THE HUNGRY MR. DICKENS

By WILLIAM ROSS CLARK

SINCE 1939, when Edmund Wilson set the style in "The Two Scrooges," we have been getting a heart-rending picture of Charles Dickens as a melancholy misfit, drifting helplessly, unanalyzed, in a pre-Freudian world. Generations of readers had foolishly deluded themselves into thinking of Dickens as a boisterous extrovert, in love with life, richly humorous, strongly gregarious. But no! It turns out that certain traumatic experiences in boyhood, especially of course, the five or six months in the blacking warehouse, left such ineffaceable scars on his psyche that by the time *Bleak House* (the first of the "Dark Novels") got written, the creator of Sam Weller and Wilkins Micawber had become an advanced, brooding neurotic, working out his abysmal conflicts in obscure symbolical terms in his fiction.

It is affirmed that he had lost his faith in democracy, and even in the potential goodness of Scrooge (referring, of course, to that gentleman in his symbolic capacity), that his success and his money had never enabled him to overcome his sense of social inferiority, that society itself was some kind of prison-house closing in on him. He gave, they tell us, "suicidal" readings of his own work as a compulsive manifestation of a "thanatos-urge." I myself have written an article (which I like to describe as definitive, and which, I might add, is still available for publication) on the excessively high death rate in Dickens' novels. His books are chock-full of violence and sudden death. Almost no one dies normally. The Grim Reaper sweeps about with extraordinary abandon, garnering here a little Nell, there a little Paul, along with a legion of adults cut down with singular indiscrimination. Alert readers, as far back as 1858, even before they were supplied with the right terminology, detected this literary sadism or homicidal streak in Dickens, and commented on the fact that no other writer had found the King of Terror quite so useful as a lay figure.

On the other hand, as late as the second decade of our century, G. K. Chesterton, who was an old-fashioned chap, failed to see these distressing symptoms of imbalance in Dickens, and wrote about him with the same naive enthusiasm that characterizes, let us say, the average member of the Toronto Dickensian Fellowship. Chesterton was in fact so blind to some of the most significant aspects of Dickens' mind that he did not recognize him as a mental case, but turned him, as Jack Lindsay says, into a "lusty goon."

Well, I want no part of that. I want to add my minim

to the fund of clarification about Dickens' mind. If enough of us get on the job here, we will finally get Charles institutionalized, and properly taken care of.

No one has noticed, or noticed sufficiently, Dickens' food-and-drink obsession. As I said above, his mortuary mania, his graveyardism, his thanatos-urge has been dealt with more than once, and there is no doubt now that he was quite abnormally addicted to deathbeds, crypts, mortician's parlors and associated phenomena. A really wretched funeral was meat and drink to him. But what of his conspicuous concern with genuine comestibles and potables? The literary analysts have scarcely glanced at this, and the professional psychologists, so far as I know, have not supplied us with a technical term for this preoccupation. A "nutriment-urge" or "complex?" It hardly serves. It is commonplace, and does not sufficiently suggest both food and drink, and Dickens is unique in the frequency and specificity of his references to both. For the moment, however, it will have to do, though we really need a term with a Greek root.

It is an arresting fact that the first sketch submitted and accepted for publication by Dickens was called "A *Dinner* at Poplar Walk." He later changed the title to "Mr. Minns and his Cousin." The significance of this change of title can hardly be overestimated, but what that significance is, is extremely difficult to determine. All we can say, with the knowledge we have at present, is that Dickens chose to eliminate the reference to food. In this mediocre tale we are almost immediately introduced to the dietary habits of the personae. On page two we have our first brandy and soda (sweetened) with a Dickens' character, three paragraphs later we are at breakfast (a normal one, to be sure): ham, toast, and coffee, and then, as the original title suggests, the main action of the sketch takes place around a dinner table. There are in the *Sketches by Boz* (1836), Dickens' first published volume, accounts of public charitable dinners, Christmas dinners, boarding house dinners. The number of brandies and water, gins and water, jorums of punch, glasses of ale, wine, and assorted spirits; the number of hams, capons, geese, turkeys, haunches and joints of beef and mutton, not to mention pigeon-pies, that we are to enjoy over the thirty years separating "A Dinner at Poplar Walk" and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864), is unmatched, not even rivalled, I am sure, by any comparable novelist, if there can be said to be a novelist comparable to Dickens.

A lasting impression one gets from even a cursory reading of *Pickwick Papers*, Dickens' second full volume, is of almost con-

tinuous eating and drinking. Mr. Pickwick and his three travelling companions, Mr. Winkle, Mr. Snodgrass, and Mr. Tupman, are constantly treating or being treated, and are on various occasions, collectively or severally, dropping asleep in improper places from sheer satiety. After the Muggleton-Dingley Dell cricket match and a cold but capital dinner at the Blue Lion Inn — "fowls and pies, all that sort of thing" — it is necessary to carry to bed the first three gentlemen mentioned above. The dignified founder of the Pickwick Club at another time is left sound asleep in a wheelbarrow, being simply overstuffed with food and cold punch. Mr. Wardle's picnic in his barouche for the four Pickwickians is an impressive affair, protein-wise: capons (evidently one per man), tongue, veal, ham, pigeon-pie, lobsters, and salad are the principal items on the menu. It is strongly suggested that there is a bottle of wine per person. The twentieth century imagination reels to contemplate the quantities of spirits and solid calories that Dickens pours and stuffs into these four better-than-middle aged gentlemen, yet there is no hint of a dyspeptic tendency in any of them.

Dickens' concern over hungry children, especially hungry small boys, has been pointed to more than once, and is easily accounted for. In Forster's life of the novelist, two pages are devoted to Dickens' actual experiences with hunger when he was a small boy. He used frequently in the mornings (this was during the five months he worked in the blacking warehouse) to buy stale pastries at half price with the money which he should have saved for a more nutritious dinner. He describes vividly the raisin puddings on which he often dined, either an ordinary one, "stout, hale, heavy, and flabby," or the better grade, which he bought less often because it was small. When he had money at tea-time, he drank a half-pint of coffee and had a slice of bread. When he had no money he went to Covent Garden Market and "stared" at the pineapples.

So, when Dickens writes the famous scene in which Oliver Twist says to the workhouse master, "Please sir, I want some more," he knew whereof he was writing. In that novel (Dickens' third book), we again find the characteristic specificity with respect to food. In the workhouse the meals were generally of the one-dish variety — to each boy a single porringer of gruel, not even bread except on occasions "of great public rejoicing." When Oliver is apprenticed to Sowerberry, the undertaker, his first meal consists of broken bits of meat which had been left untouched by the family dog. When he runs away from Sowerberry and is installed with Fagin, his supper on the first night

consists of sausages, gin and hot water. In the morning he has hot rolls, coffee, and ham. At least it can be said for Fagin that he kept a better table than Oliver had previously known. In Oliver's condition, even the gin may have been salutary.

A reference here to young David Copperfield's experience at Yarmouth is thematically, if not chronologically, in order. This is the scene, equal in celebrity with Oliver's asking-for-more, in which young David, en route to school near London, stops for refreshment ordered in advance by his stepfather. You will recall the details — a substantial dinner of chops, potatoes, greens, gravy, batter pudding, and ale, is set before the bewildered child who is making his first journey alone. The whole, or virtually the whole, of the meal, is consumed by William, the waiter, who uses a variety of mean stratagems to cheat the small boy. After David gets back in the coach he finds himself famous because he is presumed to have eaten the whole works. The coach buzzes with discussion of the powers of this minute trencherman. He is expected momentarily to burst. There is jocular speculation as to why the coach is drawing so heavy behind. David is, in fact, hungry, but so embarrassed by being compared to a boa-constrictor who eats so much at one "sitting" that he can last for a week, that he is inhibited into declining supper. Dickens, however, is careful to see that his youthful hero (himself in fact) has a thoroughly sound breakfast the next morning: eggs, bacon, coffee and rolls.

Of course, the best known meal in Dickens is the Cratchit Christmas dinner. In Scrooge's nocturnal vision, the piece de resistance is a goose. "There never was such a goose" for tenderness, flavor, and size. The goose was "eked out" by apple-sauce, mashed potatoes, a plum pudding, blazing in a half-quartern of ignited brandy, apples, oranges, chestnuts, and a hot mixture compounded in a jug with gin and lemons. Somehow, this seems not half-bad for an exploited clerk on fifteen bob a week. The point is, Dickens could not compel himself into serving the Cratchits a genuinely meager dinner. And tomorrow, when Scrooge wakes up, a regenerated man, into the world of actuality, the modest subsidiary dishes on the Cratchit table are "eked out" by the largest turkey to be bought in London, twice the size of Tiny Tim, so large indeed that "he never could have stood upon his legs, that bird." (Dickens thus insures the Cratchits of splendid leftovers for at least a week.) Moreover, on the day following Christmas, when Bob Cratchit is late getting to work, and explains that he had been making "rather merry yesterday," Scrooge announces that Bob's raise in salary is to be

confirmed that very afternoon "over a bowl of smoking bishop," that is: hot port wine, oranges, lemons and sugar. Cratchit may well have been late to the office on December 27th too.

Perhaps Dickens chronically wrote Christmas stories because they were profitable, because they were expected of him, *and* because it is a season of feasting. It is notable that he begins the action of at least one major novel, *Great Expectations*, on Christmas Eve. The first four chapters of this great book might be said to revolve around foodstuffs. When Pip encounters the convict on the marshes, one of the latter's first questions is: "You know what vittles is?" Pip responds nobly to the starving man's need, and by a little adroit thievery at home, manages to bring him bread, cheese, meat-bone, mincemeat, a savory pork pie, and brandy, a respectable *table d'hote* under the circumstances. This one generous act, performed on Christmas morning, as we all know, changed the whole course of Pip's life, and it is a curious fact that in this quasi-autobiographical novel, the small boy Pip, who is supposed to be in a state of fright approaching panic, is sufficiently himself to watch the progress of the meal with the keenest interest and to express politely his satisfaction that the food is being enjoyed.

Immediately after this scene we go to the Gargerys' Christmas dinner, described by Pip as "superb." It consisted of a leg of pickled pork and greens, a pair of roast stuffed fowls, mince pie, boiled pudding, savory pork pie "a bit of which can lay atop of anything you could mention and do no harm," nuts, oranges, and apples. This fare was complemented in the liquid department by port, sherry, brandy, and the inevitable gin, hot water, and lemon peel. In the first fifty pages of *Great Expectations* there is a deal of commissarial activity, and Dickens seldom leaves such matters alone for long. When Pip goes "to play" at Miss Havisham's, he is given bread and meat and a mug of beer. When he first arrives in London, he is delayed a half-hour in gaining admittance to his rooms, because his fellow lodger has gone all the way to Covent Garden market to get really fresh fruit for the newcomer. A multi-course dinner, given by Mr. Jaggers for Pip and his friends, is reported in detail, everything being of the very best quality.

In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Squeers is a villain because he starves or poisons small boys on milk "drownded" in water, on brimstone and treacle, and on beef from horned cattle that have died a natural death, meanwhile gorging himself on cold roast beef for breakfast and prime steak for supper, to say nothing of his hourly beverage intake. In Dickens' scheme there is nothing wrong

with appetite per se — the giant Yorkshireman, John Browdie, in the same novel, has ordered for afternoon tea, besides the ordinary components of that repast, "large joints of roast and boiled, a tongue, a pigeon-pie, a cold fowl, a tankard of ale, and other little matters of a like kind." Within an hour or two after "tea" with these delicacies, Browdie summons a waiter "to take these things awa', and let's have soomat broiled for supper — vary comfortable and plenty o' it. . .bring some brandy and wather."

But this gormandizing of Browdie's, unlike Squeers', is something we are to enjoy, not resent. Of course the general moral principle involved is elementary. Small boys and charitable, genial, male adults like John Browdie and Samuel Pickwick, Esq., should be allowed the pleasures of the table without restriction. Scoundrels like Squeers should be strictly regimented.

Dickens' concern about nutrition for the opposite sex, whether young or old, is not nearly so pointed — it's the males who eat, or eat specified sorts of food. Mrs. Squeers is solicitous of her Squeersy, sees that he has prime steak at the end of a journey, but we get no accounting of her bill of fare. Dickens' "little" women like Nell and Amy Dorrit, seem scarcely to eat at all, but are constantly seeing anxiously to the dietary needs of their helpless men folk. Once in a while, when Dickens wants to pillory a female character, he gives her a weakness for something strong in her tea, as with Flora Finching, a savage portrait in *Little Dorrit* of Maria Beadnell who had rejected Dickens as a suitor in his early twenties. Dickens does particularize for us the calorie intake of the couch-ridden Mrs. Clennam in the novel just mentioned. With her peculiar, perverted Calvinism, it is proper that Mrs. Clennam's regimen should be austere, though, in fact, she could have but little appetite, having neither left her room nor her couch for a dozen years. Her principal daily meal consists of "a dish of little rusks and a small, precise pat of butter." But even in the gloomy bedroom of this malevolent old recluse we run into a hot punch, compounded of port, water, lemon, sugar, and spice, an odorous mixture into which she dips her rusks. Once in a while she has a roast partridge, but on the whole she is a very abstemious old party. She usually topped off a meal by reading aloud from "a book" to her two servants, normally selecting passages in which her enemies were to be consumed by fire or put to the edge of the sword.

In *Martin Chuzzlewit* we have a bizarre and hilarious "wake." For seven days the body of old Anthony Chuzzlewit lies abovestairs (a decidedly unhygienic procedure, and of course, in our

day, illegal), during which period, below-stairs, Mr. Pecksniff and Mrs. Gamp "kept quite a dainty table. . .with sweetbreads, stewed kidneys, oysters, and other such light viands for supper every night" along with sundry jorums of hot punch. Mrs. Gamp was very particular and punctual in her drinking too "requiring a pint of mild porter at lunch, a pint at dinner, half a pint as a species of stay or holdfast between dinner and tea, and a pint of the celebrated staggering ale, or Real Old Brighton Tipper, at supper, beside the bottle on the chimney piece and such casual invitations to refresh herself as the good breeding of her employers might prompt them to offer." There was in fact a solid week of "dismal joviality and grim enjoyment."

Even in *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens' last completed novel, when one would suppose that his thanatos-urge would be riding high, he keeps coming back to the dinner table. We dine several times with the Veneerings and the Podsnaps. When the poor but proud Wilfers get eight sovereigns in advance from their lodger, their first thought is "now, we can have a spread." And they do. They have veal cutlet for the main dish, very brown, to suit the finical Miss Bella Wilfer. They have Scotch ale and *rum* and hot water and lemon peel, which, I take it, is superior to "gin and."

In the same novel, Silas Wegg, the literary man with a wooden leg, who is engaged by the illiterate, but now rich, Noddy Boffin as a reader, prefaces his first evening's work by consuming the whole of a "weal and hammer" pie, a dish well calculated to "meller" the organ for reading. When asked by his genial employer what he "reads on," Wegg replies "gin and water," with which concoction he periodically "mellers" the organ throughout each session. Noddy Boffin, intended by Dickens to be one of his most lovable characters, has the conviction that it is not right to ask a guest if he will have something to eat to be fetched from some obscure pantry; he has in the sitting-room a shelf of exposed edibles, and the guest is invited to cast his eye along it and name his choice. This is a truly good man.

And so, from the first published sketch to the last completed novel we encounter this tenacious interest in groceries and the wine-list. It has, of course, little, if anything, to do with fear of hunger. It is a good vulgar zest for food — the positive attribute of a man with unusual powers of enjoyment in the gustatory line. (In fact, Dickens had unusual powers of enjoyment in almost every line. This would be an embarrasing truism except for the efforts, above mentioned, to make him into a morbid misfit). Dickens was peculiarly aware of the fact that the sharing of food

has from time out of mind been symbolic of and inseparable from a sense of fellowship and festivity, and these were indispensable to him to the very end.

The recent tendency to make Dickens over into our own twentieth century neurotic image has gone too far. Naturally, he was high-strung and subject to moods — most sensitive human beings are, let alone geniuses. He did talk mysteriously about a sense of guilt. What thoughtful person has not felt it? His bad health in his later years was damaging to his characteristic high spirits. Nothing could be more normal than that. When in later middle life he saw how frequently contemporary friends and relatives were dropping round him, he was shocked and depressed. So are all persons who live to middle age. But even in his last years, the evidence of his letters, and of the last so-called "dark" novels, discounts heavily the concept of Dickens, in any significant sense, as a tragic figure.

Given half of Charles Dickens' industry and one-tenth of his talent, we would all be glad to take on his abysmal conflicts — naturally with the proviso that we would be relieved of those we presently embrace.

A young teacher I had as a freshman used to speculate on what great literary personage he would like most to have dinner with. He settled usually for Dr. Johnson — an excellent choice. But it would be pleasant to sit down to a substantial board with Charles Dickens — and since the idea is fanciful to start with — why not have Samuel Pickwick & Co., the Artful Dodger, Dick Swiveller, and Noddy Boffin. On second thought, Mrs. Gamp should be there to fill any conversational gaps. My tentative menu would be: turbot, capon, pigeon-pie, lobsters, a "weal and hammer" (for the novelty), salad (for balance), mince pie or boiled pudding, a glass of that celebrated staggering ale, Real Old Brighton Tipper (in honor of the lady guest), and later in the evening a bowl of smoking bishop.