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 to the feeling of war. I am grateful. The story may perhaps be one 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 in the remote Chinese countryside, in a small mission bungalow perched upon a hill among the rice fields in the valleys below. In the near distance sound 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. She saw them live, the babies tied to a rope and splashing in the shallower 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 small, before she knew better, she turned as worms will, and flung back a word she had learned among the boat folk when they quarreled. 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 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 parents, very busy, 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’ 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 them away and 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, to 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

*This week marks the hundredth anniversary of the publication of the first instalment of “The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club.”—The Editor.
FLETCHER PRATT
Reviewed by ELMER DAVIS

Mr. FLETCHER PRATT has written a biography and a psy­chography, an account of what Caesar did in the technical sense. . . . How then did he achieve military results that have left him that Rome was past reform. What he was, which is far from easy reading, but will be eminently worth the trouble for anybody who wants to know about Caesar. No writer, whether of his­tory or of fiction, has ever presented a satisfying picture of Caesar, for the possible reason that Caesar was bigger in all dimensions than anybody who has ever written about him. That Shake­speare’s picture of Caesar happens to be one of the least adequate is perhaps un­i­important, since Shakespeare was inter­ested in Caesar only as the hub around which his plots revolved; just as Shaw’s Caesar is what Shaw would have been in Caesar’s place. It might be supposed in general that the greater the stature of the writer, the nearer he could come to appreciating a character of the largest size; yet there is in all first-rate literature no more ludicrously inadequate pic­ture of a first-rate historical character than Tolstoy’s Napoleon.

Which is only to say that lesser men than Shaw or Shakespeare may in some cases do a better job. Talbot Mundy in “Tros of Samothrace” presented admirably one aspect of Caesar—the way he looked to foreigners who happened to be in his way—and in “Queen Cleopatra” indicated some of the reasons why men who had once hated him found them­selves serving him; and Mr. Pratt seems in some respects to have come closer to the essential Caesar than any other writer.

His book is hard to read; he plunges into the middle of his story, with the epi­sode of Clodius at the Bona Dea mys­teries, and you must have a pretty fair prior knowledge of what it is all about to be able to follow him. Also his style is so compressed as often to be cryptic, and his vocabulary abounds in unex­pected terms that are a stumbling-block to the reader. Yet a good deal of the story, naturally, is the account of Caesar’s cam­paigns, and here Mr. Pratt’s lucidity is magnificent. Not in vain has he studied Caesar’s own reports; his battle pictures are first-rate and his analysis of strategy that sometimes baffled ancient writers is not only clear but convincing. But more interesting than his account of what Cae­sar did are his intuitions of what Caesar was.

A connoisseur of all the arts, on such a spacious scale as to need a better term than connoisseur to define him, and at the same time a ward politician; Mr. Pratt separates these personalities, calls them Julius Caesar and “Caius-Jack” Caesar. Maybe yes, maybe no; at any rate the two personalities were there in the man known as Gaius Julius Caesar, and Mr. Pratt’s interpretation is perhaps as good as anybody’s. A moderate reformer, in the beginning, till his consulship showed him that Rome was past reform. What Caesar was working toward thereafter (gradually, not perceiving it himself for a long time) Mr. Pratt conjectures in the chapter dryly termed “Footnote to His­tory: which may be omitted without inter­rupting the narrative.” Don’t omit it; the Pratt theory may be influenced by what subsequently happened under the Empire, but it makes better sense than the doctrines of some respected historians.

Still better is the account of Caesar’s military career. “He was never a great soldier, he was not even a good soldier, in the technical sense. . . . How then did he achieve military results that have left him that Rome was past reform. What Caesar did are his intuitions of what Caesar was. His system is not that of the doctrines of some respected historians. Empires, but it makes better sense than the system upon which it happened to be applied. This is documented, with chapter and verse from Caesar’s campaigns; it will be hard to give Pratt any argument on that. The prodigious intelligence, to be sure, did not achieve satisfactory results in its final problem; Caesar, ruler of the world, revolutionizing vast schemes of reorganization, got on the nerves of petty men so that they banded together and murdered him. His failure to remember other men’s opinions as a factor in politics has fre­quently been ascribed to the influence of Cleopatra; Mr. Pratt on the whole would agree, but he analyzes that influence more convincingly than any of the his­tories. Caesar was not such a fool as being from an old man’s “girl-fever” when he landed at Alexandria; but he found Cleopatra a new experience. Women equally hot Caesar had known before, but she was a woman of brilliant intelligence too; “she passed over easily and naturally from physical delirium to intel­lectual companionship, from fire to ice”; and more especially her political opinions were completely different from his, different from any that were held in Rome where a great variety of political opinions had been hotly debated for de­cades; she could give Caesar an argument, an argument on fundamentals such as he had never encountered before. This, Mr. Pratt concedes, is inference; but inference that explains better than any other theory why Caesar to some extent made a fool of himself over a woman, at a time when it was imperative that he should not make a fool of himself for any reason at all.

The analyses of Roman politics, always bold, always interesting, are not always convincing; and neither are the estimates of some of the subsidiary characters. Mark Antony, for instance, was very far from a proletarian, and the inferences partly supported by his alleged prole­tarianism, while they may be sound, need some other prop than that. Nor does Pompey seem to have had the concrete intentions with which Mr. Pratt credits him in the years after Julia’s death; that happy but indolent warrior was fairly well satisfied, provided nobody shook his pedestal. But Mr. Pratt’s primary busi­ness is to show us Caesar, and to this reviewer he seems on the whole to have come nearer doing that than has anyone else.

But a book which is the result of so much research, and has been so admirably manufactured, should not have been disfigured by execrable proofreading.