

Chapter XXXIX

Mr Samuel Weller, Being Intrusted With A Mission Of Love, Proceeds To Execute It; With What Success Will Hereinafter Appear

During the whole of next day, Sam kept Mr Winkle steadily in sight, fully determined not to take his eyes off him for one instant, until he should receive express instructions from the fountain-head. However disagreeable Sam's very close watch and great vigilance were to Mr Winkle, he thought it better to bear with them, than, by any act of violent opposition, to hazard being carried away by force, which Mr Weller more than once strongly hinted was the line of conduct that a strict sense of duty prompted him to pursue. There is little reason to doubt that Sam would very speedily have quieted his scruples, by bearing Mr Winkle back to Bath, bound hand and foot, had not Mr Pickwick's prompt attention to the note, which Dowler had undertaken to deliver, forestalled any such proceeding. In short, at eight o'clock in the evening, Mr Pickwick himself walked into the coffee-room of the Bush Tavern, and told Sam with a smile, to his very great relief, that he had done quite right, and it was unnecessary for him to mount guard any longer.

'I thought it better to come myself,' said Mr Pickwick, addressing Mr Winkle, as Sam disencumbered him of his great-coat and travelling-shawl, 'to ascertain, before I gave my consent to Sam's employment in this matter, that you are quite in earnest and serious, with respect to this young lady.'

'Serious, from my heart - from my soul!' returned Mr Winkle, with great energy.

'Remember,' said Mr Pickwick, with beaming eyes, 'we met her at our excellent and hospitable friend's, Winkle. It would be an ill return to tamper lightly, and without due consideration, with this young lady's affections. I'll not allow that, sir. I'll not allow it.'

'I have no such intention, indeed,' exclaimed Mr Winkle warmly. 'I have considered the matter well, for a long time, and I feel that my happiness is bound up in her.'

'That's wot we call tying it up in a small parcel, sir,' interposed Mr Weller, with an agreeable smile.

Mr Winkle looked somewhat stern at this interruption, and Mr Pickwick angrily requested his attendant not to jest with one of the best feelings of our nature; to which Sam replied, 'That he wouldn't, if

he was aware on it; but there were so many on 'em, that he hardly know'd which was the best ones wen he heerd 'em mentioned.'

Mr Winkle then recounted what had passed between himself and Mr Ben Allen, relative to Arabella; stated that his object was to gain an interview with the young lady, and make a formal disclosure of his passion; and declared his conviction, founded on certain dark hints and mutterings of the aforesaid Ben, that, wherever she was at present immured, it was somewhere near the Downs. And this was his whole stock of knowledge or suspicion on the subject.

With this very slight clue to guide him, it was determined that Mr Weller should start next morning on an expedition of discovery; it was also arranged that Mr Pickwick and Mr Winkle, who were less confident of their powers, should parade the town meanwhile, and accidentally drop in upon Mr Bob Sawyer in the course of the day, in the hope of seeing or hearing something of the young lady's whereabouts.

Accordingly, next morning, Sam Weller issued forth upon his quest, in no way daunted by the very discouraging prospect before him; and away he walked, up one street and down another - we were going to say, up one hill and down another, only it's all uphill at Clifton - without meeting with anything or anybody that tended to throw the faintest light on the matter in hand. Many were the colloquies into which Sam entered with grooms who were airing horses on roads, and nursemaids who were airing children in lanes; but nothing could Sam elicit from either the first-mentioned or the last, which bore the slightest reference to the object of his artfully-prosecuted inquiries. There were a great many young ladies in a great many houses, the greater part whereof were shrewdly suspected by the male and female domestics to be deeply attached to somebody, or perfectly ready to become so, if opportunity afforded. But as none among these young ladies was Miss Arabella Allen, the information left Sam at exactly the old point of wisdom at which he had stood before.

Sam struggled across the Downs against a good high wind, wondering whether it was always necessary to hold your hat on with both hands in that part of the country, and came to a shady by-place, about which were sprinkled several little villas of quiet and secluded appearance. Outside a stable door at the bottom of a long back lane without a thoroughfare, a groom in undress was idling about, apparently persuading himself that he was doing something with a spade and a wheel-barrow. We may remark, in this place, that we have scarcely ever seen a groom near a stable, in his lazy moments, who has not been, to a greater or less extent, the victim of this singular delusion.

Sam thought he might as well talk to this groom as to any one else, especially as he was very tired with walking, and there was a good large stone just opposite the wheel-barrow; so he strolled down the lane, and, seating himself on the stone, opened a conversation with the ease and freedom for which he was remarkable.

'Mornin', old friend,' said Sam.

'Arternoon, you mean,' replied the groom, casting a surly look at Sam.

'You're wery right, old friend,' said Sam; 'I DO mean arternoon. How are you?'

'Why, I don't find myself much the better for seeing of you,' replied the ill-tempered groom.

'That's wery odd - that is,' said Sam, 'for you look so uncommon cheerful, and seem altogether so lively, that it does vun's heart good to see you.'

The surly groom looked surlier still at this, but not sufficiently so to produce any effect upon Sam, who immediately inquired, with a countenance of great anxiety, whether his master's name was not Walker.

'No, it ain't,' said the groom.

'Nor Brown, I s'pose?' said Sam.

'No, it ain't.'

'Nor Vilson?'

'No; nor that @ither,' said the groom.

'Vell,' replied Sam, 'then I'm mistaken, and he hasn't got the honour o' my acquaintance, which I thought he had. Don't wait here out o' compliment to me,' said Sam, as the groom wheeled in the barrow, and prepared to shut the gate. 'Ease afore ceremony, old boy; I'll excuse you.'

'I'd knock your head off for half-a-crown,' said the surly groom, bolting one half of the gate.

'Couldn't afford to have it done on those terms,' rejoined Sam. 'It 'ud be worth a life's board wages at least, to you, and 'ud be cheap at that. Make my compliments indooors. Tell 'em not to vait dinner for me, and say they needn't mind puttin' any by, for it'll be cold afore I come in.'

In reply to this, the groom waxing very wroth, muttered a desire to damage somebody's person; but disappeared without carrying it into execution, slamming the door angrily after him, and wholly unheeding Sam's affectionate request, that he would leave him a lock of his hair before he went.

Sam continued to sit on the large stone, meditating upon what was best to be done, and revolving in his mind a plan for knocking at all the doors within five miles of Bristol, taking them at a hundred and fifty or two hundred a day, and endeavouring to find Miss Arabella by that expedient, when accident all of a sudden threw in his way what he might have sat there for a twelvemonth and yet not found without it.

Into the lane where he sat, there opened three or four garden gates, belonging to as many houses, which though detached from each other, were only separated by their gardens. As these were large and long, and well planted with trees, the houses were not only at some distance off, but the greater part of them were nearly concealed from view. Sam was sitting with his eyes fixed upon the dust-heap outside the next gate to that by which the groom had disappeared, profoundly turning over in his mind the difficulties of his present undertaking, when the gate opened, and a female servant came out into the lane to shake some bedside carpets.

Sam was so very busy with his own thoughts, that it is probable he would have taken no more notice of the young woman than just raising his head and remarking that she had a very neat and pretty figure, if his feelings of gallantry had not been most strongly roused by observing that she had no one to help her, and that the carpets seemed too heavy for her single strength. Mr Weller was a gentleman of great gallantry in his own way, and he no sooner remarked this circumstance than he hastily rose from the large stone, and advanced towards her. 'My dear,' said Sam, sliding up with an air of great respect, 'you'll spile that wery pretty figure out o' all perportion if you shake them carpets by yourself. Let me help you.'

The young lady, who had been coyly affecting not to know that a gentleman was so near, turned round as Sam spoke - no doubt (indeed she said so, afterwards) to decline this offer from a perfect stranger - when instead of speaking, she started back, and uttered a half-suppressed scream. Sam was scarcely less staggered, for in the countenance of the well-shaped female servant, he beheld the very features of his valentine, the pretty housemaid from Mr Nupkins's.

'Wy, Mary, my dear!' said Sam.

'Lauk, Mr Weller,' said Mary, 'how you do frighten one!'

Sam made no verbal answer to this complaint, nor can we precisely say what reply he did make. We merely know that after a short pause Mary said, 'Lor, do adun, Mr Weller!' and that his hat had fallen off a few moments before - from both of which tokens we should be disposed to infer that one kiss, or more, had passed between the parties.

'Why, how did you come here?' said Mary, when the conversation to which this interruption had been offered, was resumed.

'O' course I came to look arter you, my darlin',' replied Mr Weller; for once permitting his passion to get the better of his veracity.

'And how did you know I was here?' inquired Mary. 'Who could have told you that I took another service at Ipswich, and that they afterwards moved all the way here? Who COULD have told you that, Mr Weller?'

'Ah, to be sure,' said Sam, with a cunning look, 'that's the pint. Who could ha' told me?'

'It wasn't Mr Muzzle, was it?' inquired Mary.

'Oh, no.' replied Sam, with a solemn shake of the head, 'it warn't him.'

'It must have been the cook,' said Mary.

'O' course it must,' said Sam.

'Well, I never heard the like of that!' exclaimed Mary.

'No more did I,' said Sam. 'But Mary, my dear' - here Sam's manner grew extremely affectionate - 'Mary, my dear, I've got another affair in hand as is wery pressin'. There's one o' my governor's friends - Mr Winkle, you remember him?'

'Him in the green coat?' said Mary. 'Oh, yes, I remember him.'

'Well,' said Sam, 'he's in a horrid state o' love; reg'larly comfoozled, and done over vith it.'

'Lor!' interposed Mary.

'Yes,' said Sam; 'but that's nothin' if we could find out the young 'ooman;' and here Sam, with many digressions upon the personal beauty of Mary, and the unspeakable tortures he had experienced since he last saw her, gave a faithful account of Mr Winkle's present predicament.

'Well,' said Mary, 'I never did!'

'O' course not,' said Sam, 'and nobody never did, nor never vill neither; and here am I a-walkin' about like the wandering Jew - a sportin' character you have perhaps heerd on Mary, my dear, as vos always doin' a match agin' time, and never vent to sleep - looking arter this here Miss Arabella Allen.'

'Miss who?' said Mary, in great astonishment.

'Miss Arabella Allen,' said Sam.

'Goodness gracious!' said Mary, pointing to the garden door which the sulky groom had locked after him. 'Why, it's that very house; she's been living there these six weeks. Their upper house- maid, which is lady's-maid too, told me all about it over the wash-house palin's before the family was out of bed, one mornin'.'

'Wot, the very next door to you?' said Sam.

'The very next,' replied Mary.

Mr Weller was so deeply overcome on receiving this intelligence that he found it absolutely necessary to cling to his fair informant for support; and divers little love passages had passed between them, before he was sufficiently collected to return to the subject.

'Vell,' said Sam at length, 'if this don't beat cock-fightin' nothin' never vill, as the lord mayor said, ven the chief secretary o' state proposed his missis's health arter dinner. That very next house! Wy, I've got a message to her as I've been a-trying all day to deliver.'

'Ah,' said Mary, 'but you can't deliver it now, because she only walks in the garden in the evening, and then only for a very little time; she never goes out, without the old lady.'

Sam ruminated for a few moments, and finally hit upon the following plan of operations; that he should return just at dusk - the time at which Arabella invariably took her walk - and, being admitted by Mary into the garden of the house to which she belonged, would contrive to scramble up the wall, beneath the overhanging boughs of a large pear-tree, which would effectually screen him from observation; would there deliver his message, and arrange, if possible, an interview on behalf of Mr Winkle for the ensuing evening at the same hour. Having made this arrangement with great despatch, he assisted Mary in the long-deferred occupation of shaking the carpets.

It is not half as innocent a thing as it looks, that shaking little pieces of carpet - at least, there may be no great harm in the shaking, but the folding is a very insidious process. So long as the shaking lasts, and the two parties are kept the carpet's length apart, it is as innocent an amusement as can well be devised; but when the folding begins, and the distance between them gets gradually lessened from one half its former length to a quarter, and then to an eighth, and then to a sixteenth, and then to a thirty-second, if the carpet be long enough, it becomes dangerous. We do not know, to a nicety, how many pieces of carpet were folded in this instance, but we can venture to state that as many pieces as there were, so many times did Sam kiss the pretty housemaid.

Mr Weller regaled himself with moderation at the nearest tavern until it was nearly dusk, and then returned to the lane without the thoroughfare. Having been admitted into the garden by Mary, and having received from that lady sundry admonitions concerning the safety of his limbs and neck, Sam mounted into the pear-tree, to wait until Arabella should come into sight.

He waited so long without this anxiously-expected event occurring, that he began to think it was not going to take place at all, when he heard light footsteps upon the gravel, and immediately afterwards beheld Arabella walking pensively down the garden. As soon as she came nearly below the tree, Sam began, by way of gently indicating his presence, to make sundry diabolical noises similar to those which would probably be natural to a person of middle age who had been afflicted with a combination of inflammatory sore throat, croup, and whooping-cough, from his earliest infancy.

Upon this, the young lady cast a hurried glance towards the spot whence the dreadful sounds proceeded; and her previous alarm being not at all diminished when she saw a man among the branches, she would most certainly have decamped, and alarmed the house, had not fear fortunately deprived her of the power of moving, and caused her to sink down on a garden seat, which happened by good luck to be near at hand.

'She's a-goin' off,' soliloquised Sam in great perplexity. 'Wot a thing it is, as these here young creeturs will go a-faintin' away just ven they oughtn't to. Here, young 'ooman, Miss Sawbones, Mrs. Vinkle, don't!'

Whether it was the magic of Mr Winkle's name, or the coolness of the open air, or some recollection of Mr Weller's voice, that revived Arabella, matters not. She raised her head and languidly inquired, 'Who's that, and what do you want?'

'Hush,' said Sam, swinging himself on to the wall, and crouching there in as small a compass as he could reduce himself to, 'only me, miss, only me.'

'Mr Pickwick's servant!' said Arabella earnestly.

'The very same, miss,' replied Sam. 'Here's Mr Vinkle regularly sewed up with desperation, miss.'

'Ah!' said Arabella, drawing nearer the wall.

'Ah, indeed,' said Sam. 'We thought we should have been obliged to strait-vest him last night; he's been a-ravin' all day; and he says if he can't see you afore to-morrow night's over, he wishes he may be somethin' unpleasanted if he don't drown hisself.'

'Oh, no, no, Mr Weller!' said Arabella, clasping her hands.

'That's wot he says, miss,' replied Sam coolly. 'He's a man of his word, and it's my opinion he'll do it, miss. He's heard all about you from the sawbones in barnacles.'

'From my brother!' said Arabella, having some faint recognition of Sam's description.

'I don't rightly know which is your brother, miss,' replied Sam. 'Is it the dirtiest vun o' the two?'

'Yes, yes, Mr Weller,' returned Arabella, 'go on. Make haste, pray.'

'Well, miss,' said Sam, 'he's heard all about it from him; and it's the gov'nor's opinion that if you don't see him very quick, the sawbones as we've been a-speakin' on, 'ull get as much extra lead in his head as'll rather damage the dewelopment o' the orgins if they ever put it in spirits arterwards.'

'Oh, what can I do to prevent these dreadful quarrels!' exclaimed Arabella.

'It's the suspicion of a priory 'tachment as is the cause of it all,' replied Sam. 'You'd better see him, miss.'

'But how? - where?' cried Arabella. 'I dare not leave the house alone. My brother is so unkind, so unreasonable! I know how strange my talking thus to you may appear, Mr Weller, but I am very, very unhappy - ' and here poor Arabella wept so bitterly that Sam grew chivalrous.

'It may seem wery strange talkin' to me about these here affairs, miss,' said Sam, with great vehemence; 'but all I can say is, that I'm not only ready but villin' to do anythin' as'll make matters agreeable; and if chuckin' either o' them sawboneses out o' winder 'ull do it, I'm the man.' As Sam Weller said this, he tucked up his wristbands, at the imminent hazard of falling off the wall in so doing, to intimate his readiness to set to work immediately.

Flattering as these professions of good feeling were, Arabella resolutely declined (most unaccountably, as Sam thought) to avail herself of them. For some time she strenuously refused to grant Mr Winkle the interview Sam had so pathetically requested; but at length, when the conversation threatened to be interrupted by the unwelcome arrival of a third party, she hurriedly gave him to understand, with many professions of gratitude, that it was barely possible she might be in the garden an hour later, next evening. Sam understood this perfectly well; and Arabella, bestowing upon him one of her sweetest smiles, tripped gracefully away, leaving Mr Weller in a state of very great admiration of her charms, both personal and mental.

Having descended in safety from the wall, and not forgotten to devote a few moments to his own particular business in the same department, Mr Weller then made the best of his way back to the Bush, where his prolonged absence had occasioned much speculation and some alarm.

'We must be careful,' said Mr Pickwick, after listening attentively to Sam's tale, 'not for our sakes, but for that of the young lady. We must be very cautious.'

'WE!' said Mr Winkle, with marked emphasis.

Mr Pickwick's momentary look of indignation at the tone of this remark, subsided into his characteristic expression of benevolence, as he replied -

'WE, Sir! I shall accompany you.'

'You!' said Mr Winkle.

'I,' replied Mr Pickwick mildly. 'In affording you this interview, the young lady has taken a natural, perhaps, but still a very imprudent step. If I am present at the meeting - a mutual friend, who is old enough to be the father of both parties - the voice of calumny can never be raised against her hereafter.'

Mr Pickwick's eyes lightened with honest exultation at his own foresight, as he spoke thus. Mr Winkle was touched by this little trait

of his delicate respect for the young PROTEGEE of his friend, and took his hand with a feeling of regard, akin to veneration.

'You SHALL go,' said Mr Winkle.

'I will,' said Mr Pickwick. 'Sam, have my greatcoat and shawl ready, and order a conveyance to be at the door to-morrow evening, rather earlier than is absolutely necessary, in order that we may be in good time.'

Mr Weller touched his hat, as an earnest of his obedience, and withdrew to make all needful preparations for the expedition.

The coach was punctual to the time appointed; and Mr Weller, after duly installing Mr Pickwick and Mr Winkle inside, took his seat on the box by the driver. They alighted, as had been agreed on, about a quarter of a mile from the place of rendezvous, and desiring the coachman to await their return, proceeded the remaining distance on foot.

It was at this stage of the undertaking that Mr Pickwick, with many smiles and various other indications of great self-satisfaction, produced from one of his coat pockets a dark lantern, with which he had specially provided himself for the occasion, and the great mechanical beauty of which he proceeded to explain to Mr Winkle, as they walked along, to the no small surprise of the few stragglers they met.

'I should have been the better for something of this kind, in my last garden expedition, at night; eh, Sam?' said Mr Pickwick, looking good-humouredly round at his follower, who was trudging behind.

'Wery nice things, if they're managed properly, Sir,' replied Mr Weller; 'but wen you don't want to be seen, I think they're more useful arter the candle's gone out, than wen it's alight.'

Mr Pickwick appeared struck by Sam's remarks, for he put the lantern into his pocket again, and they walked on in silence.

'Down here, Sir,' said Sam. 'Let me lead the way. This is the lane, Sir.'

Down the lane they went, and dark enough it was. Mr Pickwick brought out the lantern, once or twice, as they groped their way along, and threw a very brilliant little tunnel of light before them, about a foot in diameter. It was very pretty to look at, but seemed to have the effect of rendering surrounding objects rather darker than before.

At length they arrived at the large stone. Here Sam recommended his master and Mr Winkle to seat themselves, while he reconnoitred, and ascertained whether Mary was yet in waiting.

After an absence of five or ten minutes, Sam returned to say that the gate was opened, and all quiet. Following him with stealthy tread, Mr Pickwick and Mr Winkle soon found themselves in the garden. Here everybody said, 'Hush!' a good many times; and that being done, no one seemed to have any very distinct apprehension of what was to be done next.

'Is Miss Allen in the garden yet, Mary?' inquired Mr Winkle, much agitated.

'I don't know, sir,' replied the pretty housemaid. 'The best thing to be done, sir, will be for Mr Weller to give you a hoist up into the tree, and perhaps Mr Pickwick will have the goodness to see that nobody comes up the lane, while I watch at the other end of the garden. Goodness gracious, what's that?'

'That 'ere blessed lantern 'ull be the death on us all,' exclaimed Sam peevishly. 'Take care wot you're a-doin' on, sir; you're a-sendin' a blaze o' light, right into the back parlour winder.'

'Dear me!' said Mr Pickwick, turning hastily aside, 'I didn't mean to do that.'

'Now, it's in the next house, sir,' remonstrated Sam.

'Bless my heart!' exclaimed Mr Pickwick, turning round again.

'Now, it's in the stable, and they'll think the place is afire,' said Sam. 'Shut it up, sir, can't you?'

'It's the most extraordinary lantern I ever met with, in all my life!' exclaimed Mr Pickwick, greatly bewildered by the effects he had so unintentionally produced. 'I never saw such a powerful reflector.'

'It'll be vun too powerful for us, if you keep blazin' away in that manner, sir,' replied Sam, as Mr Pickwick, after various unsuccessful efforts, managed to close the slide. 'There's the young lady's footsteps. Now, Mr Winkle, sir, up vith you.'

'Stop, stop!' said Mr Pickwick, 'I must speak to her first. Help me up, Sam.'

'Gently, Sir,' said Sam, planting his head against the wall, and making a platform of his back. 'Step atop o' that 'ere flower-pot, Sir. Now then, up with you.'

'I'm afraid I shall hurt you, Sam,' said Mr Pickwick.

'Never mind me, Sir,' replied Sam. 'Lend him a hand, Mr Winkle. sir. Steady, sir, steady! That's the time o' day!'

As Sam spoke, Mr Pickwick, by exertions almost supernatural in a gentleman of his years and weight, contrived to get upon Sam's back; and Sam gently raising himself up, and Mr Pickwick holding on fast by the top of the wall, while Mr Winkle clasped him tight by the legs, they contrived by these means to bring his spectacles just above the level of the coping.

'My dear,' said Mr Pickwick, looking over the wall, and catching sight of Arabella, on the other side, 'don't be frightened, my dear, it's only me.' 'Oh, pray go away, Mr Pickwick,' said Arabella. 'Tell them all to go away. I am so dreadfully frightened. Dear, dear Mr Pickwick, don't stop there. You'll fall down and kill yourself, I know you will.'

'Now, pray don't alarm yourself, my dear,' said Mr Pickwick soothingly. 'There is not the least cause for fear, I assure you. Stand firm, Sam,' said Mr Pickwick, looking down.

'All right, sir,' replied Mr Weller. 'Don't be longer than you can conveniently help, sir. You're rayther heavy.'

'Only another moment, Sam,' replied Mr Pickwick.

'I merely wished you to know, my dear, that I should not have allowed my young friend to see you in this clandestine way, if the situation in which you are placed had left him any alternative; and, lest the impropriety of this step should cause you any uneasiness, my love, it may be a satisfaction to you, to know that I am present. That's all, my dear.'

'Indeed, Mr Pickwick, I am very much obliged to you for your kindness and consideration,' replied Arabella, drying her tears with her handkerchief. She would probably have said much more, had not Mr Pickwick's head disappeared with great swiftness, in consequence of a false step on Sam's shoulder which brought him suddenly to the ground. He was up again in an instant however; and bidding Mr Winkle make haste and get the interview over, ran out into the lane to keep watch, with all the courage and ardour of youth. Mr Winkle himself, inspired by the occasion, was on the wall in a moment, merely pausing to request Sam to be careful of his master.

'I'll take care on him, sir,' replied Sam. 'Leave him to me.'

'Where is he? What's he doing, Sam?' inquired Mr Winkle.

'Bless his old gaiters,' rejoined Sam, looking out at the garden door. 'He's a-keepin' guard in the lane vith that 'ere dark lantern, like a amiable Guy Fawkes! I never see such a fine creetur in my days. Blessed if I don't think his heart must ha' been born five- and-twenty year arter his body, at least!'

Mr Winkle stayed not to hear the encomium upon his friend. He had dropped from the wall; thrown himself at Arabella's feet; and by this time was pleading the sincerity of his passion with an eloquence worthy even of Mr Pickwick himself.

While these things were going on in the open air, an elderly gentleman of scientific attainments was seated in his library, two or three houses off, writing a philosophical treatise, and ever and anon moistening his clay and his labours with a glass of claret from a venerable-looking bottle which stood by his side. In the agonies of composition, the elderly gentleman looked sometimes at the carpet, sometimes at the ceiling, and sometimes at the wall; and when neither carpet, ceiling, nor wall afforded the requisite degree of inspiration, he looked out of the window. In one of these pauses of invention, the scientific gentleman was gazing abstractedly on the thick darkness outside, when he was very much surprised by observing a most brilliant light glide through the air, at a short distance above the ground, and almost instantaneously vanish. After a short time the phenomenon was repeated, not once or twice, but several times; at last the scientific gentleman, laying down his pen, began to consider to what natural causes these appearances were to be assigned.

They were not meteors; they were too low. They were not glow-worms; they were too high. They were not will-o'-the-wisps; they were not fireflies; they were not fireworks. What could they be? Some extraordinary and wonderful phenomenon of nature, which no philosopher had ever seen before; something which it had been reserved for him alone to discover, and which he should immortalise his name by chronicling for the benefit of posterity. Full of this idea, the scientific gentleman seized his pen again, and committed to paper sundry notes of these unparalleled appearances, with the date, day, hour, minute, and precise second at which they were visible: all of which were to form the data of a voluminous treatise of great research and deep learning, which should astonish all the atmospherical wiseacres that ever drew breath in any part of the civilised globe.

He threw himself back in his easy-chair, wrapped in contemplations of his future greatness. The mysterious light appeared more brilliantly

than before, dancing, to all appearance, up and down the lane, crossing from side to side, and moving in an orbit as eccentric as comets themselves.

The scientific gentleman was a bachelor. He had no wife to call in and astonish, so he rang the bell for his servant.

'Pruffle,' said the scientific gentleman, 'there is something very extraordinary in the air to-night? Did you see that?' said the scientific gentleman, pointing out of the window, as the light again became visible.

'Yes, I did, Sir.'

'What do you think of it, Pruffle?'

'Think of it, Sir?'

'Yes. You have been bred up in this country. What should you say was the cause for those lights, now?'

The scientific gentleman smilingly anticipated Pruffle's reply that he could assign no cause for them at all. Pruffle meditated.

'I should say it was thieves, Sir,' said Pruffle at length.

'You're a fool, and may go downstairs,' said the scientific gentleman.

'Thank you, Sir,' said Pruffle. And down he went. But the scientific gentleman could not rest under the idea of the ingenious treatise he had projected being lost to the world, which must inevitably be the case if the speculation of the ingenious Mr Pruffle were not stifled in its birth. He put on his hat and walked quickly down the garden, determined to investigate the matter to the very bottom.

Now, shortly before the scientific gentleman walked out into the garden, Mr Pickwick had run down the lane as fast as he could, to convey a false alarm that somebody was coming that way; occasionally drawing back the slide of the dark lantern to keep himself from the ditch. The alarm was no sooner given, than Mr Winkle scrambled back over the wall, and Arabella ran into the house; the garden gate was shut, and the three adventurers were making the best of their way down the lane, when they were startled by the scientific gentleman unlocking his garden gate.

'Hold hard,' whispered Sam, who was, of course, the first of the party. 'Show a light for just vun second, Sir.'

Mr Pickwick did as he was desired, and Sam, seeing a man's head peeping out very cautiously within half a yard of his own, gave it a gentle tap with his clenched fist, which knocked it, with a hollow sound, against the gate. Having performed this feat with great suddenness and dexterity, Mr Weller caught Mr Pickwick up on his back, and followed Mr Winkle down the lane at a pace which, considering the burden he carried, was perfectly astonishing.

'Have you got your vind back agin, Sir,' inquired Sam, when they had reached the end.

'Quite. Quite, now,' replied Mr Pickwick.

'Then come along, Sir,' said Sam, setting his master on his feet again. 'Come between us, sir. Not half a mile to run. Think you're vinnin' a cup, sir. Now for it.'

Thus encouraged, Mr Pickwick made the very best use of his legs. It may be confidently stated that a pair of black gaiters never got over the ground in better style than did those of Mr Pickwick on this memorable occasion.

The coach was waiting, the horses were fresh, the roads were good, and the driver was willing. The whole party arrived in safety at the Bush before Mr Pickwick had recovered his breath.

'in with you at once, sir,' said Sam, as he helped his master out. 'Don't stop a second in the street, arter that 'ere exercise. Beg your pardon, sir,' continued Sam, touching his hat as Mr Winkle descended, 'hope there warn't a priory 'tachment, sir?'

Mr Winkle grasped his humble friend by the hand, and whispered in his ear, 'It's all right, Sam; quite right.' Upon which Mr Weller struck three distinct blows upon his nose in token of intelligence, smiled, winked, and proceeded to put the steps up, with a countenance expressive of lively satisfaction.

As to the scientific gentleman, he demonstrated, in a masterly treatise, that these wonderful lights were the effect of electricity; and clearly proved the same by detailing how a flash of fire danced before his eyes when he put his head out of the gate, and how he received a shock which stunned him for a quarter of an hour afterwards; which demonstration delighted all the scientific associations beyond measure, and caused him to be considered a light of science ever afterwards.