"'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 the 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, hay-stacks, 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 attention.

"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 very 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's 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 all 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—would have him at any price—tremendous operation.' The fact is," said Bob, in conclusion, "it'll do me more good than otherwise, I expect. If it gets into one of the local papers, it will be the making of me. Here's Ben; now, then, jump in!"

With these hurried words, Mr. Bob Sawyer pushed the post-boy on one side, jerked his friend into the vehicle, slammed the door, put up the steps, wafered the bill on the street door, locked it, put the key in his pocket, jumped into the dickey, gave the word for starting, and did the whole with such extraordinary precipitation, that before Mr. Pickwick had well began to consider whether Mr. Bob Sawyer ought to go or not, they were rolling away, with Mr. Bob Sawyer thoroughly established as part and parcel of the equipage.

So long as their progress was confined to the streets of Bristol, the facetious Bob kept his professional green spectacles on, and conducted himself with becoming steadiness and gravity of demeanor; merely giving utterance to divers verbal witticisms for the exclusive behoof and entertainment of Mr. Samuel Weller. But when they emerged on the open road, he threw off his green spectacles and his gravity together, and performed a great variety of practical jokes, which were calculated to attract the attention of the passers-by, and to render the carriage and those it contained objects of more than ordinary curiosity; the least conspicuous among these feats being a most vociferous imitation of a key-bugle, and the ostentatious display of a crimson silk pocket-handkerchief attached to a walking-stick, which was occasionally waved in the air with various gestures indicative of supremacy and defiance.

"I wonder," said Mr. Pickwick, stopping in the midst of a most sedate conversation with Ben Allen, bearing reference to the numerous good qualities of Mr. Winkle and his sister; "I wonder what all the people we pass can see in us to make them stare so."

"It's a neat turn-out," replied Ben Allen, with something of pride in his tone. "They're not used to see this sort of thing every day, I dare say."

"Possibly," replied Mr. Pickwick. "It may be so. Perhaps it is."

Mr. Pickwick might very probably have reasoned himself into the belief that it really was: had he not, just then happening to look out of the coach window, observed that the looks of the passengers betokened any thing but respectful astonishment, and that various telegraphic communications appeared to be passing between them and some persons outside the vehicle: whereupon it occurred to him that these demonstrations might be, in some remote degree, referable to the humorous deportment of Mr. Robert Sawyer.

"I hope," said Mr. Pickwick, "that our volatile friend is committing no absurdities in that dickey behind."

"Oh dear, no," replied Ben Allen. "Except when he's elevated, Bob's the quietest creature breathing."

Here a prolonged imitation of a key-bugle broke upon the ear, succeeded by cheers and screams, all of which evidently proceeded from the throat and lungs of the quietest creature breathing, or, in plainer designation, of Mr. Bob Sawyer himself.

Mr. Pickwick and Mr. Ben Allen looked expressively at each other, and the former gentleman taking off his hat, and leaning out of the coach window until nearly the whole of his waistcoat was outside it, was at length enabled to catch a glimpse of his facetious friend.

Mr. Bob Sawyer was seated not in the dickey, but on the roof of the chaise, with his legs as far asunder as they would conveniently go, wearing Mr.

Samuel Weller's hat on one side of his head, and bearing in one hand a most enormous sandwich, while in the other he supported a goodly-sized case-bottle, to both of which he applied himself with intense relish; varying the monotony of the occupation by an occasional howl, or the interchange of some lively *badinage* with any passing stranger. The crimson flag was carefully tied in an erect position to the rail of the dickey; and Mr. Samuel Weller, decorated with Bob Sawyer's hat, was seated in the centre thereof, discussing a twin sandwich with an animated countenance, the expression of which betokened his entire and perfect approval of the whole arrangement.

This was enough to irritate a gentleman with Mr. Pickwick's sense of propriety, but it was not the whole extent of the aggravation, for a stage-coach full, inside and out, was meeting them at the moment, and the astonishment of the passengers was very palpably evinced. The congratulations of an Irish family, too, who were keeping up with the chaise, and begging all the time, were of rather a boisterous description; especially those of its male head, who appeared to consider the display as part and parcel of some political, or other procession of triumph.

"Mr. Sawyer!" cried Mr. Pickwick, in a state of great excitement. "Mr. Sawyer, sir!"

"Halloo!" responded that gentleman, looking over the side of the chaise with all the coolness in life.

"Are you mad, sir?" demanded Mr. Pickwick.

"Not a bit of it," replied Bob; "only cheerful."

"Cheerful, sir!" ejaculated Mr. Pickwick. "Take down that scandalous red handkerchief, I beg. I insist, sir. Sam, take it down."

Before Sam could interpose, Mr. Bob Sawyer gracefully struck his colors, and, having put them in his pocket, nodded in a courteous manner to Mr. Pickwick, wiped the mouth of the case-bottle, and applied it to his own; thereby informing him, without any unnecessary waste of words, that he devoted that draught to wishing him all manner of happiness and prosperity. Having done this, Bob replaced the cork with great care, and looking benignantly down on Mr. Pickwick, took a large bite out of the sandwich, and smiled.

"Come," said Mr. Pickwick, whose momentary anger was not quite proof against Bob's immovable self-possession, "pray let us have no more of this absurdity."

"No, no," replied Bob, once more exchanging hats with Mr. Weller; "I didn't mean to do it, only I got so enlivened with the ride that I couldn't help it."

"Think of the look of the thing," expostulated Mr. Pickwick; "have some regard to appearances."

"Oh, certainly," said Bob, "it's not the sort of thing at all. All over, governor."

Satisfied with this assurance, Mr. Pickwick once more drew his head into the chaise and pulled up the glass; but he had scarcely resumed the conversation which Mr. Bob Sawyer had interrupted, when he was somewhat startled by the apparition of a small dark body, of an oblong form, on the outside of the window, which gave sundry taps against it, as if impatient of admission.

"What's this?" exclaimed Mr. Pickwick.

"It looks like a case-bottle," remarked Ben Allen, eying the object in question through his spectacles with some interest; "I rather think it belongs to Bob."

The impression was perfectly accurate; for Mr. Bob Sawyer, having attached the case-bottle to the end of the walking-stick, was battering the window with it, in token of his wish that his friends inside would partake of its contents in all good-fellowship and harmony.

"What's to be done?" said Mr. Pickwick, looking at the bottle. "This proceeding is more absurd than the other."

"I think it would be best to take it in," replied Mr. Ben Allen; "it would serve him right to take it in and keep it, wouldn't it?"

"It would," said Mr. Pickwick: "shall I?"

"I think it the most proper course we could possibly adopt," replied Ben.

This advice quite coinciding with his own opinion, Mr. Pickwick gently let down the window and disengaged the bottle from the stick: upon which the latter was drawn up, and Mr. Bob Sawyer was heard to laugh heartily.

"What a merry dog it is!" said Mr. Pickwick, looking round at his companion with the bottle in his hand.

"He is," said Mr. Allen.

"You can not possibly be angry with him," remarked Mr. Pickwick.

"Quite out of the question," observed Benjamin Allen.

During this short interchange of sentiments, Mr. Pickwick had, in an abstracted mood, uncorked the bottle.

"What is it?" inquired Ben Allen, carelessly.

"I don't know," replied Mr. Pickwick, with equal carelessness. "It smells, I think, like milk-punch."

"Oh, indeed?" said Ben.

"I *think* so," rejoined Mr. Pickwick, very properly guarding himself against the possibility of stating an untruth: "mind, I could not undertake to say certainly, without tasting it."

"You had better do so," said Ben; "we may as well know what it is."

"Do you think so?" replied Mr. Pickwick. "Well, if you are curious to know, of course I have no objection."

Ever willing to sacrifice his own feelings to the wishes of his friend, Mr. Pickwick at once took a pretty long taste.

"What is it?" inquired Ben Allen, interrupting him with some impatience.

"Curious," said Mr. Pickwick, smacking his lips, "I hardly know now. Oh yes!" said Mr. Pickwick, after a second taste. "It *is* punch."

Mr. Ben Allen looked at Mr. Pickwick; Mr. Pickwick looked at Mr. Ben Allen; Mr. Ben Allen smiled; Mr. Pickwick did not.

"It would serve him right," said the last-named gentleman, with some severity, "it would serve him right to drink it every drop."

"The very thing that occurred to me," said Ben Allen.

"Is it, indeed?" rejoined Mr. Pickwick. "Then here's his health!" With these words, that excellent person took a most energetic pull at the bottle, and handed it to Ben Allen, who was not slow to imitate his example. The smiles became mutual, and the milk-punch was gradually and cheerfully disposed of.

"After all," said Mr. Pickwick, as he drained the last drop, "his pranks are really very amusing; very entertaining indeed."

"You may say that," rejoined Mr. Ben Allen. In proof of Bob Sawyer's being one of the funniest fellows alive, he proceeded to entertain Mr. Pickwick with a long and circumstantial account how that gentleman once drank himself into a fever and got his head shaved; the relation of which pleasant and agreeable history was only stopped by the stoppage of the chaise at the Bell at Berkeley Heath, to change horses.

"I say! We're going to dine here, aren't we?" said Bob, looking in at the window.

"Dine!" said Mr. Pickwick. "Why, we have only come nineteen miles, and have eighty-seven and a half to go."

"Just the reason why we should take something to enable us to bear up against the fatigue," remonstrated Mr. Bob Sawyer.

"Oh, it's quite impossible to dine at half-past eleven o'clock in the day," replied Mr. Pickwick, looking at his watch.

"So it is," rejoined Bob, "lunch is the very thing. Halloo, you sir! Lunch for three, directly, and keep the horses back for a quarter of an hour. Tell them to put every thing they have cold on the table, and some bottled ale, and let us taste your very best Madeira." Issuing these orders with monstrous importance and bustle, Mr. Bob Sawyer at once hurried into the house to superintend the arrangements; in less than five minutes he returned and declared them to be excellent.

The quality of the lunch fully justified the eulogium which Bob had pronounced, and very great justice was done to it, not only by that gentleman, but Mr. Ben Allen and Mr. Pickwick also. Under the auspices of the three, the bottled ale and the Madeira were promptly disposed of; and when (the horses being once more put to) they resumed their seats, with the case-bottle full of the best substitute for milk-punch that could be procured on so short a notice, the key-bugle sounded, and the red flag waved, without the slightest opposition on Mr. Pickwick's part.

At the Hop Pole at Tewkesbury, they stopped to dine; upon which occasion there was more bottled ale, with some more Madeira, and some port besides; and here the case-bottle was replenished for the fourth time. Under the influence of these combined stimulants, Mr. Pickwick and Mr. Ben Allen fell fast asleep for thirty miles, while Bob and Mr. Weller sang duets in the dickey.

It was quite dark when Mr. Pickwick roused himself sufficiently to look out of window. The straggling cottages by the road-side, the dingy hue of every object visible, the murky atmosphere, the paths of cinders and brick-dust, the deep-red glow of furnace-fires in the distance, the volumes of dense smoke issuing heavily forth from high toppling chimneys, blackening and obscuring every thing around; the glare of distant lights, the ponderous wagons which toiled along the road, laden with clashing rods of iron, or piled with heavy goods—all betokened their rapid approach to the great working town of Birmingham.

As they rattled through the narrow thoroughfares leading to the heart of the turmoil, the sights and sounds of earnest occupation struck more forcibly on the senses. The streets were thronged with working people. The hum of labor resounded from every house, lights gleamed from the long casement windows in the attic stories, and the whirl of wheels and noise of machinery shook the trembling walls. The fires, whose lurid, sullen light had been visible for miles, blazed fiercely up, in the great works and factories of the town. The din of hammers, the rushing of steam, and the dead, heavy clanking of engines, was the harsh music which arose from every quarter.

The post-boy was driving briskly through the open streets, and past the handsome and well-lighted shops which intervene between the outskirts of the town and the Old Royal Hotel, before Mr. Pickwick had begun to consider the very difficult and delicate nature of the commission which had carried him thither.

The delicate nature of this commission, and the difficulty of executing it in a satisfactory manner, were by no means lessened by the voluntary companionship of Mr. Bob Sawyer. Truth to tell, Mr. Pickwick felt that his presence on the occasion, however considerate and gratifying, was by no means an honor he would willingly have sought; in fact, he would cheerfully have given a reasonable sum of money to have had Mr. Bob Sawyer removed to any place at not less than fifty miles' distance, without delay.

Mr. Pickwick had never held any personal communication with Mr. Winkle, senior, although he had once or twice corresponded with him by letter, and returned satisfactory answers to his inquiries concerning the moral character and behavior of his son; he felt nervously sensible that to wait upon him for the first time, attended by Bob Sawyer and Ben Allen, both slightly fuddled, was not the most ingenious and likely means that could have been hit upon to prepossess him in his favor.

"However," said Mr. Pickwick, endeavoring to reassure himself, "I must do the best I can. I must see him to-night, for I faithfully promised to do so. If they persist in accompanying me, I must make the interview as brief as possible, and be content to hope that, for their own sakes, they will not expose themselves."

As he comforted himself with these reflections, the chaise stopped at the door of the Old Royal. Ben Allen having been partially awakened from a stupendous sleep, and dragged out by the collar by Mr. Samuel Weller, Mr. Pickwick was enabled to alight. They were shown to a comfortable apartment, and Mr. Pickwick at once propounded a question to the waiter concerning the whereabout of Mr. Winkle's residence.

"Close by, sir," said the waiter, "not above five hundred yards, sir. Mr. Winkle is a wharfinger, sir,

at the canal, sir. Private residence is not—oh dear no, sir, *not* five hundred yards, sir." Here the waiter blew a candle out, and made a feint of lighting it again, in order to afford Mr. Pickwick an opportunity of asking any further questions, if he felt so disposed.

"Take any thing now, sir?" said the waiter, lighting the candle in desperation at Mr. Pickwick's silence. "Tea or coffee, sir? Dinner, sir?"

"Nothing now."

"Very good, sir. Like to order supper, sir?"

"Not just now."

"*Very* good, sir." Here he walked softly to the door, and then stopping short, turned round, and said, with great suavity,

"Shall I send the chamber-maid, gentlemen?"

"You may if you please;" replied Mr. Pickwick.

"If *you* please, sir."

"And bring some soda-water," said Bob Sawyer.

"Soda-water, sir? Yes, sir." With his mind apparently relieved from an overwhelming weight, by having at last got an order for something, the waiter imperceptibly melted away. Waiters never walk or run. They have a peculiar and mysterious power of skimming out of rooms which other mortals possess not.

Some slight symptoms of vitality having been awakened in Mr. Ben Allen by the soda-water, he suffered himself to be prevailed upon to wash his face and hands, and to submit to be brushed by Sam. Mr. Pickwick and Bob Sawyer having also repaired the disorder which the journey had made in their apparel, the three started forth, arm in arm, to Mr. Winkle's; Bob Sawyer impregnating the atmosphere with tobacco-smoke as he walked along.

About a quarter of a mile off, in a quiet, substantial-looking street, stood an old red-brick house with three steps before the door, and a brass plate upon it, bearing, in fat Roman capitals, the words, "Mr. Winkle." The steps were very white, and the bricks were very red, and the house was very clean; and here stood Mr. Pickwick, Mr. Benjamin Allen, and Mr. Bob Sawyer, as the clock struck ten.

A smart servant-girl answered the knock, and started on beholding the three strangers.

"Is Mr. Winkle at home, my dear?" inquired Mr. Pickwick.

"He is just going to supper, sir," replied the girl.

"Give him that card, if you please," rejoined Mr. Pickwick. "Say I am sorry to trouble him at so late an hour; but I am anxious to see him to-night, and have only just arrived."

The girl looked timidly at Mr. Bob Sawyer, who was expressing his admiration of her personal charms by a variety of wonderful grimaces; and casting an eye at the hats and great-coats which hung in the passage, called another girl to mind the door while she went up stairs. The sentinel was speedily relieved; for the girl returned immediately, and begging pardon of the gentlemen for leaving them in the street, ushered them into a floor-clothed back parlor, half office and half dressing-room, in which the principal useful and ornamental articles of furniture were a desk, a wash-hand stand and shaving-glass, a boot-rack and boot-jack, a high stool, four chairs, a table, and an old eight-day clock. Over the mantel-piece were the sunken doors of an iron safe, while a couple of hanging shelves for books, an almanac, and several files of dusty papers, decorated the walls.

"Very sorry to leave you standing at the door, sir," said the girl, lighting a lamp, and addressing Mr. Pickwick with a winning smile, "but you was quite strangers to me; and we have such a many trampers that only come to see what they can lay their hands on, that really—"

"There is not the least occasion for any apology, my dear," said Mr. Pickwick, good-humoredly.

"Not the slightest, my love," said Bob Sawyer, playfully stretching forth his arms, and skipping from side to side, as if to prevent the young lady's leaving the room.

The young lady was not at all softened by these allurements, for she at once expressed her opinion that Mr. Bob Sawyer was an "odous creetur;" and, on his becoming rather more pressing in his attentions, imprinted her fair fingers upon his face, and bounced out of the room with many expressions of aversion and contempt.

Deprived of the young lady's society, Mr. Bob Sawyer proceeded to divert himself by peeping into the desk, looking into all the table-drawers, feigning to pick the lock of the iron safe, turning the almanac with its face to the wall, trying on the boots of Mr. Winkle, senior, over his own, and making several other humorous experiments upon the furniture, all of which afforded Mr. Pickwick unspeakable horror and agony, and yielded Mr. Bob Sawyer proportionate delight.

At length the door opened, and a little old gentleman in a snuff-colored suit, with a head and face the precise counterpart of those belonging to Mr. Winkle, junior, excepting that he was rather bald, trotted into the room with Mr. Pickwick's card in one hand, and a silver candlestick in the other.

"Mr. Pickwick, sir, how do you do?" said Winkle the elder, putting down the candlestick and proffering his hand. "Hope I see you well, sir. Glad to see you. Be seated, Mr. Pickwick, I beg sir. This gentleman is—"

"My friend, Mr. Sawyer," interposed Mr. Pickwick, "your son's friend."

"Oh," said Mr. Winkle the elder, looking rather grimly at Bob. "I hope *you* are well, sir."

"Right as a trivet, sir," replied Bob Sawyer.

"This other gentleman," cried Mr. Pickwick, "is, as you will see, when you have read the letter with which I am intrusted, a very near relative, or I should rather say a very particular friend of your son's. His name is Allen."

"*That* gentleman?" inquired Mr. Winkle, pointing with the card toward Ben Allen, who had fallen asleep in an attitude which left nothing of him visible but his spine and his coat-collar.

Mr. Pickwick was on the point of replying to the question, and reciting Mr. Benjamin Allen's name and honorable distinctions at full length, when the sprightly Mr. Bob Sawyer, with a view of rousing his friend to a sense of his situation, inflicted a startling pinch upon the fleshy part of his arm, which caused him to jump up with a shriek. Suddenly aware that he was in the presence of a stranger, Mr. Ben

Allen advanced and, shaking Mr. Winkle most affectionately by both hands for about five minutes, murmured, in some half-intelligible fragments of sentences, the great delight he felt in seeing him, and a hospitable inquiry whether he felt disposed to take any thing after his walk, or would prefer waiting "till dinner-time;" which done, he sat down and gazed about him with a petrified stare, as if he had not the remotest idea where he was, which indeed he had not.

All this was most embarrassing to Mr. Pickwick, the more especially as Mr. Winkle, senior, evinced palpable astonishment at the eccentric—not to say extraordinary—behavior of his two companions. To bring the matter to an issue at once, he drew a letter from his pocket, and presenting it to Mr. Winkle, senior, said:

"This letter, sir, is from your son. You will see, by its contents, that on your favorable and fatherly consideration of it depends his future happiness and welfare. Will you oblige me by giving it the calmest and coolest perusal, and by discussing the subject afterward with me, in the tone and spirit in which alone it ought to be discussed? You may judge of the importance of your decision to your son, and his intense anxiety upon the subject, by my waiting upon you, without any previous warning, at so late an hour; and," added Mr. Pickwick, glancing slightly at his two companions, "and under such unfavorable circumstances."

With this prelude, Mr. Pickwick placed four closely-written sides of extra superfine wire-wove penitence in the hands of the astounded Mr. Winkle, senior. Then reseating himself in his chair, he watched his looks and manner: anxiously, it is true, but with the open front of a gentleman who feels he has taken no part which he need excuse or palliate.

The old wharfinger turned the letter over; looked at the front, back, and sides; made a microscopic examination of the fat little boy on the seal; raised his eyes to Mr. Pickwick's face; and then, seating himself on the high stool, and drawing the lamp closer to him, broke the wax, unfolded the epistle, and lifting it to the light, prepared to read.

Just at this moment, Mr. Bob Sawyer, whose wit had lain dormant for some minutes, placed his hands upon his knees, and made a face after the portraits of the late Mr. Grimaldi, as clown. It so happened that Mr. Winkle, senior, instead of being deeply engaged in reading the letter, as Mr. Bob Sawyer thought, chanced to be looking over the top of it at no less a person than Mr. Bob Sawyer himself; rightly conjecturing that the face aforesaid was made in ridicule and derision of his own person, he fixed his eyes on Bob with such expressive sternness, that the late Mr. Grimaldi's lineaments gradually resolved themselves into a very fine expression of humility and confusion.

"Did you speak, sir?" inquired Mr. Winkle, senior, after an awful silence.

"No, sir," replied Bob, with no remains of the clown about him, save and except the extreme redness of his cheeks.

"You are sure you did not, sir?" said Mr. Winkle, senior.

"Oh dear yes, sir, quite," replied Bob.

"I thought you did, sir," rejoined the old gentleman, with indignant emphasis. "Perhaps you *looked* at me, sir?"

"Oh, no! sir, not at all," replied Bob, with extreme civility.

"I am very glad to hear it, sir," said Mr. Winkle, senior. Having frowned upon the abashed Bob with great magnificence, the old gentleman again brought the letter to the light, and began to read it seriously.

Mr. Pickwick eyed him intently as he turned from the bottom line of the first page to the top line of the second, and from the bottom of the second to the top of the third, and from the bottom of the third to the top of the fourth; but not the slightest alteration of countenance afforded a clue to the feelings with which he received the announcement of his son's marriage, which Mr. Pickwick knew was in the very first half-dozen lines.

He read the letter to the last word; folded it again with all the carefulness and precision of a man of business; and, just when Mr. Pickwick expected some great outbreak of feeling, dipped a pen in the inkstand, and said as quietly as if he were speaking on the most ordinary counting-house topic,

"What is Nathaniel's address, Mr. Pickwick?"

"The George and Vulture, at present," replied that gentleman.

"George and Vulture. Where is that?"

"George Yard, Lombard Street."

"In the City?"

"Yes."

The old gentleman methodically indorsed the address on the back of the letter; and then, placing it in the desk, which he locked, said, as he got off the stool and put the bunch of keys in his pocket,

"I suppose there is nothing else which need detain us, Mr. Pickwick?"

"Nothing else, my dear sir!" observed that warm-hearted person in indignant amazement. "Nothing else! Have you no opinion to express on this momentous event in our young friend's life? No assurance to convey to him, through me, of the continuance of your affection and protection? Nothing to say which will cheer and sustain him, and the anxious girl who looks to him for comfort and support? My dear sir, consider."

"I will consider," replied the old gentleman. "I have nothing to say just now. I am a man of business, Mr. Pickwick. I never commit myself hastily in any affair, and from what I see of this, I by no means like the appearance of it. A thousand pounds is not much, Mr. Pickwick."

"You're very right, sir," interposed Ben Allen, just awake enough to know that he had spent *his* thousand pounds without the smallest difficulty. "You're an intelligent man. Bob, he's a very knowing fellow this."

"I am very happy to find that *you* do me the justice to make the admission, sir," said Mr. Winkle, senior, looking contemptuously at Ben Allen, who was shaking his head profoundly. "The fact is, Mr. Pickwick, that when I gave my son a roving license for a year or so, to see something of men and manners (which he has done under your auspices), so that he might not enter into life a mere boarding-school milksop to be gulled by every body, I never bargain-

ed for this. He knows that very well; so if I withdraw my countenance from him on this account, he has no call to be surprised. He shall hear from me, Mr. Pickwick. Good-night, sir. Margaret, open the door."

All this time, Bob Sawyer had been nudging Mr. Ben Allen to say something on the right side; Ben accordingly now burst, without the slightest preliminary notice, into a brief but impassioned piece of eloquence.

"Sir," said Mr. Ben Allen, staring at the old gentleman out of a pair of very dim and languid eyes, and working his right arm vehemently up and down, "you—you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"As the lady's brother, of course you are an excellent judge of the question," retorted Mr. Winkle, senior. "There; that's enough. Pray say no more, Mr. Pickwick. Good-night, gentlemen!"

With these words, the old gentleman took up the candlestick, and opening the room door, politely motioned toward the passage.

"You will regret this, sir," said Mr. Pickwick, setting his teeth close together to keep down his choler; for he felt how important the effect might prove to his young friend.

"I am at present of a different opinion," calmly replied Mr. Winkle, senior. "Once again, gentlemen, I wish you a good-night."

Mr. Pickwick walked, with angry strides, into the street. Mr. Bob Sawyer, completely quelled by the decision of the old gentleman's manner, took the same course. Mr. Ben Allen's hat rolled down the steps immediately afterward, and Mr. Ben Allen's body followed it directly. The whole party went silent and supperless to bed; and Mr. Pickwick thought, just before he fell asleep, that if he had known Mr. Winkle, senior, had been quite so much of a man of business, it was extremely probable he might never have waited upon him on such an errand.

CHAPTER LI.

IN WHICH MR. PICKWICK ENCOUNTERS AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE. TO WHICH FORTUNATE CIRCUMSTANCE THE READER IS MAINLY INDEBTED FOR MATTER OF THRILLING INTEREST HEREIN SET DOWN, CONCERNING TWO GREAT PUBLIC MEN OF MIGHT AND POWER.

THE morning which broke upon Mr. Pickwick's sight at eight o'clock was not at all calculated to elevate his spirits, or to lessen the depression which the unlooked-for result of his embassy inspired. The sky was dark and gloomy, the air was damp and raw, the streets were wet and sloppy. The smoke hung sluggishly above the chimney-tops as if it lacked the courage to rise, and the rain came slowly and doggedly down, as if it had not even the spirit to pour. A game-cock in the stable-yard, deprived of every spark of his accustomed animation, balanced himself dismally on one leg in a corner; a donkey, moping with drooping head under the narrow roof of an outhouse, appeared, from his meditative and miserable countenance, to be contemplating suicide. In the street, umbrellas were the only things to be seen, and the clicking of pattens and splashing of rain-drops were the only sounds to be heard.

The breakfast was interrupted by very little conversation; even Mr. Bob Sawyer felt the influence of the weather, and the previous day's excitement. In his own expressive language, he was "floored." So was Mr. Ben Allen. So was Mr. Pickwick.

In protracted expectation of the weather clearing up, the last evening paper from London was read and re-read with an intensity of interest only known in cases of extreme destitution; every inch of the carpet was walked over with similar perseverance; the windows were looked out of often enough to justify the imposition of an additional duty upon them; all kinds of topics of conversation were started, and failed; and at length Mr. Pickwick, when noon had arrived, without a change for the better, rang the bell resolutely and ordered out the chaise.

Although the roads were miry, and the drizzling rain came down harder than it had done yet, and although the mud and wet splashed in at the open windows of the carriage to such an extent that the discomfort was almost as great to the pair of insides as to the pair of outsides, still there was something in the motion, and the sense of being up and doing, which was so infinitely superior to being pent in a dull room, looking at the dull rain dripping into a dull street, that they all agreed, on starting, that the change was a great improvement, and wondered how they could possibly have delayed making it as long as they had done.

When they stopped to change at Coventry, the steam ascended from the horses in such clouds as wholly to obscure the hostler, whose voice was however heard to declare from the mist that he expected the first Gold Medal from the Humane Society, on their next distribution of rewards, for taking the post-boy's hat off; the water descending from the brim of which, the invisible gentleman declared must inevitably have drowned him (the post-boy), but for his great presence of mind in tearing it promptly from his head, and drying the gasping man's countenance with a wisp of straw.

"This is pleasant," said Bob Sawyer, turning up his coat-collar, and pulling the shawl over his mouth to concentrate the fumes of a glass of brandy just swallowed.

"Wery," replied Sam, composedly.

"You don't seem to mind it," observed Bob.

"Vy, I don't exactly see no good my mindin' on it 'ud do, sir," replied Sam.

"That's an unanswerable reason, anyhow," said Bob.

"Yes, sir," rejoined Mr. Weller. "Wotever is is right, as the young nobleman sweetly remarked wen they put him down in the pension list 'cos his mother's uncle's vife's grandfather vunce lit the king's pipe vith a portable tinder-box."

"Not a bad notion that, Sam," said Mr. Bob Sawyer, approvingly.

"Just wot the young nobleman said ev'ry quarter-day arterwards for the rest of his life," replied Mr. Weller.

"Wos you ever called in," inquired Sam, glancing at the driver, after a short silence, and lowering his voice to a mysterious whisper: "wos you ever called in, ven you wos 'prentice to a sawbones, to wisit a post-boy?"

"I don't remember that I ever was," replied Bob Sawyer.

"You never see a post-boy in that 'ere hospital as you *walked* (as they says o' the ghosts), did you?" demanded Sam.

"No," replied Bob Sawyer. "I don't think I ever did."

"Never know'd a church-yard vere there wos a post-boy's tombstone, or see a dead post-boy, did you?" inquired Sam, pursuing his catechism.

"No," rejoined Bob, "I never did."

"No!" rejoined Sam, triumphantly. "Nor never vill; and there's another thing that no man never see, and that's a dead donkey. No man never see a dead donkey, 'cept the gen'l'm'n in the black silk smalls as know'd the young 'ooman as kep a goat; and that wos a French donkey, so wery likely he warn't wun o' the reg'lar breed."

"Well, what has that got to do with the post-boys?" asked Bob Sawyer.

"This here," replied Sam. "Without goin' so far as to as-sert, as some wery sensible people do, that post-boys and donkeys is both immortal, wot I say is this; that wenever they feels theirselves gettin' stiff and past their work, they just rides off together, wun post-boy to a pair in the usual way; wot becomes on 'em nobody knows; but it's wery probable as they starts avay to take their pleasure in some other vorld, for there ain't a man alive as ever see either a donkey or a post-boy a-takin' his pleasure in this!"

Expatiating upon this learned and remarkable theory, and citing many curious statistical and other facts in its support, Sam Weller beguiled the time until they reached Dunchurch, where a dry post-boy and fresh horses were procured; the next stage was Daventry, and the next Towcester; and at the end of each stage it rained harder than it had done at the beginning.

"I say," remonstrated Bob Sawyer, looking in at the coach window, as they pulled up before the door of the Saracen's Head, Towcester, "this won't do, you know."

"Bless me!" said Mr. Pickwick, just awaking from a nap, "I'm afraid you're wet."

"Oh you are, are you?" returned Bob. "Yes, I am, a little that way. Uncomfortably damp, perhaps."

Bob did look dampish, inasmuch as the rain was streaming from his neck, elbows, cuffs, skirts, and knees; and his whole apparel shone so with the wet, that it might have been mistaken for a full suit of prepared oil-skin.

"I *am* rather wet," said Bob, giving himself a shake, and casting a little hydraulic shower around, like a Newfoundland dog just emerged from the water.

"I think it's quite impossible to go on to-night," interposed Ben.

"Out of the question, sir," remarked Sam Weller, coming to assist in the conference; "it's a cruelty to animals, sir, to ask 'em to do it. There's beds here, sir," said Sam, addressing his master, "every thing clean and comfortable. Wery good little dinner, sir, they can get ready in half an hour—pair of fowls, sir, and a weal cutlet; French beans, 'taturs, tart, and tidiness. You'd better stop vere you are, sir, if I might recommend. Take adwice, sir, as the doctor said."

The host of the Saracen's Head opportunely appeared at this moment, to confirm Mr. Weller's statement relative to the accommodations of the establishment, and to back his entreaties with a variety of dismal conjectures regarding the state of the roads, the doubt of fresh horses being to be had at the next stage, the dead certainty of its raining all night, the equally mortal certainty of its clearing up in the morning, and other topics of inducement familiar to innkeepers.

"Well," said Mr. Pickwick; "but I must send a letter to London by some conveyance, so that it may be delivered the very first thing in the morning, or I must go forward at all hazards."

The landlord smiled his delight. Nothing could be easier than for the gentleman to inclose a letter in a sheet of brown paper, and send it on, either by the mail or the night coach from Birmingham. If the gentleman was particularly anxious to have it left as soon as possible, he might write outside, "To be delivered immediately," which was sure to be attended to, or "pay the bearer half a crown extra for instant delivery," which was surer still.

"Very well," said Mr. Pickwick, "then we will stop here."

"Lights in the Sun, John; make up the fire; the gentlemen are wet!" cried the landlord. "This way, gentlemen; don't trouble yourselves about the post-boy now, sir. I'll send him to you when you ring for him, sir. Now, John, the candles."

The candles were brought, the fire was stirred up, and a fresh log of wood thrown on. In ten minutes' time a waiter was laying the cloth for dinner, the curtains were drawn, the fire was blazing brightly, and every thing looked (as every thing always does, in all decent English inns) as if the travelers had been expected, and their comforts prepared, for days beforehand.

Mr. Pickwick sat down at a side table, and hastily indited a note to Mr. Winkle, merely informing him that he was detained by stress of weather, but would certainly be in London next day; until when he deferred any account of his proceedings. This note was hastily made into a parcel, and dispatched to the bar per Mr. Samuel Weller.

Sam left it with the landlady, and was returning to pull his master's boots off, after drying himself by the kitchen fire, when, glancing casually through a half-opened door, he was arrested by the sight of a gentleman with a sandy head, who had a large bundle of newspapers lying on the table before him, and was perusing the leading article of one with a settled sneer which curled up his nose and all his other features into a majestic expression of haughty contempt.

"Halloo!" said Sam, "I ought to know that 'ere head and them features; the eye-glass too, and the broad-brimmed tile! Eatansvill to vit, or I'm a Roman."

Sam was taken with a troublesome cough at once, for the purpose of attracting the gentleman's atten-