

Complaint of Body, the Ass, Against His Rider, the Soul.

By STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

Body:

WELL, here we go!
I told you that the weather looked like snow.
Why couldn't we have stayed there at the inn?
There was good straw and barley in the bin
And a grey jenny with a melting eye,
Neat-hoofed and sly—I rather like them sly—
Master a trader and a man of sense.
He likes his life and dinner. So do I.
Sleeps warm and doesn't try to cross a pass
A mountain-goat would balk at in his prime,
Where the hail falls as big as Peter's Pence
And every stone you slip on rolls a mile!
But that's not you, of course—that's not our style—
We're far too dandipratted and sublime!
Which of us is the ass?

Good ground, beyond the snow?
I've heard that little song before, you know.
Past cliff and ragged mount
And the wind's skinning-knife,
Far and forever far,
The water of the fount,
The water that is life
And the bright star?
Give me my water from a decent trough,
Not dabs of ice licked out of freezing stone
And, as for stars, why, let the stars alone,
You'll have us both in glory soon enough!

Alas, alack!
I'm carrying an idiot on my back.
I'm carrying Mr. Who to God Knows Where.
Oh, do not fix me with that burning stare
Of beauteous disdain!
I'm not a colt. I know my ass's rights.
A stall and fodder and sound sleep of nights.
One can't expect to live on sugarcane
But what's the sense, when one grows old and stiff,
Of scrambling up this devil-haunted cliff
To play hot cockles with the Northern Lights?
I'll balk, that's what I'll do!
And all the worse for you!
Oh, lash me if you like—I know your way—
Rake my poor sides and leave the bloody weal
Beneath your spurring steel.
My lungs are fire and my limbs are lead.

Go on ahead? I can't go on ahead.
Desert you in your need? Nay, master, nay.

Nay, master, nay; I grumble as I must
And yet, as you perceive, I do go on,
Grudging, impenitent and full of fear
And knowing my own death.
You have no fear because you have no breath.
Your silver essence knows nor cold nor heat.
Your world's beyond. My only world is here.
(Oh, the sweet rollings in the summer dust,
The smell of hay and thistles and the street,
The quick life, done so soon!)
You'll have your guerdon when the journey's done.
You'll play the hero where the wine is poured,
You and the moon—but I
Who served you well and shall become a bone,
Why do I live when it must be to die?
Why should I serve—and still have no reward?

Soul:

Your plaint is sound, yet I must rule you still
With bridle, bit and will.
For, without me, you are the child unborn
And the infertile corn.
I am not cruelty but I am he,
Drowning in sea, who yet disdains the sea,
And you that sea, that shore
And the brave, laboring oar,
Little upon the main,
That drives on reefs I know not of but does not drive in vain.
For I'm your master but your scholar, too,
And learn great things of you.
And, though I shall forsake you, nothing loth,
To grumble with the clods,
To sleep into the stone,
I'll answer for us both
When I stand up alone.
For it is part as your ambassador
I go before
To tell the gods who sit above the show,
How, in this world they never stoop to know,
Under what skies, against what mortal odds,
The dust grows noble with desire and pain,
And that not once but every day anew.



WOODCUT BY WOLF TRAUT: Illustrating a life of St. Francis,
written by St. Bonaventura (1512).

A Debt to Dickens

BY PEARL S. BUCK

I HAVE long looked for an opportunity* to pay a certain debt which I have owed since I was seven years old. Debts are usually burdens, but this is no ordinary debt, and it is no burden, except as the feeling of warm gratitude may ache in one until it is expressed. My debt is to an Englishman, who long ago in China rendered an inestimable service to a small American child. That child was myself and that Englishman was Charles Dickens. I know no better way to meet my obligation than to write down what Charles Dickens did in China for an American child.

First, you must picture to yourself that child, living quite solitary in a remote Chinese countryside, in a small mission bungalow perched upon a hill among the rice fields in the valleys below. In the near distance wound that deep, treacherous, golden river, the Yangtse, and some of the most terrifying and sinister, as well as the most delightful and exciting moments of that child's life, were spent beside the river. She loved to crawl along its banks upon the rocks or upon the muddy flats and watch for the lifting of the huge four-square nets that hung into the moving yellow flood, and see out of that flood come perhaps again and again an empty net, but sometimes great flashing, twisting silver bodies of fish. She lingered beside villages of boat folk, and saw them live, the babies tied to a rope and splashing in the shallower waters. But she saw babies dead thrown into the deep waters. She wandered small and alien among the farm folk in the earthen houses among the fields. She accepted a bowl of rice and cabbage often at meal time and sat among the peasants on the threshing floor about the door and ate, usually in silence, listening and listening, answering their kindly, careless questions, bearing with shy, painful smiles their kind, teasing laughter at her yellow curls and unfortunate blue eyes, which they thought so ugly. She was, she knew, very alien. Upon the streets of the great city where sometimes she went she learned to accept the cry of foreign devil, and to realize she was a foreign devil. Once when she was very very small, before she knew better, she turned as worms will, and flung back a word she

had learned among the boat folk when they quarrelled. It was a word so wicked that the youth who called her foreign devil ran howling with terror, and thereafter she went more contentedly, not using the word any more because of its great wickedness, but knowing she had it to use if she needed it very much.

She grew from a very tiny child into a bigger child, still knowing she was alien. However kindly the people about her might be, and they were much more often kind than not, she knew that she was foreign to them. And she wondered very much about her own folk and where they were and how they looked and at what they played. But she did not know. In the bungalow were her par-

ents, very busy, very, very busy, and when she had learned her lessons in the morning quickly, they were too busy to pay much heed to her and so she wandered about a great deal, seeing and learning all sorts of things. She had fun. But very often she used to wonder, "Where are the other children like me? What is it like in the country where they live?" She longed very much, I can remember, to have some of them to play with. But she never had them.

To this small, isolated creature there came one day an extraordinary accident. She was an impossibly voracious reader. She would like to have had children's books, but there were none, and so she read everything,—Plutarch's "Lives" and Fox's "Martyrs," the Bible, church history, and the hot spots in Jonathan Edwards's sermons, and conversations out of Shakespeare, and bits of Tennyson and Browning which she could not understand at all. Then one day she looked doubtfully at a long row of somber blue books on a very high shelf. They were quite beyond her reach. Later she discovered this was because they were novels. But being desperate she put a three-cornered bamboo stool on top of a small table and climbed up and stared at the bindings and in faded black titles she read "Oliver Twist," by Charles Dickens. She was then a little past seven years old. It was a very hot August day, in the afternoon about three o'clock, when the household was asleep, all except the in-

defatigable parents, and they were very, very busy. She took "Oliver Twist" out of his place—it was fat and thick, for "Hard Times" was bound with it—and in great peril descended, and stopping in the pantry for a pocket full of peanuts, she made off to a secret corner of the veranda into which only a small, agile child could squeeze, and opened the closely printed pages of an old edition, and discovered her playmates.

How can I make you know what that discovery was to that small, lonely child? There in that corner above the country road in China, with vendors passing beneath me, I entered into my own heritage. I cannot tell you about those hours. I know I was roused at six o'clock by the call to my supper, and I looked about dazed, to discover the long rays of the late afternoon sun streaming across the valleys. I remember twice I closed the book and burst into tears, unable to bear the tragedy of Oliver Twist, and then opened it quickly again, burning to know more. I remember, most significant of all, that I forgot to touch a peanut, and my pocket was still quite full when I was called. I went to my supper in a dream, and read as late as I dared in my bed afterward, and slept with the book under my pillow, and woke again in the early morning. When "Oliver Twist" was finished, and after it "Hard Times," I was wretched with indecision. I felt I must read it all straight over again, and yet I was voracious for that long row of blue books.

What was in them? I climbed up again, finally, and put "Oliver Twist" at the beginning, and began on the next one, which was "David Copperfield." I resolved to read straight through the row and then begin at the beginning once more and read straight through again.

This program I carried on consistently, over and over, for about ten years, and after that I still kept a Dickens book on hand, so to speak, to dip into and feel myself at home again. Today I have for

him a feeling which I have for no other human soul. He opened my eyes to people, he taught me to love all sorts of people, high and low, rich and poor, the old and little children. He taught me to hate hypocrisy and pious mouthing of unctuous words. He taught me that beneath gruffness there may be kindness, and that kindness is the sweetest thing in the world, and goodness is the best thing in the world. He taught me to de-

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PHIZ'S PICKWICK



SEYMOUR'S
PICKWICK

*This week marks the hundredth anniversary of the publication of the first instalment of "The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club."—The Editor.