

buss in the other, which he was going to stow away in his little arm-chest. 'Are you going to get in, Jack Martin?' said the guard, holding the lantern to my uncle's face.

"'Halloo?' said my uncle, falling back a step or two. 'That's familiar!'

"'It's so on the way-bill,' replied the guard.

"'Isn't there a "Mister" before it?' said my uncle. For he felt, gentlemen, that for a guard he didn't know, to call him Jack Martin, was a liberty which the Post-office wouldn't have sanctioned if they had known it.

"'No, there is not,' rejoined the guard, coolly.

"'Is the fare paid?' inquired my uncle.

"'Of course it is,' rejoined the guard.

"'It is, is it?' said my uncle. 'Then here goes! Which coach?'

"'This, said the guard, pointing to an old-fashioned Edinburgh and London Mail, which had the steps down, and the door open. 'Stop! Here are the other passengers. Let them get in first.'

"As the guard spoke, there all at once appeared, right in front of my uncle, a young gentlemen in a powdered wig, and a sky-blue coat trimmed with silver, made very full and broad in the skirts, which were lined with buckram. Tiggin and Welps were in the printed calico and waistcoat piece line, gentlemen, so my uncle knew all the materials at once. He wore knee-breeches, and a kind of leggings rolled up over his silk stockings, and shoes with buckles; he had ruffles at his wrists, a three-cornered hat on his head, and a long taper sword by his side. The flaps of his waistcoat came half-way down his thighs, and the ends of his cravat reached to his waist. He stalked gravely to the coach door, pulled off his hat, and held it above his head at arms-length: cocking his little finger in the air at the same time, as some affected people do when they take a cup of tea. Then he drew his feet together, and made a low, grave bow, and then put out his left hand. My uncle was just going to step forward and shake it heartily, when he perceived that these attentions were directed, not toward him, but to a young lady who just then appeared at the foot of the steps, attired in an old-fashioned green velvet dress with a long waist and stomacher. She had no bonnet on her head, gentlemen, which was muffled in a black silk hood, but she looked round

for an instant, as she prepared to get into the coach; and such a beautiful face as she disclosed, my uncle had never seen—not even in a picture. She got into the coach holding up her dress with one hand; and as my uncle always said with a round oath, when he told the story, he wouldn't have believed it possible that legs and feet could have been brought to such a state of perfection unless he had seen them with his own eyes.

"But, in this one glimpse of the beautiful face, my uncle saw that the young lady cast an imploring look upon him, and that she appeared terrified and distressed. He noticed, too, that the young fellow in the powdered wig, notwithstanding his show of gallantry, which was all very fine and grand, clasped her tight by the wrist when she got in, and followed himself immediately afterward. An uncommonly ill-looking fellow, in a close brown wig and a plum-colored suit, wearing a very large sword, and boots up to his hips, belonged to the party; and when he sat himself down next to the young lady, who shrunk into a corner at his approach, my uncle was confirmed in his original impression that something dark and mysterious was going forward, or, as he always said himself, 'that there was a screw loose somewhere.' It's quite surprising how quickly he made up his mind to help the lady at any peril, if she needed help.

"'Death and lightning!' exclaimed the young gentleman, laying his hand upon his sword as my uncle entered the coach.

"'Blood and thunder!' roared the other gentleman. With this, he whipped his sword out, and made a lunge at my uncle without further ceremony. My uncle had no weapon about him, but with great dexterity he snatched the ill-looking gentleman's three-cornered hat from his head, and, receiving the point of his sword right through the crown, squeezed the sides together, and held it tight.

"'Pink him behind!' cried the ill-looking gentleman to his companion, as he struggled to regain his sword.

"'He had better not,' cried my uncle, displaying the heel of one of his shoes in a threatening manner. 'I'll kick his brains out, if he has any, or fracture his skull, if he hasn't. Exerting all his strength at this moment, my uncle wrenched the ill-looking man's sword from his grasp, and flung it clean out of the coach-window: upon which the younger gentleman vociferated 'Death and lightning!' again.

and laid his hand upon the hilt of his sword in a very fierce manner, but didn't draw it. Perhaps, gentlemen, as my uncle used to say with a smile, perhaps he was afraid of alarming the lady.

"Now, gentlemen, said my uncle, taking his seat deliberately, 'I don't want to have any death, with or without lightning, in a lady's presence, and we have had quite blood and thundering enough for one journey; so, if you please, we'll sit in our places like quiet insides. Here, guard, pick up that gentleman's carving-knife.'

"As quickly as my uncle said the words, the guard appeared at the coach-window, with the gentleman's sword in his hand. He held up his lantern, and looked earnestly in my uncle's face, as he handed it in: when, by its light, my uncle saw, to his great surprise, that an immense crowd of mail-coach guards swarmed round the window, every one of whom had his eyes earnestly fixed upon him too. He had never seen such a sea of white faces red bodies, and earnest eyes, in all his born days.

"This is the strangest sort of thing I ever had anything to do with,' thought my uncle; 'allow me to return your hat, sir.'

"The ill-looking gentleman received his three-cornered hat in silence, looked at the hole in the middle with an inquiring air, and finally stuck it on the top of his wig with a solemnity the effect of which was a trifle impaired by his sneezing violently at the moment, and jerking it off again.

"All right!' cried the guard with the lantern, mounting into his little seat behind. Away they went. My uncle peeped out of the coach-window as they emerged from the yard, and observed that the other mails, with coachmen, guards, horses, and passengers, complete, were driving round and round in circles, at a slow trot of about five miles an hour. My uncle burned with indignation, gentlemen. As a commercial man, he felt that the mail-bags were not to be trifled with, and he resolved to memorialize the Post-office on the subject the very instant he reached London.

"At present, however, his thoughts were occupied with the young lady who sat in the farthest corner of the coach, with her face muffled closely in her hood; the gentleman with the sky-blue coat sitting opposite to her; the other man in the plum-colored suit, by her side; and both watching her intently. If she so much as rustled the folds of her

hood, he could hear the ill-looking man clap his hand upon his sword, and could tell by the other's breathing (it was so dark he couldn't see his face) that he was looking as big as if he were going to devour her at a mouthful. This roused my uncle more and more, and he resolved, come what might, to see the end of it. He had a great admiration for bright eyes, and sweet faces, and pretty legs and feet; in short, he was fond of the whole sex. It runs in our family, gentlemen—so am I.

"Many were the devices which my uncle practiced to attract the lady's attention, or at all events to engage the mysterious gentlemen in conversation. They were all in vain; the gentlemen wouldn't talk, and the lady didn't dare. He thrust his head out of the coach-window at intervals, and bawled out to know why they didn't go faster? But he called till he was hoarse; nobody paid the least attention to him. He leaned back in the coach, and thought of the beautiful face, and the feet and legs. This answered better; it whiled away the time, and kept him from wondering where he was going, and how it was that he found himself in such an odd situation. Not that this would have worried him much, any way—he was a mighty free-and-easy, roving, devil-may-care sort of person, was my uncle, gentlemen.

"All of a sudden the coach stopped. 'Halloo!' said my uncle, 'what's in the wind now?'

"Alight here,' said the guard, letting down the steps.

"Here!' cried my uncle.

"Here,' rejoined the guard.

"I'll do nothing of the sort,' said my uncle.

"Very well, stop where you are,' said the guard.

"I will,' said my uncle.

"Do,' said the guard.

"The other passengers had regarded this colloquy with great attention, and, finding that my uncle was determined not to alight, the younger man squeezed past him, to hand the lady out. At this moment the ill-looking man was inspecting the hole in the crown of his three-cornered hat. As the young lady brushed past, she dropped one of her gloves into my uncle's hand, and softly whispered with her lips, so close to his face that he felt her warm breath on his nose, the single word 'Help!' Gentlemen, my uncle leaped out of the coach at once, with such violence that it rocked on the springs again.

“‘Oh! You’ve thought better of it, have you?’ said the guard, when he saw my uncle standing on the ground.

“My uncle looked at the guard for a few seconds, in some doubt whether it wouldn’t be better to wrench his blunderbuss from him, fire it in the face of the man with the big sword, knock the rest of the company over the head with the stock, snatch up the young lady, and go off in the smoke. On second thoughts, however, he abandoned this plan, as being a shade too melodramatic in the execution, and followed the two mysterious men, who, keeping the lady between them, were now entering an old house in front of which the coach had stopped. They turned into the passage, and my uncle followed.

“Of all the ruinous and desolate places my uncle had ever beheld, this was the most so. It looked as if it had once been a large house of entertainment; but the roof had fallen in in many places, and the stairs were steep, rugged, and broken. There was a huge fire-place in the room into which they walked, and the chimney was blackened with smoke; but no warm blaze lighted it up now. The white feathery dust of burned wood was still strewn over the hearth, but the stove was cold, and all was dark and gloomy.

“‘Well,’ said my uncle, as he looked about him, ‘a mail traveling at the rate of six miles and a half an hour, and stopping for an indefinite time at such a hole as this, is rather an irregular sort of proceeding, I fancy. This shall be made known. I’ll write to the papers.’

“My uncle said this in a pretty loud voice, and in an open, unreserved sort of manner, with the view of engaging the two strangers in conversation if he could. But neither of them took any more notice of him than whispering to each other, and scowling at him as they did so. The lady was at the farther end of the room, and once she ventured to wave her hand, as if beseeching my uncle’s assistance.

“At length the two strangers advanced a little, and the conversation began in earnest.

“‘You don’t know this is a private room, I suppose, fellow?’ said the gentleman in sky-blue.

“‘No, I do not, fellow,’ rejoined my uncle. ‘Only if this is a private room specially ordered for the occasion, I should think the public room must be a *very* comfortable one;’ with this my uncle sat himself down in a high-backed chair, and

took such an accurate measure of the gentleman with his eyes, that Tiggin and Welps could have supplied him with printed calico for a suit, and not an inch too much or too little, from that estimate alone.

“‘Quit this room,’ said both men together, grasping their swords.

“‘Eh?’ said my uncle, not at all appearing to comprehend their meaning.

“‘Quit the room, or you are a dead man,’ said the ill-looking fellow with the large sword, drawing it at the same time and flourishing it in the air.

“‘Down with him!’ cried the gentleman in sky-blue, drawing his sword also, and falling back two or three yards. ‘Down with him!’ The lady gave a loud scream.

“Now, my uncle was always remarkable for great boldness, and great presence of mind. All the time that he had appeared so indifferent to what was going on, he had been looking slyly about for some missile or weapon of defence, and at the very instant when the swords were drawn he espied, standing in the chimney-corner, an old basket-hilted rapier in a rusty scabbard. At one bound my uncle caught it in his hand, drew it, flourished it gallantly above his head, called aloud to the lady to keep out of the way, hurled the chair at the man in sky-blue, and the scabbard at the man in plum-color, and taking advantage of the confusion, fell upon them both, pell-mell.

“Gentlemen, there is an old story—none the worse for being true—regarding a fine young Irish gentleman, who being asked if he could play the fiddle, replied he had no doubt he could, but he couldn’t exactly say for certain, because he had never tried. This is not inapplicable to my uncle and his fencing. He had never had a sword in his hand before, except once when he played Richard the Third at a private theatre: upon which occasion it was arranged with Richmond that he was to be run through from behind, without showing fight at all. But here he was, cutting and slashing with two experienced swordsmen: thrusting and guarding and poking and slicing, and acquitting himself in the most manful and dexterous manner possible, although up to that time he had never been aware that he had the least notion of the science. It only shows how true the old saying is, that a man never knows what he can do until he tries, gentlemen.

"The noise of the combat was terrific; each of the three combatants swearing like troopers, and their swords clashing with as much noise as if all the knives and steels in Newport market were rattling together at the same time. When it was at its very height, the lady (to encourage my uncle, most probably) withdrew her hood entirely from her face, and disclosed a countenance of such dazzling beauty, that he would have fought against fifty men, to win one smile from it and die. He had done wonders before, but now he began to powder away like a raving mad giant.

"At this very moment, the gentleman in sky-blue turning round, and seeing the young lady with her face uncovered, vented an exclamation of rage and jealousy, and, turning his weapon against her beautiful bosom, pointed a thrust at her heart, which caused my uncle to utter a cry of apprehension that made the building ring. The lady stepped lightly aside, and snatching the young man's sword from his hand before he had recovered his balance, drove him to the wall, and running it through him, and the paneling, up to the very hilt, pinned him there, hard and fast. It was a splendid example. My uncle, with a loud shout of triumph, and a strength that was irresistible, made his adversary retreat in the same direction, and plunging the old rapier into the very centre of a large red flower in the pattern of his waistcoat, nailed him beside his friend; there they both stood, gentlemen, jerking their arms and legs about in agony, like the toy-shop figures that are moved by a piece of pack-thread. My uncle always said afterwards that this was one of the surest means he knew of for disposing of an enemy; but it was liable to one objection on the ground of expense, inasmuch as it involved the loss of a sword for every man disabled.

"The mail, the mail!" cried the lady, running up to my uncle, and throwing her beautiful arms round his neck; "we may yet escape."

"May!" cried my uncle; "why, my dear, there's nobody else to kill, is there?" My uncle was rather disappointed, gentlemen, for he thought that a little quiet bit of love-making would be agreeable after the slaughtering, if it were only to change the subject.

"We have not an instant to lose here," said the young lady. "He (pointing to the young gentleman in sky-blue) is the only son of the powerful Marquess of Filletoville."

"Well then, my dear, I'm afraid he'll never come to the

title," said my uncle, looking coolly at the young gentleman as he stood fixed up against the wall in the cock-chaffer fashion I have described. "You have cut off the entail, my love."

"I have been torn from my home and friends by these villains," said the young lady, her features glowing with indignation. "That wretch would have married me by violence in another hour."

"Confound his impudence!" said my uncle, bestowing a very contemptuous look on the dying heir of Filletoville.

"As you may guess from what you have seen," said the young lady, "the party were prepared to murder me if I appealed to any one for assistance. If their accomplices find us here, we are lost. Two minutes hence may be too late. The mail!" With these words, overpowered by her feelings, and the exertion of sticking the young Marquess of Filletoville, she sunk into my uncle's arms. My uncle caught her up, and bore her to the house-door. There stood the mail, with four long-tailed, flowing-maned, black horses, ready harnessed; but no coachman, no guard, no hostler even, at the horses' heads.

"Gentlemen, I hope I do no injustice to my uncle's memory, when I express my opinion, that although he was a bachelor, he *had* held some ladies in his arms before this time; I believe, indeed, that he had rather a habit of kissing bar-maids; and I know that, in or two instances, he had been seen by credible witnesses to hug a landlady in a very perceptible manner. I mention the circumstance, to show what a very uncommon sort of person this beautiful young lady must have been, to have affected my uncle in the way she did; he used to say, that as her long dark hair trailed over his arm, and her beautiful dark eyes fixed themselves upon his face when she recovered, he felt so strange and nervous that his legs trembled beneath him. But who can look in a sweet, soft pair of dark eyes without feeling queer? I can't, gentlemen. I am afraid to look at some eyes I know, and that's the truth of it."

"You will never leave me," murmured the young lady.

"Never," said my uncle. And he meant it too.

"My dear preserver!" exclaimed the young lady. "My dear, kind, brave preserver!"

"Don't," said my uncle, interrupting her.

"Why?" inquired the young lady.

“Because your mouth looks so beautiful when you speak,” rejoined my uncle, “that I am afraid I shall be rude enough to kiss it.”

“The young lady put up her hand as if to caution my uncle not to do so, and said—no, she didn’t say anything—she smiled. When you are looking at a pair of the most delicious lips in the world, and see them gently break into a roguish smile—if you are very near them, and nobody else by—you can not better testify your admiration of their beautiful form and color than by kissing them at once. My uncle did so, and I honor him for it.

“Hark!” cried the young lady, starting. “The noise of wheels and horses!”

“So it is,” said my uncle, listening. He had a good ear for wheels and the trampling of hoofs; but there appeared to be so many horses and carriages rattling toward them from a distance, that it was impossible to form a guess at their number. The sound was like that of fifty breaks, with six blood-cattle in each.

“We are pursued!” cried the young lady, clasping her hands, “We are pursued! I have no hope but in you!”

“There was such an expression of terror in her beautiful face, that my uncle made up his mind at once. He lifted her into the coach, told her not to be frightened, pressed his lips to hers once more, and then advising her to draw up the window to keep the cold air out, mounted to the box.

“Stay, love,” cried the young lady.

“What’s the matter?” said my uncle, from the coach-box.

“I want to speak to you,” said the young lady; “only a word. Only one word, dearest.”

“Must I get down?” inquired my uncle. The lady made no answer, but she smiled again. Such a smile, gentlemen! It beat the other one all to nothing. My uncle descended from his perch in a twinkling.

“What is it, my dear?” said my uncle, looking in at the coach window. The lady happened to bend forward at the same time, and my uncle thought she looked more beautiful than she had done yet. He was very close to her just then, gentlemen, so he really ought to know.

“What is it, my dear?” said my uncle.

“Will you never love any one but me; never marry any one beside?” said the young lady.

“My uncle swore a great oath that he never would marry any body else, and the young lady drew in her head, and pulled up the window. He jumped upon the box, squared his elbows, adjusted the ribbons, seized the whip which lay on the roof, gave one flick to the off leader, and away went the four long-tailed flowing-maned black horses, at fifteen good English miles an hour, with the old mail coach behind them. Whew! How they tore along!

“The noise behind grew louder. The faster the old mail went, the faster came their pursuers—men, horses, dogs, were leagued in the pursuit. The noise was frightful, but, above all, rose the voice of the young lady urging my uncle on, and shrieking, ‘Faster! Faster!’

“They whirled past the dark trees, as feathers would be swept before a hurricane. Houses, gates, churches, haystacks, objects of every kind they shot by, with a velocity and noise like roaring waters suddenly let loose. Still the noise of pursuit grew louder, and still my uncle could hear the young lady wildly screaming, ‘Faster! Faster!’

“My uncle plied whip and rein, and the horses flew onward till they were white with foam; and yet the noise behind increased; and yet the young lady cried, ‘Faster! Faster!’ My uncle gave a loud stamp on the boot in the energy of the moment, and—found that it was gray morning, and he was sitting in the wheelwright’s yard, on the box of an old Edinburgh mail, shivering with the cold and wet, and stamping his feet to warm them! He got down, and looked eagerly inside for the beautiful young lady. Alas! there was neither door nor seat to the coach. It was a mere shell.

“Of course, my uncle knew very well that there was some mystery in the matter, and that every thing had passed exactly as he used to relate it. He remained staunch to the great oath he had sworn to the beautiful young lady, refusing several eligible landladies on her account, and dying a bachelor at last. He always said, what a curious thing it was that he should have found out, by such a mere accident as his clambering over the palings, that the ghosts of mail-coaches and horses, guards, coachmen, and passengers, were in the habit of making journeys regularly every night. He used to add, that he believed he was the only living person who had ever been taken as a passenger on one of these excursions. And I think he was right, gentlemen—at least I never heard of any other.”

"I wonder what these ghosts of mail-coaches carry in their bags," said the landlord, who had listened to the whole story with profound interest.

"The dead letters, of course," said the Bagman.

"Oh, ah! To be sure," rejoined the landlord. "I never thought of that."

CHAPTER L.

HOW MR. PICKWICK SPED UPON HIS MISSION, AND HOW HE WAS RE-ENFORCED IN THE OUTSET BY A MOST UNEXPECTED AUXILIARY.

THE horses were put to, punctually at a quarter before nine next morning, and Mr. Pickwick and Sam Weller having each taken his seat, the one inside and the other out, the postilion was duly directed to repair in the first instance to Mr. Bob Sawyer's house, for the purpose of taking up Mr. Benjamin Allen.

It was with feelings of no small astonishment, when the carriage drew up before the door with the red lamp, and the very legible inscription of "Sawyer, late Nockemorf," that Mr. Pickwick saw, on popping his head out of the coach-window, the boy in the gray livery busily employed in putting up the shutters; the which, being an unusual and an un-business-like proceeding at that hour of the morning, at once suggested to his mind two inferences; the one, that some good friend and patient of Mr. Bob Sawyer's was dead; the other, that Mr. Bob Sawyer himself was bankrupt.

"What is the matter?" said Mr. Pickwick to the boy.

"Nothing is the matter, sir," replied the boy, expanding his mouth to the whole breadth of his countenance.

"All right, all right!" cried Bob Sawyer, suddenly appearing at the door with a small leathern knapsack, limp and dirty, in one hand, and a rough coat and shawl thrown over the other arm. "I'm going, old fellow."

"You!" exclaimed Mr. Pickwick.

"Yes," replied Bob Sawyer, "and a regular expedition we'll make of it. Here, Sam! Look out!" Thus briefly bespeaking Mr. Weller's attention, Mr. Bob Sawyer jerked the leathern knapsack into the dickey, where it was immediately stowed away under the seat by Sam, who

regarded the proceeding with great admiration. This done, Mr. Bob Sawyer, with the assistance of the boy, forcibly worked himself into the rough coat, which was a few sizes too small for him, and then advancing to the coach-window, thrust in his head, and laughed boisterously.

"What a start it is, isn't it!" cried Bob, wiping the tears out of his eyes with one of the cuffs of the rough coat.

"My dear sir," said Mr. Pickwick, with some embarrassment, "I had no idea of your accompanying us."

"No, that's just the very thing," replied Bob, seizing Mr. Pickwick by the lappel of his coat. "That's the joke."

"Oh, that's the joke?" said Mr. Pickwick.

"Of course," replied Bob. "It's the whole point of the thing, you know—that, and leaving the business to take care of itself, as it seems to have made up its mind not to take care of me." With this explanation of the phenomenon of the shutters, Mr. Bob Sawyer pointed to the shop, and relapsed into an ecstasy of mirth.

"Bless me, you are surely not mad enough to think of leaving your patients without any body to attend them!" remonstrated Mr. Pickwick in a very serious tone.

"Why not?" asked Bob, in reply. "I shall save by it, you know. None of them ever pay. Besides," said Bob, lowering his voice to a confidential whisper, "they will be the better for it; for, being nearly out of drugs, and not able to increase my account just now, I should have been obliged to give them calomel all round, and it would have been certain to have disagreed with some of them. So it's all for the best."

There was a philosophy, and a strength of reasoning, about this reply which Mr. Pickwick was not prepared for. He paused a few moments, and added, less firmly than before.

"But this chaise, my young friend, will only hold two; and I am pledged to Mr. Allen."

"Don't think of me for a minute," replied Bob. "I've arranged it all; Sam and I will share the dickey between us. Look here. This little bill is to be wafered on the shop door: 'Sawyer, late Nockemorf. Inquire of Mrs. Cripps over the way.' Mrs. Cripps is my boy's mother. 'Mr. Sawyer's very sorry,' says Mrs. Cripps; 'couldn't help it—fetched away early this morning to a consultation of the very first surgeons in the country—couldn't do without him—