

## Chapter XX

### **Showing How Dodson And Fogg Were Men Of Business, And Their Clerks Men Of Pleasure; And How An Affecting Interview Took Place Between Mr Weller And His Long-Lost Parent; Showing Also What Choice Spirits Assembled At The Magpie And Stump, And What A Capital Chapter The Next One Will Be**

In the ground-floor front of a dingy house, at the very farthest end of Freeman's Court, Cornhill, sat the four clerks of Messrs. Dodson & Fogg, two of his Majesty's attorneys of the courts of King's Bench and Common Pleas at Westminster, and solicitors of the High Court of Chancery - the aforesaid clerks catching as favourable glimpses of heaven's light and heaven's sun, in the course of their daily labours, as a man might hope to do, were he placed at the bottom of a reasonably deep well; and without the opportunity of perceiving the stars in the day-time, which the latter secluded situation affords.

The clerks' office of Messrs. Dodson & Fogg was a dark, mouldy, earthy-smelling room, with a high wainscotted partition to screen the clerks from the vulgar gaze, a couple of old wooden chairs, a very loud-ticking clock, an almanac, an umbrella-stand, a row of hat-pegs, and a few shelves, on which were deposited several ticketed bundles of dirty papers, some old deal boxes with paper labels, and sundry decayed stone ink bottles of various shapes and sizes. There was a glass door leading into the passage which formed the entrance to the court, and on the outer side of this glass door, Mr Pickwick, closely followed by Sam Weller, presented himself on the Friday morning succeeding the occurrence of which a faithful narration is given in the last chapter.

'Come in, can't you!' cried a voice from behind the partition, in reply to Mr Pickwick's gentle tap at the door. And Mr Pickwick and Sam entered accordingly.

'Mr Dodson or Mr Fogg at home, sir?' inquired Mr Pickwick, gently, advancing, hat in hand, towards the partition.

'Mr Dodson ain't at home, and Mr Fogg's particularly engaged,' replied the voice; and at the same time the head to which the voice belonged, with a pen behind its ear, looked over the partition, and at Mr Pickwick.

it was a ragged head, the sandy hair of which, scrupulously parted on one side, and flattened down with pomatum, was twisted into little semi-circular tails round a flat face ornamented with a pair of small eyes, and garnished with a very dirty shirt collar, and a rusty black stock.

'Mr Dodson ain't at home, and Mr Fogg's particularly engaged,' said the man to whom the head belonged.

'When will Mr Dodson be back, sir?' inquired Mr Pickwick. 'Can't say.'

'Will it be long before Mr Fogg is disengaged, Sir?'

'Don't know.'

Here the man proceeded to mend his pen with great deliberation, while another clerk, who was mixing a Seidlitz powder, under cover of the lid of his desk, laughed approvingly.

'I think I'll wait,' said Mr Pickwick. There was no reply; so Mr Pickwick sat down unbidden, and listened to the loud ticking of the clock and the murmured conversation of the clerks.

'That was a game, wasn't it?' said one of the gentlemen, in a brown coat and brass buttons, inky drabs, and bluchers, at the conclusion of some inaudible relation of his previous evening's adventures.

'Devilish good - devilish good,' said the Seidlitz-powder man. 'Tom Cummins was in the chair,' said the man with the brown coat. 'It was half-past four when I got to Somers Town, and then I was so uncommon lushy, that I couldn't find the place where the latch-key went in, and was obliged to knock up the old 'ooman. I say, I wonder what old Fogg 'ud say, if he knew it. I should get the sack, I s'pose - eh?'

At this humorous notion, all the clerks laughed in concert.

'There was such a game with Fogg here, this mornin',' said the man in the brown coat, 'while Jack was upstairs sorting the papers, and you two were gone to the stamp-office. Fogg was down here, opening the letters when that chap as we issued the writ against at Camberwell, you know, came in - what's his name again?'

'Ramsey,' said the clerk who had spoken to Mr Pickwick.

'Ah, Ramsey - a precious seedy-looking customer. 'Well, sir,' says old Fogg, looking at him very fierce - you know his way - 'well, Sir, have you come to settle?' 'Yes, I have, sir,' said Ramsey, putting his hand in his pocket, and bringing out the money, 'the debt's two pound ten, and the costs three pound five, and here it is, Sir;' and he sighed like bricks, as he lugged out the money, done up in a bit of blotting-paper. Old Fogg looked first at the money, and then at him, and then he coughed in his rum way, so that I knew something was coming. 'You don't know there's a declaration filed, which increases the costs

materially, I suppose,' said Fogg. 'You don't say that, sir,' said Ramsey, starting back; 'the time was only out last night, Sir.' 'I do say it, though,' said Fogg, 'my clerk's just gone to file it. Hasn't Mr Jackson gone to file that declaration in Bullman and Ramsey, Mr Wicks?' Of course I said yes, and then Fogg coughed again, and looked at Ramsey. 'My God!' said Ramsey; 'and here have I nearly driven myself mad, scraping this money together, and all to no purpose.' 'None at all,' said Fogg coolly; 'so you had better go back and scrape some more together, and bring it here in time.' 'I can't get it, by God!' said Ramsey, striking the desk with his fist. 'Don't bully me, sir,' said Fogg, getting into a passion on purpose. 'I am not bullying you, sir,' said Ramsey. 'You are,' said Fogg; 'get out, sir; get out of this office, Sir, and come back, Sir, when you know how to behave yourself.' Well, Ramsey tried to speak, but Fogg wouldn't let him, so he put the money in his pocket, and sneaked out. The door was scarcely shut, when old Fogg turned round to me, with a sweet smile on his face, and drew the declaration out of his coat pocket. 'Here, Wicks,' says Fogg, 'take a cab, and go down to the Temple as quick as you can, and file that. The costs are quite safe, for he's a steady man with a large family, at a salary of five-and-twenty shillings a week, and if he gives us a warrant of attorney, as he must in the end, I know his employers will see it paid; so we may as well get all we can get out of him, Mr Wicks; it's a Christian act to do it, Mr Wicks, for with his large family and small income, he'll be all the better for a good lesson against getting into debt - won't he, Mr Wicks, won't he?' - and he smiled so good-naturedly as he went away, that it was delightful to see him. He is a capital man of business,' said Wicks, in a tone of the deepest admiration, 'capital, isn't he?'

The other three cordially subscribed to this opinion, and the anecdote afforded the most unlimited satisfaction.

'Nice men these here, Sir,' whispered Mr Weller to his master; 'wery nice notion of fun they has, Sir.'

Mr Pickwick nodded assent, and coughed to attract the attention of the young gentlemen behind the partition, who, having now relaxed their minds by a little conversation among themselves, condescended to take some notice of the stranger.

'I wonder whether Fogg's disengaged now?' said Jackson.

'I'll see,' said Wicks, dismounting leisurely from his stool. 'What name shall I tell Mr Fogg?'

'Pickwick,' replied the illustrious subject of these memoirs.

Mr Jackson departed upstairs on his errand, and immediately returned with a message that Mr Fogg would see Mr Pickwick in five minutes; and having delivered it, returned again to his desk.

'What did he say his name was?' whispered Wicks.

'Pickwick,' replied Jackson; 'it's the defendant in Bardell and Pickwick.'

A sudden scraping of feet, mingled with the sound of suppressed laughter, was heard from behind the partition.

'They're a-twiggin' of you, Sir,' whispered Mr Weller.

'Twigging of me, Sam!' replied Mr Pickwick; 'what do you mean by twigging me?'

Mr Weller replied by pointing with his thumb over his shoulder, and Mr Pickwick, on looking up, became sensible of the pleasing fact, that all the four clerks, with countenances expressive of the utmost amusement, and with their heads thrust over the wooden screen, were minutely inspecting the figure and general appearance of the supposed trifler with female hearts, and disturber of female happiness. On his looking up, the row of heads suddenly disappeared, and the sound of pens travelling at a furious rate over paper, immediately succeeded.

A sudden ring at the bell which hung in the office, summoned Mr Jackson to the apartment of Fogg, from whence he came back to say that he (Fogg) was ready to see Mr Pickwick if he would step upstairs. Upstairs Mr Pickwick did step accordingly, leaving Sam Weller below. The room door of the one-pair back, bore inscribed in legible characters the imposing words, 'Mr Fogg'; and, having tapped thereat, and been desired to come in, Jackson ushered Mr Pickwick into the presence.

'Is Mr Dodson in?' inquired Mr Fogg.

'Just come in, Sir,' replied Jackson.

'Ask him to step here.'

'Yes, sir.' Exit Jackson.

'Take a seat, sir,' said Fogg; 'there is the paper, sir; my partner will be here directly, and we can converse about this matter, sir.'

Mr Pickwick took a seat and the paper, but, instead of reading the latter, peeped over the top of it, and took a survey of the man of business, who was an elderly, pimply-faced, vegetable-diet sort of man, in a black coat, dark mixture trousers, and small black gaiters; a kind of being who seemed to be an essential part of the desk at which he was writing, and to have as much thought or feeling.

After a few minutes' silence, Mr Dodson, a plump, portly, stern-looking man, with a loud voice, appeared; and the conversation commenced.

'This is Mr Pickwick,' said Fogg.

'Ah! You are the defendant, Sir, in Bardell and Pickwick?' said Dodson.

'I am, sir,' replied Mr Pickwick.

'Well, sir,' said Dodson, 'and what do you propose?'

'Ah!' said Fogg, thrusting his hands into his trousers' pockets, and throwing himself back in his chair, 'what do you propose, Mr Pickwick?'

'Hush, Fogg,' said Dodson, 'let me hear what Mr Pickwick has to say.'

'I came, gentlemen,' said Mr Pickwick, gazing placidly on the two partners, 'I came here, gentlemen, to express the surprise with which I received your letter of the other day, and to inquire what grounds of action you can have against me.'

'Grounds of - ' Fogg had ejaculated this much, when he was stopped by Dodson.

'Mr Fogg,' said Dodson, 'I am going to speak.' 'I beg your pardon, Mr Dodson,' said Fogg.

'For the grounds of action, sir,' continued Dodson, with moral elevation in his air, 'you will consult your own conscience and your own feelings. We, Sir, we, are guided entirely by the statement of our client. That statement, Sir, may be true, or it may be false; it may be credible, or it may be incredible; but, if it be true, and if it be credible, I do not hesitate to say, Sir, that our grounds of action, Sir, are strong, and not to be shaken. You may be an unfortunate man, Sir, or you may be a designing one; but if I were called upon, as a jurymen upon my oath, Sir, to express an opinion of your conduct, Sir, I do not hesitate to assert that I should have but one opinion about it.' Here Dodson drew himself up, with an air of offended virtue, and looked at

Fogg, who thrust his hands farther in his pockets, and nodding his head sagely, said, in a tone of the fullest concurrence, 'Most certainly.'

'Well, Sir,' said Mr Pickwick, with considerable pain depicted in his countenance, 'you will permit me to assure you that I am a most unfortunate man, so far as this case is concerned.'

'I hope you are, Sir,' replied Dodson; 'I trust you may be, Sir. If you are really innocent of what is laid to your charge, you are more unfortunate than I had believed any man could possibly be. What do you say, Mr Fogg?'

'I say precisely what you say,' replied Fogg, with a smile of incredulity.

'The writ, Sir, which commences the action,' continued Dodson, 'was issued regularly. Mr Fogg, where is the PRAECIPE book?'

'Here it is,' said Fogg, handing over a square book, with a parchment cover.

'Here is the entry,' resumed Dodson. 'Middlesex, Capias MARTHA BARDELL, WIDOW, v. SAMUEL PICKWICK. Damages #1500. Dodson & Fogg for the plaintiff, Aug. 28, 1827.' All regular, Sir; perfectly.' Dodson coughed and looked at Fogg, who said 'Perfectly,' also. And then they both looked at Mr Pickwick.

'I am to understand, then,' said Mr Pickwick, 'that it really is your intention to proceed with this action?'

'Understand, sir! - that you certainly may,' replied Dodson, with something as near a smile as his importance would allow.

'And that the damages are actually laid at fifteen hundred pounds?' said Mr Pickwick.

'To which understanding you may add my assurance, that if we could have prevailed upon our client, they would have been laid at treble the amount, sir,' replied Dodson. 'I believe Mrs. Bardell specially said, however,' observed Fogg, glancing at Dodson, 'that she would not compromise for a farthing less.'

'Unquestionably,' replied Dodson sternly. 'For the action was only just begun; and it wouldn't have done to let Mr Pickwick compromise it then, even if he had been so disposed.'

'As you offer no terms, sir,' said Dodson, displaying a slip of parchment in his right hand, and affectionately pressing a paper copy

of it, on Mr Pickwick with his left, 'I had better serve you with a copy of this writ, sir. Here is the original, sir.'

'Very well, gentlemen, very well,' said Mr Pickwick, rising in person and wrath at the same time; 'you shall hear from my solicitor, gentlemen.'

'We shall be very happy to do so,' said Fogg, rubbing his hands.

'Very,' said Dodson, opening the door.

'And before I go, gentlemen,' said the excited Mr Pickwick, turning round on the landing, 'permit me to say, that of all the disgraceful and rascally proceedings - '

'Stay, sir, stay,' interposed Dodson, with great politeness. 'Mr Jackson! Mr Wicks!'

'Sir,' said the two clerks, appearing at the bottom of the stairs.

'I merely want you to hear what this gentleman says,' replied Dodson. 'Pray, go on, sir - disgraceful and rascally proceedings, I think you said?'

'I did,' said Mr Pickwick, thoroughly roused. 'I said, Sir, that of all the disgraceful and rascally proceedings that ever were attempted, this is the most so. I repeat it, sir.'

'You hear that, Mr Wicks,' said Dodson.

'You won't forget these expressions, Mr Jackson?' said Fogg.

'Perhaps you would like to call us swindlers, sir,' said Dodson. 'Pray do, Sir, if you feel disposed; now pray do, Sir.'

'I do,' said Mr Pickwick. 'You ARE swindlers.'

'Very good,' said Dodson. 'You can hear down there, I hope, Mr Wicks?'

'Oh, yes, Sir,' said Wicks.

'You had better come up a step or two higher, if you can't,' added Mr Fogg. 'Go on, Sir; do go on. You had better call us thieves, Sir; or perhaps You would like to assault one Of US. Pray do it, Sir, if you would; we will not make the smallest resistance. Pray do it, Sir.'

As Fogg put himself very temptingly within the reach of Mr Pickwick's clenched fist, there is little doubt that that gentleman would have complied with his earnest entreaty, but for the interposition of Sam, who, hearing the dispute, emerged from the office, mounted the stairs, and seized his master by the arm.

'You just come away,' said Mr Weller. 'Battledore and shuttlecock's a very good game, when you ain't the shuttlecock and two lawyers the battledores, in which case it gets too excitin' to be pleasant. Come away, Sir. If you want to ease your mind by blowing up somebody, come out into the court and blow up me; but it's rayther too expensive work to be carried on here.'

And without the slightest ceremony, Mr Weller hauled his master down the stairs, and down the court, and having safely deposited him in Cornhill, fell behind, prepared to follow whithersoever he should lead.

Mr Pickwick walked on abstractedly, crossed opposite the Mansion House, and bent his steps up Cheapside. Sam began to wonder where they were going, when his master turned round, and said -

'Sam, I will go immediately to Mr Perker's.'

'That's just exactly the wery place vere you ought to have gone last night, Sir,' replied Mr Weller.

'I think it is, Sam,' said Mr Pickwick. 'I KNOW it is,' said Mr Weller.

'Well, well, Sam,' replied Mr Pickwick, 'we will go there at once; but first, as I have been rather ruffled, I should like a glass of brandy-and-water warm, Sam. Where can I have it, Sam?'

Mr Weller's knowledge of London was extensive and peculiar. He replied, without the slightest consideration -

'Second court on the right hand side - last house but vun on the same side the vay - take the box as stands in the first fireplace, 'cos there ain't no leg in the middle o' the table, which all the others has, and it's wery inconvenient.'

Mr Pickwick observed his valet's directions implicitly, and bidding Sam follow him, entered the tavern he had pointed out, where the hot brandy-and-water was speedily placed before him; while Mr Weller, seated at a respectful distance, though at the same table with his master, was accommodated with a pint of porter.

The room was one of a very homely description, and was apparently under the especial patronage of stage-coachmen; for several gentleman, who had all the appearance of belonging to that learned profession, were drinking and smoking in the different boxes. Among the number was one stout, red-faced, elderly man, in particular, seated in an opposite box, who attracted Mr Pickwick's attention. The stout man was smoking with great vehemence, but between every half-dozen puffs, he took his pipe from his mouth, and looked first at Mr Weller and then at Mr Pickwick. Then, he would bury in a quart pot, as much of his countenance as the dimensions of the quart pot admitted of its receiving, and take another look at Sam and Mr Pickwick. Then he would take another half-dozen puffs with an air of profound meditation and look at them again. At last the stout man, putting up his legs on the seat, and leaning his back against the wall, began to puff at his pipe without leaving off at all, and to stare through the smoke at the new-comers, as if he had made up his mind to see the most he could of them.

At first the evolutions of the stout man had escaped Mr Weller's observation, but by degrees, as he saw Mr Pickwick's eyes every now and then turning towards him, he began to gaze in the same direction, at the same time shading his eyes with his hand, as if he partially recognised the object before him, and wished to make quite sure of its identity. His doubts were speedily dispelled, however; for the stout man having blown a thick cloud from his pipe, a hoarse voice, like some strange effort of ventriloquism, emerged from beneath the capacious shawls which muffled his throat and chest, and slowly uttered these sounds - 'Wy, Sammy!'

'Who's that, Sam?' inquired Mr Pickwick.

'Why, I wouldn't ha' believed it, Sir,' replied Mr Weller, with astonished eyes. 'It's the old 'un.'

'Old one,' said Mr Pickwick. 'What old one?'

'My father, sir,' replied Mr Weller. 'How are you, my ancient?' And with this beautiful ebullition of filial affection, Mr Weller made room on the seat beside him, for the stout man, who advanced pipe in mouth and pot in hand, to greet him.

'Wy, Sammy,' said the father, 'I ha'n't seen you, for two year and better.'

'Nor more you have, old codger,' replied the son. 'How's mother-in-law?'

'Wy, I'll tell you what, Sammy,' said Mr Weller, senior, with much solemnity in his manner; 'there never was a nicer woman as a widder, than that 'ere second wentur o' mine - a sweet creetur she was, Sammy; all I can say on her now, is, that as she was such an uncommon pleasant widder, it's a great pity she ever changed her condition. She don't act as a wife, Sammy.' 'Don't she, though?' inquired Mr Weller, junior.

The elder Mr Weller shook his head, as he replied with a sigh, 'I've done it once too often, Sammy; I've done it once too often. Take example by your father, my boy, and be verry careful o' widders all your life, 'specially if they've kept a public-house, Sammy.' Having delivered this parental advice with great pathos, Mr Weller, senior, refilled his pipe from a tin box he carried in his pocket; and, lighting his fresh pipe from the ashes of the old One, commenced smoking at a great rate.

'Beg your pardon, sir,' he said, renewing the subject, and addressing Mr Pickwick, after a considerable pause, 'nothin' personal, I hope, sir; I hope you ha'n't got a widder, sir.'

'Not I,' replied Mr Pickwick, laughing; and while Mr Pickwick laughed, Sam Weller informed his parent in a whisper, of the relation in which he stood towards that gentleman.

'Beg your pardon, sir,' said Mr Weller, senior, taking off his hat, 'I hope you've no fault to find with Sammy, Sir?'

'None whatever,' said Mr Pickwick.

'Wery glad to hear it, sir,' replied the old man; 'I took a good deal o' pains with his eddication, sir; let him run in the streets when he was verry young, and shift for hisself. It's the only way to make a boy sharp, sir.'

'Rather a dangerous process, I should imagine,' said Mr Pickwick, with a smile.

'And not a verry sure one, neither,' added Mr Weller; 'I got reg'larly done the other day.'

'No!' said his father.

'I did,' said the son; and he proceeded to relate, in as few words as possible, how he had fallen a ready dupe to the stratagems of Job Trotter.

Mr Weller, senior, listened to the tale with the most profound attention, and, at its termination, said -

'Worn't one o' these chaps slim and tall, with long hair, and the gift o' the gab wery gallopin'?'

Mr Pickwick did not quite understand the last item of description, but, comprehending the first, said 'Yes,' at a venture.

'T' other's a black-haired chap in mulberry livery, with a wery large head?'

'Yes, yes, he is,' said Mr Pickwick and Sam, with great earnestness. 'Then I know where they are, and that's all about it,' said Mr Weller; 'they're at Ipswich, safe enough, them two.'

'No!' said Mr Pickwick.

'Fact,' said Mr Weller, 'and I'll tell you how I know it. I work an Ipswich coach now and then for a friend o' mine. I worked down the wery day arter the night as you caught the rheumatic, and at the Black Boy at Chelmsford - the wery place they'd come to - I took 'em up, right through to Ipswich, where the man-servant - him in the mulberries - told me they was a-goin' to put up for a long time.'

'I'll follow him,' said Mr Pickwick; 'we may as well see Ipswich as any other place. I'll follow him.'

'You're quite certain it was them, governor?' inquired Mr Weller, junior.

'Quite, Sammy, quite,' replied his father, 'for their appearance is wery sing'ler; besides that 'ere, I wondered to see the gen'l'm'n so formiliar with his servant; and, more than that, as they sat in the front, right behind the box, I heerd 'em laughing and saying how they'd done old Fireworks.'

'Old who?' said Mr Pickwick.

'Old Fireworks, Sir; by which, I've no doubt, they meant you, Sir.' There is nothing positively vile or atrocious in the appellation of 'old Fireworks,' but still it is by no means a respectful or flattering designation. The recollection of all the wrongs he had sustained at Jingle's hands, had crowded on Mr Pickwick's mind, the moment Mr Weller began to speak; it wanted but a feather to turn the scale, and 'old Fireworks' did it.

'I'll follow him,' said Mr Pickwick, with an emphatic blow on the table.

'I shall work down to Ipswich the day arter to-morrow, Sir,' said Mr Weller the elder, 'from the Bull in Whitechapel; and if you really mean to go, you'd better go with me.'

'So we had,' said Mr Pickwick; 'very true; I can write to Bury, and tell them to meet me at Ipswich. We will go with you. But don't hurry away, Mr Weller; won't you take anything?'

'You're wery good, Sir,' replied Mr W., stopping short; - 'perhaps a small glass of brandy to drink your health, and success to Sammy, Sir, wouldn't be amiss.'

'Certainly not,' replied Mr Pickwick. 'A glass of brandy here!' The brandy was brought; and Mr Weller, after pulling his hair to Mr Pickwick, and nodding to Sam, jerked it down his capacious throat as if it had been a small thimbleful. 'Well done, father,' said Sam, 'take care, old fellow, or you'll have a touch of your old complaint, the gout.'

'I've found a sov'rin' cure for that, Sammy,' said Mr Weller, setting down the glass.

'A sovereign cure for the gout,' said Mr Pickwick, hastily producing his note-book - 'what is it?'

'The gout, Sir,' replied Mr Weller, 'the gout is a complaint as arises from too much ease and comfort. If ever you're attacked with the gout, sir, jist you marry a widder as has got a good loud voice, with a decent notion of usin' it, and you'll never have the gout agin. It's a capital prescription, sir. I takes it reg'lar, and I can warrant it to drive away any illness as is caused by too much jollity.' Having imparted this valuable secret, Mr Weller drained his glass once more, produced a laboured wink, sighed deeply, and slowly retired.

'Well, what do you think of what your father says, Sam?' inquired Mr Pickwick, with a smile.

'Think, Sir!' replied Mr Weller; 'why, I think he's the wictim o' connubiality, as Blue Beard's domestic chaplain said, vith a tear of pity, ven he buried him.'

There was no replying to this very apposite conclusion, and, therefore, Mr Pickwick, after settling the reckoning, resumed his walk to Gray's Inn. By the time he reached its secluded groves, however, eight o'clock had struck, and the unbroken stream of gentlemen in muddy high-lows, soiled white hats, and rusty apparel, who were pouring towards the different avenues of egress, warned him that the majority of the offices had closed for that day.

After climbing two pairs of steep and dirty stairs, he found his anticipations were realised. Mr Perker's 'outer door' was closed; and the dead silence which followed Mr Weller's repeated kicks thereat, announced that the officials had retired from business for the night.

'This is pleasant, Sam,' said Mr Pickwick; 'I shouldn't lose an hour in seeing him; I shall not be able to get one wink of sleep to-night, I know, unless I have the satisfaction of reflecting that I have confided this matter to a professional man.'

'Here's an old 'ooman comin' upstairs, sir,' replied Mr Weller; 'p'raps she knows where we can find somebody. Hollo, old lady, vere's Mr Perker's people?'

'Mr Perker's people,' said a thin, miserable-looking old woman, stopping to recover breath after the ascent of the staircase - 'Mr Perker's people's gone, and I'm a-goin' to do the office out.' 'Are you Mr Perker's servant?' inquired Mr Pickwick.

'I am Mr Perker's laundress,' replied the woman.

'Ah,' said Mr Pickwick, half aside to Sam, 'it's a curious circumstance, Sam, that they call the old women in these inns, laundresses. I wonder what's that for?'

'Cos they has a mortal awersion to washing anythin', I suppose, Sir,' replied Mr Weller.

'I shouldn't wonder,' said Mr Pickwick, looking at the old woman, whose appearance, as well as the condition of the office, which she had by this time opened, indicated a rooted antipathy to the application of soap and water; 'do you know where I can find Mr Perker, my good woman?'

'No, I don't,' replied the old woman gruffly; 'he's out o' town now.'

'That's unfortunate,' said Mr Pickwick; 'where's his clerk? Do you know?'

'Yes, I know where he is, but he won't thank me for telling you,' replied the laundress.

'I have very particular business with him,' said Mr Pickwick. 'Won't it do in the morning?' said the woman.

'Not so well,' replied Mr Pickwick.

'Well,' said the old woman, 'if it was anything very particular, I was to say where he was, so I suppose there's no harm in telling. If you just go to the Magpie and Stump, and ask at the bar for Mr Lowten, they'll show you in to him, and he's Mr Perker's clerk.'

With this direction, and having been furthermore informed that the hostelry in question was situated in a court, happy in the double advantage of being in the vicinity of Clare Market, and closely approximating to the back of New Inn, Mr Pickwick and Sam descended the rickety staircase in safety, and issued forth in quest of the Magpie and Stump.

This favoured tavern, sacred to the evening orgies of Mr Lowten and his companions, was what ordinary people would designate a public-house. That the landlord was a man of money-making turn was sufficiently testified by the fact of a small bulkhead beneath the tap-room window, in size and shape not unlike a sedan-chair, being underlet to a mender of shoes: and that he was a being of a philanthropic mind was evident from the protection he afforded to a pieman, who vended his delicacies without fear of interruption, on the very door-step. In the lower windows, which were decorated with curtains of a saffron hue, dangled two or three printed cards, bearing reference to Devonshire cider and Dantzic spruce, while a large blackboard, announcing in white letters to an enlightened public, that there were 500,000 barrels of double stout in the cellars of the establishment, left the mind in a state of not unpleasing doubt and uncertainty as to the precise direction in the bowels of the earth, in which this mighty cavern might be supposed to extend. When we add that the weather-beaten signboard bore the half-obliterated semblance of a magpie intently eyeing a crooked streak of brown paint, which the neighbours had been taught from infancy to consider as the 'stump,' we have said all that need be said of the exterior of the edifice.

On Mr Pickwick's presenting himself at the bar, an elderly female emerged from behind the screen therein, and presented herself before him.

'Is Mr Lowten here, ma'am?' inquired Mr Pickwick.

'Yes, he is, Sir,' replied the landlady. 'Here, Charley, show the gentleman in to Mr Lowten.'

'The gen'l'm'n can't go in just now,' said a shambling pot-boy, with a red head, 'cos' Mr Lowten's a-singin' a comic song, and he'll put him out. He'll be done directly, Sir.'

The red-headed pot-boy had scarcely finished speaking, when a most unanimous hammering of tables, and jingling of glasses, announced

that the song had that instant terminated; and Mr Pickwick, after desiring Sam to solace himself in the tap, suffered himself to be conducted into the presence of Mr Lowten.

At the announcement of 'A gentleman to speak to you, Sir,' a puffy-faced young man, who filled the chair at the head of the table, looked with some surprise in the direction from whence the voice proceeded; and the surprise seemed to be by no means diminished, when his eyes rested on an individual whom he had never seen before.

'I beg your pardon, Sir,' said Mr Pickwick, 'and I am very sorry to disturb the other gentlemen, too, but I come on very particular business; and if you will suffer me to detain you at this end of the room for five minutes, I shall be very much obliged to you.'

The puffy-faced young man rose, and drawing a chair close to Mr Pickwick in an obscure corner of the room, listened attentively to his tale of woe.

'Ah,' he said, when Mr Pickwick had concluded, 'Dodson and Fogg - sharp practice theirs - capital men of business, Dodson and Fogg, sir.'

Mr Pickwick admitted the sharp practice of Dodson and Fogg, and Lowten resumed. 'Perker ain't in town, and he won't be, neither, before the end of next week; but if you want the action defended, and will leave the copy with me, I can do all that's needful till he comes back.'

'That's exactly what I came here for,' said Mr Pickwick, handing over the document. 'If anything particular occurs, you can write to me at the post-office, Ipswich.'

'That's all right,' replied Mr Perker's clerk; and then seeing Mr Pickwick's eye wandering curiously towards the table, he added, 'will you join us, for half an hour or so? We are capital company here to-night. There's Samkin and Green's managing-clerk, and Smithers and Price's chancery, and Pimkin and Thomas's out o' doors - sings a capital song, he does - and Jack Bamber, and ever so many more. You're come out of the country, I suppose. Would you like to join us?'

Mr Pickwick could not resist so tempting an opportunity of studying human nature. He suffered himself to be led to the table, where, after having been introduced to the company in due form, he was accommodated with a seat near the chairman and called for a glass of his favourite beverage.

A profound silence, quite contrary to Mr Pickwick's expectation, succeeded. 'You don't find this sort of thing disagreeable, I hope, sir?'

said his right hand neighbour, a gentleman in a checked shirt and Mosaic studs, with a cigar in his mouth.

'Not in the least,' replied Mr Pickwick; 'I like it very much, although I am no smoker myself.'

'I should be very sorry to say I wasn't,' interposed another gentleman on the opposite side of the table. 'It's board and lodgings to me, is smoke.'

Mr Pickwick glanced at the speaker, and thought that if it were washing too, it would be all the better.

Here there was another pause. Mr Pickwick was a stranger, and his coming had evidently cast a damp upon the party.

'Mr Grundy's going to oblige the company with a song,' said the chairman.

'No, he ain't,' said Mr Grundy.

'Why not?' said the chairman.

'Because he can't,' said Mr Grundy. 'You had better say he won't,' replied the chairman.

'Well, then, he won't,' retorted Mr Grundy. Mr Grundy's positive refusal to gratify the company occasioned another silence. 'Won't anybody enliven us?' said the chairman, despondingly.

'Why don't you enliven us yourself, Mr Chairman?' said a young man with a whisker, a squint, and an open shirt collar (dirty), from the bottom of the table.

'Hear! hear!' said the smoking gentleman, in the Mosaic jewellery.

'Because I only know one song, and I have sung it already, and it's a fine of 'glasses round' to sing the same song twice in a night,' replied the chairman.

This was an unanswerable reply, and silence prevailed again.

'I have been to-night, gentlemen,' said Mr Pickwick, hoping to start a subject which all the company could take a part in discussing, 'I have been to-night, in a place which you all know very well, doubtless, but which I have not been in for some years, and know very little of; I mean Gray's Inn, gentlemen. Curious little nooks in a great place, like London, these old inns are.'

'By Jove!' said the chairman, whispering across the table to Mr Pickwick, 'you have hit upon something that one of us, at least, would talk upon for ever. You'll draw old Jack Bamber out; he was never heard to talk about anything else but the inns, and he has lived alone in them till he's half crazy.'

The individual to whom Lowten alluded, was a little, yellow, high-shouldered man, whose countenance, from his habit of stooping forward when silent, Mr Pickwick had not observed before. He wondered, though, when the old man raised his shrivelled face, and bent his gray eye upon him, with a keen inquiring look, that such remarkable features could have escaped his attention for a moment. There was a fixed grim smile perpetually on his countenance; he leaned his chin on a long, skinny hand, with nails of extraordinary length; and as he inclined his head to one side, and looked keenly out from beneath his ragged gray eyebrows, there was a strange, wild slyness in his leer, quite repulsive to behold.

This was the figure that now started forward, and burst into an animated torrent of words. As this chapter has been a long one, however, and as the old man was a remarkable personage, it will be more respectful to him, and more convenient to us, to let him speak for himself in a fresh one.