

Chapter IX

A Discovery And A Chase

The supper was ready laid, the chairs were drawn round the table, bottles, jugs, and glasses were arranged upon the sideboard, and everything betokened the approach of the most convivial period in the whole four-and-twenty hours.

'Where's Rachael?' said Mr Wardle.

'Ay, and Jingle?' added Mr Pickwick.

'Dear me,' said the host, 'I wonder I haven't missed him before. Why, I don't think I've heard his voice for two hours at least. Emily, my dear, ring the bell.'

The bell was rung, and the fat boy appeared.

'Where's Miss Rachael?' He couldn't say. 'Where's Mr Jingle, then?' He didn't know. Everybody looked surprised. It was late - past eleven o'clock. Mr Tupman laughed in his sleeve. They were loitering somewhere, talking about him. Ha, ha! capital notion that - funny.

'Never mind,' said Wardle, after a short pause. 'They'll turn up presently, I dare say. I never wait supper for anybody.'

'Excellent rule, that,' said Mr Pickwick - 'admirable.'

'Pray, sit down,' said the host.

'Certainly' said Mr Pickwick; and down they sat.

There was a gigantic round of cold beef on the table, and Mr Pickwick was supplied with a plentiful portion of it. He had raised his fork to his lips, and was on the very point of opening his mouth for the reception of a piece of beef, when the hum of many voices suddenly arose in the kitchen. He paused, and laid down his fork. Mr Wardle paused too, and insensibly released his hold of the carving-knife, which remained inserted in the beef. He looked at Mr Pickwick. Mr Pickwick looked at him.

Heavy footsteps were heard in the passage; the parlour door was suddenly burst open; and the man who had cleaned Mr Pickwick's boots on his first arrival, rushed into the room, followed by the fat boy and all the domestics. 'What the devil's the meaning of this?' exclaimed the host.

'The kitchen chimney ain't a-fire, is it, Emma?' inquired the old lady. 'Lor, grandma! No,' screamed both the young ladies.

'What's the matter?' roared the master of the house.

The man gasped for breath, and faintly ejaculated -

'They ha' gone, mas'r! - gone right clean off, Sir!' (At this juncture Mr Tupman was observed to lay down his knife and fork, and to turn very pale.)

'Who's gone?' said Mr Wardle fiercely.

'Mus'r Jingle and Miss Rachael, in a po'-chay, from Blue Lion, Muggleton. I was there; but I couldn't stop 'em; so I run off to tell 'ee.'

'I paid his expenses!' said Mr Tupman, jumping up frantically. 'He's got ten pounds of mine! - stop him! - he's swindled me! - I won't bear it! - I'll have justice, Pickwick! - I won't stand it!' and with sundry incoherent exclamations of the like nature, the unhappy gentleman spun round and round the apartment, in a transport of frenzy.

'Lord preserve us!' ejaculated Mr Pickwick, eyeing the extraordinary gestures of his friend with terrified surprise. 'He's gone mad! What shall we do?' 'Do!' said the stout old host, who regarded only the last words of the sentence. 'Put the horse in the gig! I'll get a chaise at the Lion, and follow 'em instantly. Where?' - he exclaimed, as the man ran out to execute the commission - 'where's that villain, Joe?'

'Here I am! but I hain't a willin,' replied a voice. It was the fat boy's.

'Let me get at him, Pickwick,' cried Wardle, as he rushed at the ill-starred youth. 'He was bribed by that scoundrel, Jingle, to put me on a wrong scent, by telling a cock-and-bull story of my sister and your friend Tupman!' (Here Mr Tupman sank into a chair.) 'Let me get at him!'

'Don't let him!' screamed all the women, above whose exclamations the blubbering of the fat boy was distinctly audible.

'I won't be held!' cried the old man. 'Mr Winkle, take your hands off. Mr Pickwick, let me go, sir!'

It was a beautiful sight, in that moment of turmoil and confusion, to behold the placid and philosophical expression of Mr Pickwick's face, albeit somewhat flushed with exertion, as he stood with his arms firmly clasped round the extensive waist of their corpulent host, thus restraining the impetuosity of his passion, while the fat boy was

scratched, and pulled, and pushed from the room by all the females congregated therein. He had no sooner released his hold, than the man entered to announce that the gig was ready.

'Don't let him go alone!' screamed the females. 'He'll kill somebody!'

'I'll go with him,' said Mr Pickwick.

'You're a good fellow, Pickwick,' said the host, grasping his hand. 'Emma, give Mr Pickwick a shawl to tie round his neck - make haste. Look after your grandmother, girls; she has fainted away. Now then, are you ready?'

Mr Pickwick's mouth and chin having been hastily enveloped in a large shawl, his hat having been put on his head, and his greatcoat thrown over his arm, he replied in the affirmative.

They jumped into the gig. 'Give her her head, Tom,' cried the host; and away they went, down the narrow lanes; jolting in and out of the cart-ruts, and bumping up against the hedges on either side, as if they would go to pieces every moment.

'How much are they ahead?' shouted Wardle, as they drove up to the door of the Blue Lion, round which a little crowd had collected, late as it was.

'Not above three-quarters of an hour,' was everybody's reply. 'Chaise-and-four directly! - out with 'em! Put up the gig afterwards.'

'Now, boys!' cried the landlord - 'chaise-and-four out - make haste - look alive there!'

Away ran the hostlers and the boys. The lanterns glimmered, as the men ran to and fro; the horses' hoofs clattered on the uneven paving of the yard; the chaise rumbled as it was drawn out of the coach-house; and all was noise and bustle.

'Now then! - is that chaise coming out to-night?' cried Wardle.

'Coming down the yard now, Sir,' replied the hostler.

Out came the chaise - in went the horses - on sprang the boys - in got the travellers.

'Mind - the seven-mile stage in less than half an hour!' shouted Wardle.

'Off with you!'

The boys applied whip and spur, the waiters shouted, the hostlers cheered, and away they went, fast and furiously.

'Pretty situation,' thought Mr Pickwick, when he had had a moment's time for reflection. 'Pretty situation for the general chairman of the Pickwick Club. Damp chaise - strange horses - fifteen miles an hour - and twelve o'clock at night!'

For the first three or four miles, not a word was spoken by either of the gentlemen, each being too much immersed in his own reflections to address any observations to his companion. When they had gone over that much ground, however, and the horses getting thoroughly warmed began to do their work in really good style, Mr Pickwick became too much exhilarated with the rapidity of the motion, to remain any longer perfectly mute.

'We're sure to catch them, I think,' said he.

'Hope so,' replied his companion.

'Fine night,' said Mr Pickwick, looking up at the moon, which was shining brightly.

'So much the worse,' returned Wardle; 'for they'll have had all the advantage of the moonlight to get the start of us, and we shall lose it. It will have gone down in another hour.'

'It will be rather unpleasant going at this rate in the dark, won't it?' inquired Mr Pickwick.

'I dare say it will,' replied his friend dryly.

Mr Pickwick's temporary excitement began to sober down a little, as he reflected upon the inconveniences and dangers of the expedition in which he had so thoughtlessly embarked. He was roused by a loud shouting of the post-boy on the leader. 'Yo-yo-yo-yo-yoe!' went the first boy.

'Yo-yo-yo-yoe!' went the second.

'Yo-yo-yo-yoe!' chimed in old Wardle himself, most lustily, with his head and half his body out of the coach window.

'Yo-yo-yo-yoe!' shouted Mr Pickwick, taking up the burden of the cry, though he had not the slightest notion of its meaning or object. And amidst the yo-yoing of the whole four, the chaise stopped.

'What's the matter?' inquired Mr Pickwick.

'There's a gate here,' replied old Wardle. 'We shall hear something of the fugitives.'

After a lapse of five minutes, consumed in incessant knocking and shouting, an old man in his shirt and trousers emerged from the turnpike-house, and opened the gate.

'How long is it since a post-chaise went through here?' inquired Mr Wardle.

'How long?'

'ah!'

'Why, I don't rightly know. It worn't a long time ago, nor it worn't a short time ago - just between the two, perhaps.'

'Has any chaise been by at all?'

'Oh, yes, there's been a Shay by.'

'How long ago, my friend,' interposed Mr Pickwick; 'an hour?'

'Ah, I dare say it might be,' replied the man.

'Or two hours?' inquired the post - boy on the wheeler.

'Well, I shouldn't wonder if it was,' returned the old man doubtfully.

'Drive on, boys,' cried the testy old gentleman; 'don't waste any more time with that old idiot!'

'Idiot!' exclaimed the old man with a grin, as he stood in the middle of the road with the gate half-closed, watching the chaise which rapidly diminished in the increasing distance. 'No - not much o' that either; you've lost ten minutes here, and gone away as wise as you came, arter all. If every man on the line as has a guinea give him, earns it half as well, you won't catch t'other shay this side Mich'lmas, old short-and-fat.' And with another prolonged grin, the old man closed the gate, re-entered his house, and bolted the door after him.

Meanwhile the chaise proceeded, without any slackening of pace, towards the conclusion of the stage. The moon, as Wardle had foretold, was rapidly on the wane; large tiers of dark, heavy clouds, which had been gradually overspreading the sky for some time past, now formed one black mass overhead; and large drops of rain which pattered every now and then against the windows of the chaise, seemed to warn the travellers of the rapid approach of a stormy night.

The wind, too, which was directly against them, swept in furious gusts down the narrow road, and howled dismally through the trees which skirted the pathway. Mr Pickwick drew his coat closer about him, coiled himself more snugly up into the corner of the chaise, and fell into a sound sleep, from which he was only awakened by the stopping of the vehicle, the sound of the hostler's bell, and a loud cry of 'Horses on directly!'

But here another delay occurred. The boys were sleeping with such mysterious soundness, that it took five minutes a-piece to wake them. The hostler had somehow or other mislaid the key of the stable, and even when that was found, two sleepy helpers put the wrong harness on the wrong horses, and the whole process of harnessing had to be gone through afresh. Had Mr Pickwick been alone, these multiplied obstacles would have completely put an end to the pursuit at once, but old Wardle was not to be so easily daunted; and he laid about him with such hearty good-will, cuffing this man, and pushing that; strapping a buckle here, and taking in a link there, that the chaise was ready in a much shorter time than could reasonably have been expected, under so many difficulties.

They resumed their journey; and certainly the prospect before them was by no means encouraging. The stage was fifteen miles long, the night was dark, the wind high, and the rain pouring in torrents. It was impossible to make any great way against such obstacles united; it was hard upon one o'clock already; and nearly two hours were consumed in getting to the end of the stage. Here, however, an object presented itself, which rekindled their hopes, and reanimated their drooping spirits.

'When did this chaise come in?' cried old Wardle, leaping out of his own vehicle, and pointing to one covered with wet mud, which was standing in the yard.

'Not a quarter of an hour ago, sir,' replied the hostler, to whom the question was addressed. 'Lady and gentleman?' inquired Wardle, almost breathless with impatience.

'Yes, sir.'

'Tall gentleman - dress-coat - long legs - thin body?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Elderly lady - thin face - rather skinny - eh?'

'Yes, sir.'

'By heavens, it's the couple, Pickwick,' exclaimed the old gentleman.

'Would have been here before,' said the hostler, 'but they broke a trace.'

"Tis them!" said Wardle, 'it is, by Jove! Chaise-and-four instantly! We shall catch them yet before they reach the next stage. A guinea a-piece, boys-be alive there - bustle about - there's good fellows.'

And with such admonitions as these, the old gentleman ran up and down the yard, and bustled to and fro, in a state of excitement which communicated itself to Mr Pickwick also; and under the influence of which, that gentleman got himself into complicated entanglements with harness, and mixed up with horses and wheels of chaises, in the most surprising manner, firmly believing that by so doing he was materially forwarding the preparations for their resuming their journey.

'Jump in - jump in!' cried old Wardle, climbing into the chaise, pulling up the steps, and slamming the door after him. 'Come along! Make haste!' And before Mr Pickwick knew precisely what he was about, he felt himself forced in at the other door, by one pull from the old gentleman and one push from the hostler; and off they were again.

'Ah! we are moving now,' said the old gentleman exultingly. They were indeed, as was sufficiently testified to Mr Pickwick, by his constant collision either with the hard wood-work of the chaise, or the body of his companion.

'Hold up!' said the stout old Mr Wardle, as Mr Pickwick dived head foremost into his capacious waistcoat.

'I never did feel such a jolting in my life,' said Mr Pickwick.

'Never mind,' replied his companion, 'it will soon be over. Steady, steady.'

Mr Pickwick planted himself into his own corner, as firmly as he could; and on whirled the chaise faster than ever.

They had travelled in this way about three miles, when Mr Wardle, who had been looking out of the Window for two or three minutes, suddenly drew in his face, covered with splashes, and exclaimed in breathless eagerness -

'Here they are!'

Mr Pickwick thrust his head out of his window. Yes: there was a chaise-and-four, a short distance before them, dashing along at full gallop.

'Go on, go on,' almost shrieked the old gentleman. 'Two guineas a-piece, boys - don't let 'em gain on us - keep it up - keep it up.'

The horses in the first chaise started on at their utmost speed; and those in Mr Wardle's galloped furiously behind them.

'I see his head,' exclaimed the choleric old man; 'damme, I see his head.'

'So do I' said Mr Pickwick; 'that's he.' Mr Pickwick was not mistaken. The countenance of Mr Jingle, completely coated with mud thrown up by the wheels, was plainly discernible at the window of his chaise; and the motion of his arm, which was waving violently towards the postillions, denoted that he was encouraging them to increased exertion.

The interest was intense. Fields, trees, and hedges, seemed to rush past them with the velocity of a whirlwind, so rapid was the pace at which they tore along. They were close by the side of the first chaise. Jingle's voice could be plainly heard, even above the din of the wheels, urging on the boys. Old Mr Wardle foamed with rage and excitement. He roared out scoundrels and villains by the dozen, clenched his fist and shook it expressively at the object of his indignation; but Mr Jingle only answered with a contemptuous smile, and replied to his menaces by a shout of triumph, as his horses, answering the increased application of whip and spur, broke into a faster gallop, and left the pursuers behind.

Mr Pickwick had just drawn in his head, and Mr Wardle, exhausted with shouting, had done the same, when a tremendous jolt threw them forward against the front of the vehicle. There was a sudden bump - a loud crash - away rolled a wheel, and over went the chaise.

After a very few seconds of bewilderment and confusion, in which nothing but the plunging of horses, and breaking of glass could be made out, Mr Pickwick felt himself violently pulled out from among the ruins of the chaise; and as soon as he had gained his feet, extricated his head from the skirts of his greatcoat, which materially impeded the usefulness of his spectacles, the full disaster of the case met his view.

Old Mr Wardle without a hat, and his clothes torn in several places, stood by his side, and the fragments of the chaise lay scattered at their feet. The post-boys, who had succeeded in cutting the traces,

were standing, disfigured with mud and disordered by hard riding, by the horses' heads. About a hundred yards in advance was the other chaise, which had pulled up on hearing the crash. The postillions, each with a broad grin convulsing his countenance, were viewing the adverse party from their saddles, and Mr Jingle was contemplating the wreck from the coach window, with evident satisfaction. The day was just breaking, and the whole scene was rendered perfectly visible by the grey light of the morning.

'Hollo!' shouted the shameless Jingle, 'anybody damaged? - elderly gentlemen - no light weights - dangerous work - very.'

'You're a rascal,' roared Wardle.

'Ha! ha!' replied Jingle; and then he added, with a knowing wink, and a jerk of the thumb towards the interior of the chaise - 'I say - she's very well - desires her compliments - begs you won't trouble yourself - love to TUPPY - won't you get up behind? - drive on, boys.'

The postillions resumed their proper attitudes, and away rattled the chaise, Mr Jingle fluttering in derision a white handkerchief from the coach window.

Nothing in the whole adventure, not even the upset, had disturbed the calm and equable current of Mr Pickwick's temper. The villainy, however, which could first borrow money of his faithful follower, and then abbreviate his name to 'Tuppy,' was more than he could patiently bear. He drew his breath hard, and coloured up to the very tips of his spectacles, as he said, slowly and emphatically -

'If ever I meet that man again, I'll - '

'Yes, yes,' interrupted Wardle, 'that's all very well; but while we stand talking here, they'll get their licence, and be married in London.'

Mr Pickwick paused, bottled up his vengeance, and corked it down. 'How far is it to the next stage?' inquired Mr Wardle, of one of the boys.

'Six mile, ain't it, Tom?'

'Rayther better.'

'Rayther better nor six mile, Sir.'

'Can't be helped,' said Wardle, 'we must walk it, Pickwick.'

'No help for it,' replied that truly great man.

So sending forward one of the boys on horseback, to procure a fresh chaise and horses, and leaving the other behind to take care of the broken one, Mr Pickwick and Mr Wardle set manfully forward on the walk, first tying their shawls round their necks, and slouching down their hats to escape as much as possible from the deluge of rain, which after a slight cessation had again begun to pour heavily down.