Chapter XXVII

Samuel Weller Makes A Pilgrimage To Dorking, And Beholds His Mother-In-Law

There still remaining an interval of two days before the time agreed upon for the departure of the Pickwickians to Dingley Dell, Mr Weller sat himself down in a back room at the George and Vulture, after eating an early dinner, to muse on the best way of disposing of his time. It was a remarkably fine day; and he had not turned the matter over in his mind ten minutes, when he was suddenly stricken filial and affectionate; and it occurred to him so strongly that he ought to go down and see his father, and pay his duty to his mother-in-law, that he was lost in astonishment at his own remissness in never thinking of this moral obligation before. Anxious to atone for his past neglect without another hour's delay, he straightway walked upstairs to Mr Pickwick, and requested leave of absence for this laudable purpose.

'Certainly, Sam, certainly,' said Mr Pickwick, his eyes glistening with delight at this manifestation of filial feeling on the part of his attendant; 'certainly, Sam.'

Mr Weller made a grateful bow.

'I am very glad to see that you have so high a sense of your duties as a son, Sam,' said Mr Pickwick.

'I always had, sir,' replied Mr Weller.

'That's a very gratifying reflection, Sam,' said Mr Pickwick approvingly.

'Wery, Sir,' replied Mr Weller; 'if ever I wanted anythin' o' my father, I always asked for it in a wery 'spectful and obligin' manner. If he didn't give it me, I took it, for fear I should be led to do anythin' wrong, through not havin' it. I saved him a world o' trouble this vay, Sir.'

'That's not precisely what I meant, Sam,' said Mr Pickwick, shaking his head, with a slight smile.

'All good feelin', sir - the wery best intentions, as the gen'l'm'n said ven he run away from his wife 'cos she seemed unhappy with him,' replied Mr Weller.

'You may go, Sam,' said Mr Pickwick.

'Thank'ee, Sir,' replied Mr Weller; and having made his best bow, and put on his best clothes, Sam planted himself on the top of the Arundel coach, and journeyed on to Dorking.

The Marquis of Granby, in Mrs. Weller's time, was quite a model of a roadside public-house of the better class - just large enough to be convenient, and small enough to be snug. On the opposite side of the road was a large sign-board on a high post, representing the head and shoulders of a gentleman with an apoplectic countenance, in a red coat with deep blue facings, and a touch of the same blue over his three-cornered hat, for a sky. Over that again were a pair of flags; beneath the last button of his coat were a couple of cannon; and the whole formed an expressive and undoubted likeness of the Marquis of Granby of glorious memory.

The bar window displayed a choice collection of geranium plants, and a well-dusted row of spirit phials. The open shutters bore a variety of golden inscriptions, eulogistic of good beds and neat wines; and the choice group of countrymen and hostlers lounging about the stable door and horse-trough, afforded presumptive proof of the excellent quality of the ale and spirits which were sold within. Sam Weller paused, when he dismounted from the coach, to note all these little indications of a thriving business, with the eye of an experienced traveller; and having done so, stepped in at once, highly satisfied with everything he had observed.

'Now, then!' said a shrill female voice the instant Sam thrust his head in at the door, 'what do you want, young man?'

Sam looked round in the direction whence the voice proceeded. It came from a rather stout lady of comfortable appearance, who was seated beside the fireplace in the bar, blowing the fire to make the kettle boil for tea. She was not alone; for on the other side of the fireplace, sitting bolt upright in a high-backed chair, was a man in threadbare black clothes, with a back almost as long and stiff as that of the chair itself, who caught Sam's most particular and especial attention at once.

He was a prim-faced, red-nosed man, with a long, thin countenance, and a semi-rattlesnake sort of eye - rather sharp, but decidedly bad. He wore very short trousers, and black cotton stockings, which, like the rest of his apparel, were particularly rusty. His looks were starched, but his white neckerchief was not, and its long limp ends straggled over his closely-buttoned waistcoat in a very uncouth and unpicturesque fashion. A pair of old, worn, beaver gloves, a broad-brimmed hat, and a faded green umbrella, with plenty of whalebone sticking through the bottom, as if to counterbalance the want of a handle at the top, lay on a chair beside him; and, being disposed in a

very tidy and careful manner, seemed to imply that the red-nosed man, whoever he was, had no intention of going away in a hurry.

To do the red-nosed man justice, he would have been very far from wise if he had entertained any such intention; for, to judge from all appearances, he must have been possessed of a most desirable circle of acquaintance, if he could have reasonably expected to be more comfortable anywhere else. The fire was blazing brightly under the influence of the bellows, and the kettle was singing gaily under the influence of both. A small tray of tea-things was arranged on the table; a plate of hot buttered toast was gently simmering before the fire; and the red-nosed man himself was busily engaged in converting a large slice of bread into the same agreeable edible, through the instrumentality of a long brass toasting-fork. Beside him stood a glass of reeking hot pine-apple rum-and-water, with a slice of lemon in it; and every time the red-nosed man stopped to bring the round of toast to his eye, with the view of ascertaining how it got on, he imbibed a drop or two of the hot pine-apple rum-and-water, and smiled upon the rather stout lady, as she blew the fire.

Sam was so lost in the contemplation of this comfortable scene, that he suffered the first inquiry of the rather stout lady to pass unheeded. It was not until it had been twice repeated, each time in a shriller tone, that he became conscious of the impropriety of his behaviour.

'Governor in?' inquired Sam, in reply to the question.

'No, he isn't,' replied Mrs. Weller; for the rather stout lady was no other than the quondam relict and sole executrix of the dead-and-gone Mr Clarke; 'no, he isn't, and I don't expect him, either.'

'I suppose he's drivin' up to-day?' said Sam.

'He may be, or he may not,' replied Mrs. Weller, buttering the round of toast which the red-nosed man had just finished. 'I don't know, and, what's more, I don't care. - Ask a blessin', Mr Stiggins.'

The red-nosed man did as he was desired, and instantly commenced on the toast with fierce voracity.

The appearance of the red-nosed man had induced Sam, at first sight, to more than half suspect that he was the deputy- shepherd of whom his estimable parent had spoken. The moment he saw him eat, all doubt on the subject was removed, and he perceived at once that if he purposed to take up his temporary quarters where he was, he must make his footing good without delay. He therefore commenced proceedings by putting his arm over the half-door of the bar, coolly unbolting it, and leisurely walking in.

'Mother-in-law,' said Sam, 'how are you?'

'Why, I do believe he is a Weller!' said Mrs. W., raising her eyes to Sam's face, with no very gratified expression of countenance.

'I raythe think he is,' said the imperturbable Sam; 'and I hope this here reverend gen'l'm'n 'll excuse me saying that I wish I was THE Weller as owns you, mother-in-law.'

This was a double-barrelled compliment. It implied that Mrs. Weller was a most agreeable female, and also that Mr Stiggins had a clerical appearance. It made a visible impression at once; and Sam followed up his advantage by kissing his mother-in-law.

'Get along with you!' said Mrs. Weller, pushing him away. 'For shame, young man!' said the gentleman with the red nose.

'No offence, sir, no offence,' replied Sam; 'you're wery right, though; it ain't the right sort o' thing, ven mothers-in-law is young and good-looking, is it, Sir?'

'It's all vanity,' said Mr Stiggins.

'Ah, so it is,' said Mrs. Weller, setting her cap to rights.

Sam thought it was, too, but he held his peace.

The deputy-shepherd seemed by no means best pleased with Sam's arrival; and when the first effervescence of the compliment had subsided, even Mrs. Weller looked as if she could have spared him without the smallest inconvenience. However, there he was; and as he couldn't be decently turned out, they all three sat down to tea.

'And how's father?' said Sam.

At this inquiry, Mrs. Weller raised her hands, and turned up her eyes, as if the subject were too painful to be alluded to.

Mr Stiggins groaned.

'What's the matter with that 'ere gen'l'm'n?' inquired Sam.

'He's shocked at the way your father goes on in,' replied Mrs. Weller.

'Oh, he is, is he?' said Sam.

'And with too good reason,' added Mrs. Weller gravely.

Mr Stiggins took up a fresh piece of toast, and groaned heavily.

'He is a dreadful reprobate,' said Mrs. Weller.

'A man of wrath!' exclaimed Mr Stiggins. He took a large semi-circular bite out of the toast, and groaned again.

Sam felt very strongly disposed to give the reverend Mr Stiggins something to groan for, but he repressed his inclination, and merely asked, 'What's the old 'un up to now?'

'Up to, indeed!' said Mrs. Weller, 'Oh, he has a hard heart. Night after night does this excellent man - don't frown, Mr Stiggins; I WILL say you ARE an excellent man - come and sit here, for hours together, and it has not the least effect upon him.' 'Well, that is odd,' said Sam; 'it 'ud have a wery considerable effect upon me, if I wos in his place; I know that.'

'The fact is, my young friend,' said Mr Stiggins solemnly, 'he has an obderrate bosom. Oh, my young friend, who else could have resisted the pleading of sixteen of our fairest sisters, and withstood their exhortations to subscribe to our noble society for providing the infant negroes in the West Indies with flannel waistcoats and moral pocket-handkerchiefs?'

'What's a moral pocket-ankercher?' said Sam; 'I never see one o' them articles o' furniter.'

'Those which combine amusement With instruction, my young friend,' replied Mr Stiggins, 'blending select tales with wood-cuts.'

'Oh, I know,' said Sam; 'them as hangs up in the linen-drapers' shops, with beggars' petitions and all that 'ere upon 'em?'

Mr Stiggins began a third round of toast, and nodded assent. 'And he wouldn't be persuaded by the ladies, wouldn't he?' said Sam.

'Sat and smoked his pipe, and said the infant negroes were - what did he say the infant negroes were?' said Mrs. Weller.

'Little humbugs,' replied Mr Stiggins, deeply affected.

'Said the infant negroes were little humbugs,' repeated Mrs. Weller. And they both groaned at the atrocious conduct of the elder Mr Weller.

A great many more iniquities of a similar nature might have been disclosed, only the toast being all eaten, the tea having got very weak, and Sam holding out no indications of meaning to go, Mr Stiggins

suddenly recollected that he had a most pressing appointment with the shepherd, and took himself off accordingly.

The tea-things had been scarcely put away, and the hearth swept up, when the London coach deposited Mr Weller, senior, at the door; his legs deposited him in the bar; and his eyes showed him his son.

'What, Sammy!' exclaimed the father.

'What, old Nobs!' ejaculated the son. And they shook hands heartily.

'Wery glad to see you, Sammy,' said the elder Mr Weller, 'though how you've managed to get over your mother-in-law, is a mystery to me. I only vish you'd write me out the receipt, that's all.'

'Hush!' said Sam, 'she's at home, old feller.' 'She ain't vithin hearin',' replied Mr Weller; 'she always goes and blows up, downstairs, for a couple of hours arter tea; so we'll just give ourselves a damp, Sammy.'

Saying this, Mr Weller mixed two glasses of spirits-and-water, and produced a couple of pipes. The father and son sitting down opposite each other; Sam on one side of the fire, in the high-backed chair, and Mr Weller, senior, on the other, in an easy ditto, they proceeded to enjoy themselves with all due gravity.

'Anybody been here, Sammy?' asked Mr Weller, senior, dryly, after a long silence.

Sam nodded an expressive assent.

'Red-nosed chap?' inquired Mr Weller.

Sam nodded again.

'Amiable man that 'ere, Sammy,' said Mr Weller, smoking violently.

'Seems so,' observed Sam.

'Good hand at accounts,' said Mr Weller. 'Is he?' said Sam.

'Borrows eighteenpence on Monday, and comes on Tuesday for a shillin' to make it up half-a-crown; calls again on Vensday for another half-crown to make it five shillin's; and goes on, doubling, till he gets it up to a five pund note in no time, like them sums in the 'rithmetic book 'bout the nails in the horse's shoes, Sammy.'

Sam intimated by a nod that he recollected the problem alluded to by his parent.

'So you vouldn't subscribe to the flannel veskits?' said Sam, after another interval of smoking.

'Cert'nly not,' replied Mr Weller; 'what's the good o' flannel veskits to the young niggers abroad? But I'll tell you what it is, Sammy,' said Mr Weller, lowering his voice, and bending across the fireplace; 'I'd come down wery handsome towards strait veskits for some people at home.'

As Mr Weller said this, he slowly recovered his former position, and winked at his first-born, in a profound manner.

'it cert'nly seems a queer start to send out pocket-'ankerchers to people as don't know the use on 'em,' observed Sam.

'They're alvays a-doin' some gammon of that sort, Sammy,' replied his father. 'T'other Sunday I wos walkin' up the road, wen who should I see, a-standin' at a chapel door, with a blue soup-plate in her hand, but your mother-in-law! I werily believe there was change for a couple o' suv'rins in it, then, Sammy, all in ha'pence; and as the people come out, they rattled the pennies in it, till you'd ha' thought that no mortal plate as ever was baked, could ha' stood the wear and tear. What d'ye think it was all for?'

'For another tea-drinkin', perhaps,' said Sam.

'Not a bit on it,' replied the father; 'for the shepherd's water- rate, Sammy.'

'The shepherd's water-rate!' said Sam.

'Ay,' replied Mr Weller, 'there was three quarters owin', and the shepherd hadn't paid a farden, not he - perhaps it might be on account that the water warn't o' much use to him, for it's wery little o' that tap he drinks, Sammy, wery; he knows a trick worth a good half-dozen of that, he does. Hows'ever, it warn't paid, and so they cuts the water off. Down goes the shepherd to chapel, gives out as he's a persecuted saint, and says he hopes the heart of the turncock as cut the water off, 'll be softened, and turned in the right vay, but he raythe thinks he's booked for somethin' uncomfortable. Upon this, the women calls a meetin', sings a hymn, wotes your mother-in-law into the chair, wolunteers a collection next Sunday, and hands it all over to the shepherd. And if he ain't got enough out on 'em, Sammy, to make him free of the water company for life,' said Mr Weller, in conclusion, 'I'm one Dutchman, and you're another, and that's all about it.'

Mr Weller smoked for some minutes in silence, and then resumed -

'The worst o' these here shepherds is, my boy, that they reg'larly turns the heads of all the young ladies, about here. Lord bless their little hearts, they thinks it's all right, and don't know no better; but they're the wictims o' gammon, Samivel, they're the wictims o' gammon.'

'I s'pose they are,' said Sam.

'Nothin' else,' said Mr Weller, shaking his head gravely; 'and wot aggrawates me, Samivel, is to see 'em a-wastin' all their time and labour in making clothes for copper-coloured people as don't want 'em, and taking no notice of flesh-coloured Christians as do. If I'd my vay, Samivel, I'd just stick some o' these here lazy shepherds behind a heavy wheelbarrow, and run 'em up and down a fourteen-inch-wide plank all day. That 'ud shake the nonsense out of 'em, if anythin' vould.'

Mr Weller, having delivered this gentle recipe with strong emphasis, eked out by a variety of nods and contortions of the eye, emptied his glass at a draught, and knocked the ashes out of his pipe, with native dignity.

He was engaged in this operation, when a shrill voice was heard in the passage.

'Here's your dear relation, Sammy,' said Mr Weller; and Mrs. W. hurried into the room.

'Oh, you've come back, have you!' said Mrs. Weller.

'Yes, my dear,' replied Mr Weller, filling a fresh pipe.

'Has Mr Stiggins been back?' said Mrs. Weller.

'No, my dear, he hasn't,' replied Mr Weller, lighting the pipe by the ingenious process of holding to the bowl thereof, between the tongs, a red-hot coal from the adjacent fire; and what's more, my dear, I shall manage to surwive it, if he don't come back at all.'

'Ugh, you wretch!' said Mrs. Weller.

'Thank'ee, my love,' said Mr Weller. 'Come, come, father,' said Sam, 'none o' these little lovin's afore strangers. Here's the reverend gen'l'm'n a-comin' in now.' At this announcement, Mrs. Weller hastily wiped off the tears which she had just begun to force on; and Mr W. drew his chair sullenly into the chimney-corner.

Mr Stiggins was easily prevailed on to take another glass of the hot pine-apple rum-and-water, and a second, and a third, and then to

refresh himself with a slight supper, previous to beginning again. He sat on the same side as Mr Weller, senior; and every time he could contrive to do so, unseen by his wife, that gentleman indicated to his son the hidden emotions of his bosom, by shaking his fist over the deputy-shepherd's head; a process which afforded his son the most unmingled delight and satisfaction, the more especially as Mr Stiggins went on, quietly drinking the hot pine-apple rum-and-water, wholly unconscious of what was going forward.

The major part of the conversation was confined to Mrs. Weller and the reverend Mr Stiggins; and the topics principally descanted on, were the virtues of the shepherd, the worthiness of his flock, and the high crimes and misdemeanours of everybody beside - dissertations which the elder Mr Weller occasionally interrupted by half-suppressed references to a gentleman of the name of Walker, and other running commentaries of the same kind.

At length Mr Stiggins, with several most indubitable symptoms of having quite as much pine-apple rum-and-water about him as he could comfortably accommodate, took his hat, and his leave; and Sam was, immediately afterwards, shown to bed by his father. The respectable old gentleman wrung his hand fervently, and seemed disposed to address some observation to his son; but on Mrs. Weller advancing towards him, he appeared to relinquish that intention, and abruptly bade him good-night.

Sam was up betimes next day, and having partaken of a hasty breakfast, prepared to return to London. He had scarcely set foot without the house, when his father stood before him.

'Goin', Sammy?' inquired Mr Weller.

'Off at once,' replied Sam.

'I vish you could muffle that 'ere Stiggins, and take him vith you,' said Mr Weller.

'I am ashamed on you!' said Sam reproachfully; 'what do you let him show his red nose in the Markis o' Granby at all, for?'

Mr Weller the elder fixed on his son an earnest look, and replied, ''Cause I'm a married man, Samivel,'cause I'm a married man. Ven you're a married man, Samivel, you'll understand a good many things as you don't understand now; but vether it's worth while goin' through so much, to learn so little, as the charity-boy said ven he got to the end of the alphabet, is a matter o' taste. I raythe think it isn't.' 'Well,' said Sam, 'good-bye.'

'Tar, tar, Sammy,' replied his father.

'I've only got to say this here,' said Sam, stopping short, 'that if I was the properiator o' the Markis o' Granby, and that 'ere Stiggins came and made toast in my bar, I'd - '

'What?' interposed Mr Weller, with great anxiety. 'What?'

'Pison his rum-and-water,' said Sam.

'No!' said Mr Weller, shaking his son eagerly by the hand, 'would you raly, Sammy-would you, though?'

'I would,' said Sam. 'I wouldn't be too hard upon him at first. I'd drop him in the water-butt, and put the lid on; and if I found he was insensible to kindness, I'd try the other persvasion.'

The elder Mr Weller bestowed a look of deep, unspeakable admiration on his son, and, having once more grasped his hand, walked slowly away, revolving in his mind the numerous reflections to which his advice had given rise.

Sam looked after him, until he turned a corner of the road; and then set forward on his walk to London. He meditated at first, on the probable consequences of his own advice, and the likelihood of his father's adopting it. He dismissed the subject from his mind, however, with the consolatory reflection that time alone would show; and this is the reflection we would impress upon the reader.