It was the best of times,

it was the worst of times,

it was the age of wisdom,

it was the age of foolishness,

it was the epoch of belief,

it was the epoch of incredulity,

it was the season of Light,

it was the season of Darkness,

it was the spring of hope,

it was the winter of despair,

we had everything before us,

we had nothing before us,

we were all going direct to Heaven,

we were all going direct the other way--

in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of

its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for

evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

There were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face, on the

throne of England; there were a king with a large jaw and a queen with

a fair face, on the throne of France. In both countries it was clearer

than crystal to the lords of the State preserves of loaves and fishes,

that things in general were settled for ever.

It was the year of Our Lord one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five.

Spiritual revelations were conceded to England at that favoured period,

as at this. Mrs. Southcott had recently attained her five-and-twentieth

blessed birthday, of whom a prophetic private in the Life Guards had

heralded the sublime appearance by announcing that arrangements were

made for the swallowing up of London and Westminster. Even the Cock-lane

ghost had been laid only a round dozen of years, after rapping out its

messages, as the spirits of this very year last past (supernaturally

deficient in originality) rapped out theirs. Mere messages in the

earthly order of events had lately come to the English Crown and People,

from a congress of British subjects in America: which, strange

to relate, have proved more important to the human race than any

communications yet received through any of the chickens of the Cock-lane

brood.

France, less favoured on the whole as to matters spiritual than her

sister of the shield and trident, rolled with exceeding smoothness down

hill, making paper money and spending it. Under the guidance of her

Christian pastors, she entertained herself, besides, with such humane

achievements as sentencing a youth to have his hands cut off, his tongue

torn out with pincers, and his body burned alive, because he had not

kneeled down in the rain to do honour to a dirty procession of monks

which passed within his view, at a distance of some fifty or sixty

yards. It is likely enough that, rooted in the woods of France and

Norway, there were growing trees, when that sufferer was put to death,

already marked by the Woodman, Fate, to come down and be sawn into

boards, to make a certain movable framework with a sack and a knife in

it, terrible in history. It is likely enough that in the rough outhouses

of some tillers of the heavy lands adjacent to Paris, there were

sheltered from the weather that very day, rude carts, bespattered with

rustic mire, snuffed about by pigs, and roosted in by poultry, which

the Farmer, Death, had already set apart to be his tumbrils of

the Revolution. But that Woodman and that Farmer, though they work

unceasingly, work silently, and no one heard them as they went about

with muffled tread: the rather, forasmuch as to entertain any suspicion

that they were awake, was to be atheistical and traitorous.