate machines. This led to a mass migration from the countryside to towns and cities.

Working life in the factories was harsh. Pollution made working and living conditions unhealthy, the machinery was dangerous, the working day was long and the pay poor. Workers had few rights and were controlled by regular beatings. Women, and children as young as six years old, worked in these conditions alongside the men.

Factory owners like Bounderby grew wealthy through their exploitation of their workers.

Queen Victoria represented all that the ideal Victorian woman should be. Their responsibility was to maintain domestic stability through marriage, family values and motherhood. Had Louisa become more seriously involved with Harthouse, she would have been disgraced forever.

Finding out more

We recommend the following books and websites to gain a greater understanding of Charles Dickens' and the Gradgrinds' England:

Books

- Terry Deary, *Vile Victorians* (Horrible Histories), Scholastic, 1994.
- Ann Kramer, *Victorians* (Eyewitness Guides), Dorling Kindersley, 1998.
- Peter Hepplewhite and Mairi Campbell, *All About the Industrial Revolution*, Hodder Wayland, 2002.

- Stewart Ross, *Witness to History: Industrial Revolution,* Heinemann, 2004.
- John Malam and David Antram, *You Wouldn't Want to be a Victorian Schoolchild: Lessons You'd Rather Not Learn*, Hodder, 2002.
- Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, BBC, 2003.

Websites

- www.victorianweb.org

Scholarly information about all aspects of Victorian life, including literature, history and culture.

- www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians

The BBC's interactive site about Victorian Britain, with a wide range of information and activities for all ages.

- www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain

A site offering source materials and guidance in how to use them, as well as a wealth of information.

- www.dickensmuseum.com

Home of the Dickens Museum in London, with details about exhibits, events and lots of helpful links.

- www.dickensworld.co.uk

Dickens World, based in Chatham in Kent, is a themed visitor complex featuring the life, books and times of Charles Dickens.

- www.charlesdickenspage.com

A labour of love dedicated to Dickens, with information about his life and his novels. Many useful links.

Food for thought

Here are some things to think about if you are reading *Hard Times* alone, or ideas for discussion if you are reading it with friends.

In retelling *Hard Times* we have tried to recreate, as accurately as possible, Dickens' original plot and characters. We have also tried to imitate aspects of his style.

Remember, however, that this is not the original work; thinking about the points below, therefore, can help you begin to understand Charles Dickens' craft. To move forward from here, turn to the full-length version of *Hard Times* and lose yourself in his wonderful storytelling.

Starting points

- Which character interests you the most? Why?
- Why doesn't Mr Gradgrind want his children to 'wonder'?
- Can you find any clues early on in the story that Mr Gradgrind is a kinder man than Mr Bounderby?
- How does Dickens make us dislike Mr Bounderby?
- What would life be like if you worked in Mr Bounderby's factory?

Themes

What do you think Charles Dickens is saying about the following themes in *Hard Times*?

- education and imagination
- childhood
- marriage
- industrial towns
- workers' lives

Style

Can you find paragraphs containing examples of the following?

- descriptions of setting and atmosphere
- the use of repetition to enhance description
- the use of imagery to enhance description
- the use of accent and dialect

Look closely at how these paragraphs are written. What do you notice? Can you write a paragraph in the same style?

Symbols

Writers frequently use symbols in their work to deepen the reader's emotions and understanding. Charles Dickens is no exception. Think about how the symbols in this list match the action in *Hard Times*.

- stone and rock
- fire
- Pegasus
- the staircase
- stars