

Chapter VIII

Strongly Illustrative Of The Position, That The Course Of True Love Is Not A Railway

The quiet seclusion of Dingley Dell, the presence of so many of the gentler sex, and the solicitude and anxiety they evinced in his behalf, were all favourable to the growth and development of those softer feelings which nature had implanted deep in the bosom of Mr Tracy Tupman, and which now appeared destined to centre in one lovely object. The young ladies were pretty, their manners winning, their dispositions unexceptionable; but there was a dignity in the air, a touch-me-not-ishness in the walk, a majesty in the eye, of the spinster aunt, to which, at their time of life, they could lay no claim, which distinguished her from any female on whom Mr Tupman had ever gazed. That there was something kindred in their nature, something congenial in their souls, something mysteriously sympathetic in their bosoms, was evident. Her name was the first that rose to Mr Tupman's lips as he lay wounded on the grass; and her hysteric laughter was the first sound that fell upon his ear when he was supported to the house. But had her agitation arisen from an amiable and feminine sensibility which would have been equally irrepressible in any case; or had it been called forth by a more ardent and passionate feeling, which he, of all men living, could alone awaken? These were the doubts which racked his brain as he lay extended on the sofa; these were the doubts which he determined should be at once and for ever resolved.

it was evening. Isabella and Emily had strolled out with Mr Trundle; the deaf old lady had fallen asleep in her chair; the snoring of the fat boy, penetrated in a low and monotonous sound from the distant kitchen; the buxom servants were lounging at the side door, enjoying the pleasantness of the hour, and the delights of a flirtation, on first principles, with certain unwieldy animals attached to the farm; and there sat the interesting pair, uncared for by all, caring for none, and dreaming only of themselves; there they sat, in short, like a pair of carefully- folded kid gloves - bound up in each other.

'I have forgotten my flowers,' said the spinster aunt.

'Water them now,' said Mr Tupman, in accents of persuasion.

'You will take cold in the evening air,' urged the spinster aunt affectionately.

'No, no,' said Mr Tupman, rising; 'it will do me good. Let me accompany you.'

The lady paused to adjust the sling in which the left arm of the youth was placed, and taking his right arm led him to the garden.

There was a bower at the farther end, with honeysuckle, jessamine, and creeping plants - one of those sweet retreats which humane men erect for the accommodation of spiders.

The spinster aunt took up a large watering-pot which lay in one corner, and was about to leave the arbour. Mr Tupman detained her, and drew her to a seat beside him.

'Miss Wardle!' said he. The spinster aunt trembled, till some pebbles which had accidentally found their way into the large watering-pot shook like an infant's rattle.

'Miss Wardle,' said Mr Tupman, 'you are an angel.'

'Mr Tupman!' exclaimed Rachael, blushing as red as the watering-pot itself.

'Nay,' said the eloquent Pickwickian - 'I know it but too well.'

'All women are angels, they say,' murmured the lady playfully.

'Then what can you be; or to what, without presumption, can I compare you?' replied Mr Tupman. 'Where was the woman ever seen who resembled you? Where else could I hope to find so rare a combination of excellence and beauty? Where else could I seek to - Oh!' Here Mr Tupman paused, and pressed the hand which clasped the handle of the happy watering-pot.

The lady turned aside her head. 'Men are such deceivers,' she softly whispered.

'They are, they are,' ejaculated Mr Tupman; 'but not all men. There lives at least one being who can never change - one being who would be content to devote his whole existence to your happiness - who lives but in your eyes - who breathes but in your smiles - who bears the heavy burden of life itself only for you.'

'Could such an individual be found - ' said the lady.

'But he CAN be found,' said the ardent Mr Tupman, interposing. 'He IS found. He is here, Miss Wardle.' And ere the lady was aware of his intention, Mr Tupman had sunk upon his knees at her feet.

'Mr Tupman, rise,' said Rachael.

'Never!' was the valorous reply. 'Oh, Rachael!' He seized her passive hand, and the watering-pot fell to the ground as he pressed it to his lips. - 'Oh, Rachael! say you love me.'

'Mr Tupman,' said the spinster aunt, with averted head, 'I can hardly speak the words; but - but - you are not wholly indifferent to me.'

Mr Tupman no sooner heard this avowal, than he proceeded to do what his enthusiastic emotions prompted, and what, for aught we know (for we are but little acquainted with such matters), people so circumstanced always do. He jumped up, and, throwing his arm round the neck of the spinster aunt, imprinted upon her lips numerous kisses, which after a due show of struggling and resistance, she received so passively, that there is no telling how many more Mr Tupman might have bestowed, if the lady had not given a very unaffected start, and exclaimed in an affrighted tone -

'Mr Tupman, we are observed! - we are discovered!'

Mr Tupman looked round. There was the fat boy, perfectly motionless, with his large circular eyes staring into the arbour, but without the slightest expression on his face that the most expert physiognomist could have referred to astonishment, curiosity, or any other known passion that agitates the human breast. Mr Tupman gazed on the fat boy, and the fat boy stared at him; and the longer Mr Tupman observed the utter vacancy of the fat boy's countenance, the more convinced he became that he either did not know, or did not understand, anything that had been going forward. Under this impression, he said with great firmness -

'What do you want here, Sir?'

'Supper's ready, sir,' was the prompt reply.

'Have you just come here, sir?' inquired Mr Tupman, with a piercing look.

'Just,' replied the fat boy.

Mr Tupman looked at him very hard again; but there was not a wink in his eye, or a curve in his face.

Mr Tupman took the arm of the spinster aunt, and walked towards the house; the fat boy followed behind.

'He knows nothing of what has happened,' he whispered.

'Nothing,' said the spinster aunt.

There was a sound behind them, as of an imperfectly suppressed chuckle. Mr Tupman turned sharply round. No; it could not have been the fat boy; there was not a gleam of mirth, or anything but feeding in his whole visage.

'He must have been fast asleep,' whispered Mr Tupman.

'I have not the least doubt of it,' replied the spinster aunt.

They both laughed heartily.

Mr, Tupman was wrong. The fat boy, for once, had not been fast asleep. He was awake - wide awake - to what had been going forward.

The supper passed off without any attempt at a general conversation. The old lady had gone to bed; Isabella Wardle devoted herself exclusively to Mr Trundle; the spinster's attentions were reserved for Mr Tupman; and Emily's thoughts appeared to be engrossed by some distant object - possibly they were with the absent Snodgrass.

Eleven - twelve - one o'clock had struck, and the gentlemen had not arrived. Consternation sat on every face. Could they have been waylaid and robbed? Should they send men and lanterns in every direction by which they could be supposed likely to have travelled home? or should they - Hark! there they were. What could have made them so late? A strange voice, too! To whom could it belong? They rushed into the kitchen, whither the truants had repaired, and at once obtained rather more than a glimmering of the real state of the case.

Mr Pickwick, with his hands in his pockets and his hat cocked completely over his left eye, was leaning against the dresser, shaking his head from side to side, and producing a constant succession of the blandest and most benevolent smiles without being moved thereunto by any discernible cause or pretence whatsoever; old Mr Wardle, with a highly-inflamed countenance, was grasping the hand of a strange gentleman muttering protestations of eternal friendship; Mr Winkle, supporting himself by the eight-day clock, was feebly invoking destruction upon the head of any member of the family who should suggest the propriety of his retiring for the night; and Mr Snodgrass had sunk into a chair, with an expression of the most abject and hopeless misery that the human mind can imagine, portrayed in every lineament of his expressive face.

'is anything the matter?' inquired the three ladies.

'Nothing the matter,' replied Mr Pickwick. 'We - we're - all right. - I say, Wardle, we're all right, ain't we?'

'I should think so,' replied the jolly host. - 'My dears, here's my friend Mr Jingle - Mr Pickwick's friend, Mr Jingle, come 'pon - little visit.'

'Is anything the matter with Mr Snodgrass, Sir?' inquired Emily, with great anxiety.

'Nothing the matter, ma'am,' replied the stranger. 'Cricket dinner - glorious party - capital songs - old port - claret - good - very good - wine, ma'am - wine.'

'It wasn't the wine,' murmured Mr Snodgrass, in a broken voice. 'It was the salmon.' (Somehow or other, it never is the wine, in these cases.)

'Hadn't they better go to bed, ma'am?' inquired Emma. 'Two of the boys will carry the gentlemen upstairs.'

'I won't go to bed,' said Mr Winkle firmly.

'No living boy shall carry me,' said Mr Pickwick stoutly; and he went on smiling as before. 'Hurrah!' gasped Mr Winkle faintly.

'Hurrah!' echoed Mr Pickwick, taking off his hat and dashing it on the floor, and insanely casting his spectacles into the middle of the kitchen. At this humorous feat he laughed outright.

'Let's - have - 'nother - bottle,' cried Mr Winkle, commencing in a very loud key, and ending in a very faint one. His head dropped upon his breast; and, muttering his invincible determination not to go to his bed, and a sanguinary regret that he had not 'done for old Tupman' in the morning, he fell fast asleep; in which condition he was borne to his apartment by two young giants under the personal superintendence of the fat boy, to whose protecting care Mr Snodgrass shortly afterwards confided his own person, Mr Pickwick accepted the proffered arm of Mr Tupman and quietly disappeared, smiling more than ever; and Mr Wardle, after taking as affectionate a leave of the whole family as if he were ordered for immediate execution, consigned to Mr Trundle the honour of conveying him upstairs, and retired, with a very futile attempt to look impressively solemn and dignified. 'What a shocking scene!' said the spinster aunt.

'Dis-gusting!' ejaculated both the young ladies.

'Dreadful - dreadful!' said Jingle, looking very grave: he was about a bottle and a half ahead of any of his companions. 'Horrid spectacle - very!'

'What a nice man!' whispered the spinster aunt to Mr Tupman.

'Good-looking, too!' whispered Emily Wardle.

'Oh, decidedly,' observed the spinster aunt.

Mr Tupman thought of the widow at Rochester, and his mind was troubled. The succeeding half-hour's conversation was not of a nature to calm his perturbed spirit. The new visitor was very talkative, and the number of his anecdotes was only to be exceeded by the extent of his politeness. Mr Tupman felt that as Jingle's popularity increased, he (Tupman) retired further into the shade. His laughter was forced - his merriment feigned; and when at last he laid his aching temples between the sheets, he thought, with horrid delight, on the satisfaction it would afford him to have Jingle's head at that moment between the feather bed and the mattress.

The indefatigable stranger rose betimes next morning, and, although his companions remained in bed overpowered with the dissipation of the previous night, exerted himself most successfully to promote the hilarity of the breakfast-table. So successful were his efforts, that even the deaf old lady insisted on having one or two of his best jokes retailed through the trumpet; and even she condescended to observe to the spinster aunt, that 'He' (meaning Jingle) 'was an impudent young fellow:' a sentiment in which all her relations then and there present thoroughly coincided.

It was the old lady's habit on the fine summer mornings to repair to the arbour in which Mr Tupman had already signalised himself, in form and manner following: first, the fat boy fetched from a peg behind the old lady's bedroom door, a close black satin bonnet, a warm cotton shawl, and a thick stick with a capacious handle; and the old lady, having put on the bonnet and shawl at her leisure, would lean one hand on the stick and the other on the fat boy's shoulder, and walk leisurely to the arbour, where the fat boy would leave her to enjoy the fresh air for the space of half an hour; at the expiration of which time he would return and reconduct her to the house.

The old lady was very precise and very particular; and as this ceremony had been observed for three successive summers without the slightest deviation from the accustomed form, she was not a little surprised on this particular morning to see the fat boy, instead of leaving the arbour, walk a few paces out of it, look carefully round him in every direction, and return towards her with great stealth and an air of the most profound mystery.

The old lady was timorous - most old ladies are - and her first impression was that the bloated lad was about to do her some grievous bodily harm with the view of possessing himself of her loose coin. She would have cried for assistance, but age and infirmity had

long ago deprived her of the power of screaming; she, therefore, watched his motions with feelings of intense horror which were in no degree diminished by his coming close up to her, and shouting in her ear in an agitated, and as it seemed to her, a threatening tone -

'Missus!'

Now it so happened that Mr Jingle was walking in the garden close to the arbour at that moment. He too heard the shouts of 'Missus,' and stopped to hear more. There were three reasons for his doing so. In the first place, he was idle and curious; secondly, he was by no means scrupulous; thirdly, and lastly, he was concealed from view by some flowering shrubs. So there he stood, and there he listened.

'Missus!' shouted the fat boy.

'Well, Joe,' said the trembling old lady. 'I'm sure I have been a good mistress to you, Joe. You have invariably been treated very kindly. You have never had too much to do; and you have always had enough to eat.'

This last was an appeal to the fat boy's most sensitive feelings. He seemed touched, as he replied emphatically - 'I knows I has.'

'Then what can you want to do now?' said the old lady, gaining courage.

'I wants to make your flesh creep,' replied the boy.

This sounded like a very bloodthirsty mode of showing one's gratitude; and as the old lady did not precisely understand the process by which such a result was to be attained, all her former horrors returned.

'What do you think I see in this very arbour last night?' inquired the boy.

'Bless us! What?' exclaimed the old lady, alarmed at the solemn manner of the corpulent youth.

'The strange gentleman - him as had his arm hurt - a-kissin' and huggin' - '

'Who, Joe? None of the servants, I hope.' 'Worser than that,' roared the fat boy, in the old lady's ear.

'Not one of my grandda'aters?'

'Worser than that.'

'Worse than that, Joe!' said the old lady, who had thought this the extreme limit of human atrocity. 'Who was it, Joe? I insist upon knowing.'

The fat boy looked cautiously round, and having concluded his survey, shouted in the old lady's ear -

'Miss Rachael.'

'What!' said the old lady, in a shrill tone. 'Speak louder.'

'Miss Rachael,' roared the fat boy.

'My da'ater!'

The train of nods which the fat boy gave by way of assent, communicated a blanc-mange like motion to his fat cheeks.

'And she suffered him!' exclaimed the old lady. A grin stole over the fat boy's features as he said -

'I see her a-kissin' of him agin.'

If Mr Jingle, from his place of concealment, could have beheld the expression which the old lady's face assumed at this communication, the probability is that a sudden burst of laughter would have betrayed his close vicinity to the summer-house. He listened attentively. Fragments of angry sentences such as, 'Without my permission!' - 'At her time of life' - 'Miserable old 'ooman like me' - 'Might have waited till I was dead,' and so forth, reached his ears; and then he heard the heels of the fat boy's boots crunching the gravel, as he retired and left the old lady alone.

It was a remarkable coincidence perhaps, but it was nevertheless a fact, that Mr Jingle within five minutes of his arrival at Manor Farm on the preceding night, had inwardly resolved to lay siege to the heart of the spinster aunt, without delay. He had observation enough to see, that his off-hand manner was by no means disagreeable to the fair object of his attack; and he had more than a strong suspicion that she possessed that most desirable of all requisites, a small independence. The imperative necessity of ousting his rival by some means or other, flashed quickly upon him, and he immediately resolved to adopt certain proceedings tending to that end and object, without a moment's delay. Fielding tells us that man is fire, and woman tow, and the Prince of Darkness sets a light to 'em. Mr Jingle knew that young men, to spinster aunts, are as lighted gas to gunpowder, and he determined to essay the effect of an explosion without loss of time.

Full of reflections upon this important decision, he crept from his place of concealment, and, under cover of the shrubs before mentioned, approached the house. Fortune seemed determined to favour his design. Mr Tupman and the rest of the gentlemen left the garden by the side gate just as he obtained a view of it; and the young ladies, he knew, had walked out alone, soon after breakfast. The coast was clear.

The breakfast-parlour door was partially open. He peeped in. The spinster aunt was knitting. He coughed; she looked up and smiled. Hesitation formed no part of Mr Alfred Jingle's character. He laid his finger on his lips mysteriously, walked in, and closed the door.

'Miss Wardle,' said Mr Jingle, with affected earnestness, 'forgive intrusion - short acquaintance - no time for ceremony - all discovered.'

'Sir!' said the spinster aunt, rather astonished by the unexpected apparition and somewhat doubtful of Mr Jingle's sanity.

'Hush!' said Mr Jingle, in a stage-whisper - 'Large boy - dumpling face - round eyes - rascal!' Here he shook his head expressively, and the spinster aunt trembled with agitation.

'I presume you allude to Joseph, Sir?' said the lady, making an effort to appear composed.

'Yes, ma'am - damn that Joe! - treacherous dog, Joe - told the old lady - old lady furious - wild - raving - arbour - Tupman - kissing and hugging - all that sort of thing - eh, ma'am - eh?'

'Mr Jingle,' said the spinster aunt, 'if you come here, Sir, to insult me -'

'Not at all - by no means,' replied the unabashed Mr Jingle - 'overheard the tale - came to warn you of your danger - tender my services - prevent the hubbub. Never mind - think it an insult - leave the room' - and he turned, as if to carry the threat into execution.

'What SHALL I do!' said the poor spinster, bursting into tears. 'My brother will be furious.'

'Of course he will,' said Mr Jingle pausing - 'outrageous.' 'Oh, Mr Jingle, what CAN I say!' exclaimed the spinster aunt, in another flood of despair.

'Say he dreamt it,' replied Mr Jingle coolly.

A ray of comfort darted across the mind of the spinster aunt at this suggestion. Mr Jingle perceived it, and followed up his advantage.

'Pooh, pooh! - nothing more easy - blackguard boy - lovely woman - fat boy horsewhipped - you believed - end of the matter - all comfortable.'

Whether the probability of escaping from the consequences of this ill-timed discovery was delightful to the spinster's feelings, or whether the hearing herself described as a 'lovely woman' softened the asperity of her grief, we know not. She blushed slightly, and cast a grateful look on Mr Jingle.

That insinuating gentleman sighed deeply, fixed his eyes on the spinster aunt's face for a couple of minutes, started melodramatically, and suddenly withdrew them.

'You seem unhappy, Mr Jingle,' said the lady, in a plaintive voice. 'May I show my gratitude for your kind interference, by inquiring into the cause, with a view, if possible, to its removal?'

'Ha!' exclaimed Mr Jingle, with another start - 'removal! remove my unhappiness, and your love bestowed upon a man who is insensible to the blessing - who even now contemplates a design upon the affections of the niece of the creature who - but no; he is my friend; I will not expose his vices. Miss Wardle - farewell!' At the conclusion of this address, the most consecutive he was ever known to utter, Mr Jingle applied to his eyes the remnant of a handkerchief before noticed, and turned towards the door.

'Stay, Mr Jingle!' said the spinster aunt emphatically. 'You have made an allusion to Mr Tupman - explain it.'

'Never!' exclaimed Jingle, with a professional (i.e., theatrical) air. 'Never!' and, by way of showing that he had no desire to be questioned further, he drew a chair close to that of the spinster aunt and sat down.

'Mr Jingle,' said the aunt, 'I entreat - I implore you, if there is any dreadful mystery connected with Mr Tupman, reveal it.'

'Can I,' said Mr Jingle, fixing his eyes on the aunt's face - 'can I see - lovely creature - sacrificed at the shrine - heartless avarice!' He appeared to be struggling with various conflicting emotions for a few seconds, and then said in a low voice -

'Tupman only wants your money.'

'The wretch!' exclaimed the spinster, with energetic indignation. (Mr Jingle's doubts were resolved. She HAD money.)

'More than that,' said Jingle - 'loves another.'

'Another!' ejaculated the spinster. 'Who?' 'Short girl - black eyes - niece Emily.'

There was a pause.

Now, if there was one individual in the whole world, of whom the spinster aunt entertained a mortal and deep-rooted jealousy, it was this identical niece. The colour rushed over her face and neck, and she tossed her head in silence with an air of ineffable contempt. At last, biting her thin lips, and bridling up, she said -

'It can't be. I won't believe it.'

'Watch 'em,' said Jingle.

'I will,' said the aunt.

'Watch his looks.'

'I will.'

'His whispers.'

'I will.'

'He'll sit next her at table.'

'Let him.'

'He'll flatter her.'

'Let him.'

'He'll pay her every possible attention.'

'Let him.'

'And he'll cut you.'

'Cut ME!' screamed the spinster aunt. 'HE cut ME; will he!' and she trembled with rage and disappointment.

'You will convince yourself?' said Jingle.

'I will.'

'You'll show your spirit?'

'I will.' 'You'll not have him afterwards?'

'Never.'

'You'll take somebody else?' 'Yes.'

'You shall.'

Mr Jingle fell on his knees, remained thereupon for five minutes thereafter; and rose the accepted lover of the spinster aunt - conditionally upon Mr Tupman's perjury being made clear and manifest.

The burden of proof lay with Mr Alfred Jingle; and he produced his evidence that very day at dinner. The spinster aunt could hardly believe her eyes. Mr Tracy Tupman was established at Emily's side, ogling, whispering, and smiling, in opposition to Mr Snodgrass. Not a word, not a look, not a glance, did he bestow upon his heart's pride of the evening before.

'Damn that boy!' thought old Mr Wardle to himself. - He had heard the story from his mother. 'Damn that boy! He must have been asleep. It's all imagination.'

'Traitor!' thought the spinster aunt. 'Dear Mr Jingle was not deceiving me. Ugh! how I hate the wretch!'

The following conversation may serve to explain to our readers this apparently unaccountable alteration of deportment on the part of Mr Tracy Tupman.

The time was evening; the scene the garden. There were two figures walking in a side path; one was rather short and stout; the other tall and slim. They were Mr Tupman and Mr Jingle. The stout figure commenced the dialogue.

'How did I do it?' he inquired.

'Splendid - capital - couldn't act better myself - you must repeat the part to-morrow - every evening till further notice.'

'Does Rachael still wish it?'

'Of course - she don't like it - but must be done - avert suspicion - afraid of her brother - says there's no help for it - only a few days more - when old folks blinded - crown your happiness.'

'Any message?'

'Love - best love - kindest regards - unalterable affection. Can I say anything for you?'

'My dear fellow,' replied the unsuspecting Mr Tupman, fervently grasping his 'friend's' hand - 'carry my best love - say how hard I find it to dissemble - say anything that's kind: but add how sensible I am of the necessity of the suggestion she made to me, through you, this morning. Say I applaud her wisdom and admire her discretion.' 'I will. Anything more?'

'Nothing, only add how ardently I long for the time when I may call her mine, and all dissimulation may be unnecessary.'

'Certainly, certainly. Anything more?'

'Oh, my friend!' said poor Mr Tupman, again grasping the hand of his companion, 'receive my warmest thanks for your disinterested kindness; and forgive me if I have ever, even in thought, done you the injustice of supposing that you could stand in my way. My dear friend, can I ever repay you?'

'Don't talk of it,' replied Mr Jingle. He stopped short, as if suddenly recollecting something, and said - 'By the bye - can't spare ten pounds, can you? - very particular purpose - pay you in three days.'

'I dare say I can,' replied Mr Tupman, in the fulness of his heart. 'Three days, you say?'

'Only three days - all over then - no more difficulties.' Mr Tupman counted the money into his companion's hand, and he dropped it piece by piece into his pocket, as they walked towards the house.

'Be careful,' said Mr Jingle - 'not a look.'

'Not a wink,' said Mr Tupman.

'Not a syllable.'

'Not a whisper.'

'All your attentions to the niece - rather rude, than otherwise, to the aunt - only way of deceiving the old ones.'

'I'll take care,' said Mr Tupman aloud.

'And I'LL take care,' said Mr Jingle internally; and they entered the house.

The scene of that afternoon was repeated that evening, and on the three afternoons and evenings next ensuing. On the fourth, the host was in high spirits, for he had satisfied himself that there was no ground for the charge against Mr Tupman. So was Mr Tupman, for Mr Jingle had told him that his affair would soon be brought to a crisis. So was Mr Pickwick, for he was seldom otherwise. So was not Mr Snodgrass, for he had grown jealous of Mr Tupman. So was the old lady, for she had been winning at whist. So were Mr Jingle and Miss Wardle, for reasons of sufficient importance in this eventful history to be narrated in another chapter.