

Chapter XL

Introduces Mr Pickwick To A New And Not Uninteresting Scene In The Great Drama Of Life

The remainder of the period which Mr Pickwick had assigned as the duration of the stay at Bath passed over without the occurrence of anything material. Trinity term commenced. On the expiration of its first week, Mr Pickwick and his friends returned to London; and the former gentleman, attended of course by Sam, straightway repaired to his old quarters at the George and Vulture.

On the third morning after their arrival, just as all the clocks in the city were striking nine individually, and somewhere about nine hundred and ninety-nine collectively, Sam was taking the air in George Yard, when a queer sort of fresh-painted vehicle drove up, out of which there jumped with great agility, throwing the reins to a stout man who sat beside him, a queer sort of gentleman, who seemed made for the vehicle, and the vehicle for him.

The vehicle was not exactly a gig, neither was it a stanhope. It was not what is currently denominated a dog-cart, neither was it a taxed cart, nor a chaise-cart, nor a guillotined cabriolet; and yet it had something of the character of each and every of these machines. It was painted a bright yellow, with the shafts and wheels picked out in black; and the driver sat in the orthodox sporting style, on cushions piled about two feet above the rail. The horse was a bay, a well-looking animal enough; but with something of a flash and dog-fighting air about him, nevertheless, which accorded both with the vehicle and his master.

The master himself was a man of about forty, with black hair, and carefully combed whiskers. He was dressed in a particularly gorgeous manner, with plenty of articles of jewellery about him - all about three sizes larger than those which are usually worn by gentlemen - and a rough greatcoat to crown the whole. Into one pocket of this greatcoat, he thrust his left hand the moment he dismounted, while from the other he drew forth, with his right, a very bright and glaring silk handkerchief, with which he whisked a speck or two of dust from his boots, and then, crumpling it in his hand, swaggered up the court.

It had not escaped Sam's attention that, when this person dismounted, a shabby-looking man in a brown greatcoat shorn of divers buttons, who had been previously slinking about, on the opposite side of the way, crossed over, and remained stationary close by. Having something more than a suspicion of the object of the gentleman's visit, Sam preceded him to the George and Vulture, and, turning sharp round, planted himself in the Centre of the doorway.

'Now, my fine fellow!' said the man in the rough coat, in an imperious tone, attempting at the same time to push his way past.

'Now, Sir, wot's the matter?' replied Sam, returning the push with compound interest.

'Come, none of this, my man; this won't do with me,' said the owner of the rough coat, raising his voice, and turning white. 'Here, Smouch!'

'Well, wot's amiss here?' growled the man in the brown coat, who had been gradually sneaking up the court during this short dialogue.

'Only some insolence of this young man's,' said the principal, giving Sam another push.

'Come, none o' this gammon,' growled Smouch, giving him another, and a harder one.

This last push had the effect which it was intended by the experienced Mr Smouch to produce; for while Sam, anxious to return the compliment, was grinding that gentleman's body against the door-post, the principal crept past, and made his way to the bar, whither Sam, after bandying a few epithetical remarks with Mr Smouch, followed at once.

'Good-morning, my dear,' said the principal, addressing the young lady at the bar, with Botany Bay ease, and New South Wales gentility; 'which is Mr Pickwick's room, my dear?'

'Show him up,' said the barmaid to a waiter, without deigning another look at the exquisite, in reply to his inquiry.

The waiter led the way upstairs as he was desired, and the man in the rough coat followed, with Sam behind him, who, in his progress up the staircase, indulged in sundry gestures indicative of supreme contempt and defiance, to the unspeakable gratification of the servants and other lookers-on. Mr Smouch, who was troubled with a hoarse cough, remained below, and expectorated in the passage.

Mr Pickwick was fast asleep in bed, when his early visitor, followed by Sam, entered the room. The noise they made, in so doing, awoke him.

'Shaving-water, Sam,' said Mr Pickwick, from within the curtains.

'Shave you directly, Mr Pickwick,' said the visitor, drawing one of them back from the bed's head. 'I've got an execution against you, at the suit of Bardell. - Here's the warrant. - Common Pleas. - Here's my card. I suppose you'll come over to my house.' Giving Mr Pickwick a

friendly tap on the shoulder, the sheriff's officer (for such he was) threw his card on the counterpane, and pulled a gold toothpick from his waistcoat pocket.

'Namby's the name,' said the sheriff's deputy, as Mr Pickwick took his spectacles from under the pillow, and put them on, to read the card. 'Namby, Bell Alley, Coleman Street.'

At this point, Sam Weller, who had had his eyes fixed hitherto on Mr Namby's shining beaver, interfered.

'Are you a Quaker?' said Sam.

'I'll let you know I am, before I've done with you,' replied the indignant officer. 'I'll teach you manners, my fine fellow, one of these fine mornings.'

'Thank'ee,' said Sam. 'I'll do the same to you. Take your hat off.' With this, Mr Weller, in the most dexterous manner, knocked Mr Namby's hat to the other side of the room, with such violence, that he had very nearly caused him to swallow the gold toothpick into the bargain.

'Observe this, Mr Pickwick,' said the disconcerted officer, gasping for breath. 'I've been assaulted in the execution of my dooty by your servant in your chamber. I'm in bodily fear. I call you to witness this.'

'Don't witness nothin', Sir,' interposed Sam. 'Shut your eyes up tight, Sir. I'd pitch him out o' winder, only he couldn't fall far enough, 'cause o' the leads outside.'

'Sam,' said Mr Pickwick, in an angry voice, as his attendant made various demonstrations of hostilities, 'if you say another word, or offer the slightest interference with this person, I discharge you that instant.'

'But, Sir!' said Sam.

'Hold your tongue,' interposed Mr Pickwick. 'Take that hat up again.'

But this Sam flatly and positively refused to do; and, after he had been severely reprimanded by his master, the officer, being in a hurry, condescended to pick it up himself, venting a great variety of threats against Sam meanwhile, which that gentleman received with perfect composure, merely observing that if Mr Namby would have the goodness to put his hat on again, he would knock it into the latter end of next week. Mr Namby, perhaps thinking that such a process might be productive of inconvenience to himself, declined to offer the temptation, and, soon after, called up Smouch. Having informed him

that the capture was made, and that he was to wait for the prisoner until he should have finished dressing, Namby then swaggered out, and drove away. Smouch, requesting Mr Pickwick in a surly manner 'to be as alive as he could, for it was a busy time,' drew up a chair by the door and sat there, until he had finished dressing. Sam was then despatched for a hackney-coach, and in it the triumvirate proceeded to Coleman Street. It was fortunate the distance was short; for Mr Smouch, besides possessing no very enchanting conversational powers, was rendered a decidedly unpleasant companion in a limited space, by the physical weakness to which we have elsewhere adverted.

The coach having turned into a very narrow and dark street, stopped before a house with iron bars to all the windows; the door-posts of which were graced by the name and title of 'Namby, Officer to the Sheriffs of London'; the inner gate having been opened by a gentleman who might have passed for a neglected twin-brother of Mr Smouch, and who was endowed with a large key for the purpose, Mr Pickwick was shown into the 'coffee-room.'

This coffee-room was a front parlour, the principal features of which were fresh sand and stale tobacco smoke. Mr Pickwick bowed to the three persons who were seated in it when he entered; and having despatched Sam for Perker, withdrew into an obscure corner, and looked thence with some curiosity upon his new companions.

One of these was a mere boy of nineteen or twenty, who, though it was yet barely ten o'clock, was drinking gin-and-water, and smoking a cigar - amusements to which, judging from his inflamed countenance, he had devoted himself pretty constantly for the last year or two of his life. Opposite him, engaged in stirring the fire with the toe of his right boot, was a coarse, vulgar young man of about thirty, with a sallow face and harsh voice; evidently possessed of that knowledge of the world, and captivating freedom of manner, which is to be acquired in public-house parlours, and at low billiard tables. The third tenant of the apartment was a middle-aged man in a very old suit of black, who looked pale and haggard, and paced up and down the room incessantly; stopping, now and then, to look with great anxiety out of the window as if he expected somebody, and then resuming his walk.

'You'd better have the loan of my razor this morning, Mr Ayresleigh,' said the man who was stirring the fire, tipping the wink to his friend the boy.

'Thank you, no, I shan't want it; I expect I shall be out, in the course of an hour or so,' replied the other in a hurried manner. Then, walking again up to the window, and once more returning disappointed, he sighed deeply, and left the room; upon which the other two burst into a loud laugh.

'Well, I never saw such a game as that,' said the gentleman who had offered the razor, whose name appeared to be Price. 'Never!' Mr Price confirmed the assertion with an oath, and then laughed again, when of course the boy (who thought his companion one of the most dashing fellows alive) laughed also.

'You'd hardly think, would you now,' said Price, turning towards Mr Pickwick, 'that that chap's been here a week yesterday, and never once shaved himself yet, because he feels so certain he's going out in half an hour's time, thinks he may as well put it off till he gets home?'

'Poor man!' said Mr Pickwick. 'Are his chances of getting out of his difficulties really so great?'

'Chances be d - d,' replied Price; 'he hasn't half the ghost of one. I wouldn't give THAT for his chance of walking about the streets this time ten years.' With this, Mr Price snapped his fingers contemptuously, and rang the bell.

'Give me a sheet of paper, Crookey,' said Mr Price to the attendant, who in dress and general appearance looked something between a bankrupt glazier, and a drover in a state of insolvency; 'and a glass of brandy-and-water, Crookey, d'ye hear? I'm going to write to my father, and I must have a stimulant, or I shan't be able to pitch it strong enough into the old boy.' At this facetious speech, the young boy, it is almost needless to say, was fairly convulsed.

'That's right,' said Mr Price. 'Never say die. All fun, ain't it?'

'Prime!' said the young gentleman.

'You've got some spirit about you, you have,' said Price. 'You've seen something of life.'

'I rather think I have!' replied the boy. He had looked at it through the dirty panes of glass in a bar door.

Mr Pickwick, feeling not a little disgusted with this dialogue, as well as with the air and manner of the two beings by whom it had been carried on, was about to inquire whether he could not be accommodated with a private sitting-room, when two or three strangers of genteel appearance entered, at sight of whom the boy threw his cigar into the fire, and whispering to Mr Price that they had come to 'make it all right' for him, joined them at a table in the farther end of the room.

It would appear, however, that matters were not going to be made all right quite so speedily as the young gentleman anticipated; for a very

long conversation ensued, of which Mr Pickwick could not avoid hearing certain angry fragments regarding dissolute conduct, and repeated forgiveness. At last, there were very distinct allusions made by the oldest gentleman of the party to one Whitecross Street, at which the young gentleman, notwithstanding his primeness and his spirit, and his knowledge of life into the bargain, reclined his head upon the table, and howled dismally.

Very much satisfied with this sudden bringing down of the youth's valour, and this effectual lowering of his tone, Mr Pickwick rang the bell, and was shown, at his own request, into a private room furnished with a carpet, table, chairs, sideboard and sofa, and ornamented with a looking-glass, and various old prints. Here he had the advantage of hearing Mrs. Namby's performance on a square piano overhead, while the breakfast was getting ready; when it came, Mr Perker came too.

'Aha, my dear sir,' said the little man, 'nailed at last, eh? Come, come, I'm not sorry for it either, because now you'll see the absurdity of this conduct. I've noted down the amount of the taxed costs and damages for which the ca-sa was issued, and we had better settle at once and lose no time. Namby is come home by this time, I dare say. What say you, my dear sir? Shall I draw a cheque, or will you?' The little man rubbed his hands with affected cheerfulness as he said this, but glancing at Mr Pickwick's countenance, could not forbear at the same time casting a desponding look towards Sam Weller.

'Perker,' said Mr Pickwick, 'let me hear no more of this, I beg. I see no advantage in staying here, so I shall go to prison to-night.'

'You can't go to Whitecross Street, my dear Sir,' said Perker. 'Impossible! There are sixty beds in a ward; and the bolt's on, sixteen hours out of the four-and-twenty.'

'I would rather go to some other place of confinement if I can,' said Mr Pickwick. 'If not, I must make the best I can of that.'

'You can go to the Fleet, my dear Sir, if you're determined to go somewhere,' said Perker.

'That'll do,' said Mr Pickwick. 'I'll go there directly I have finished my breakfast.'

'Stop, stop, my dear Sir; not the least occasion for being in such a violent hurry to get into a place that most other men are as eager to get out of,' said the good-natured little attorney. 'We must have a habeas-corpus. There'll be no judge at chambers till four o'clock this afternoon. You must wait till then.'

'Very good,' said Mr Pickwick, with unmoved patience. 'Then we will have a chop here, at two. See about it, Sam, and tell them to be punctual.'

Mr Pickwick remaining firm, despite all the remonstrances and arguments of Perker, the chops appeared and disappeared in due course; he was then put into another hackney coach, and carried off to Chancery Lane, after waiting half an hour or so for Mr Namby, who had a select dinner-party and could on no account be disturbed before.

There were two judges in attendance at Serjeant's Inn - one King's Bench, and one Common Pleas - and a great deal of business appeared to be transacting before them, if the number of lawyer's clerks who were hurrying in and out with bundles of papers, afforded any test. When they reached the low archway which forms the entrance to the inn, Perker was detained a few moments parlaying with the coachman about the fare and the change; and Mr Pickwick, stepping to one side to be out of the way of the stream of people that were pouring in and out, looked about him with some curiosity.

The people that attracted his attention most, were three or four men of shabby-genteel appearance, who touched their hats to many of the attorneys who passed, and seemed to have some business there, the nature of which Mr Pickwick could not divine. They were curious-looking fellows. One was a slim and rather lame man in rusty black, and a white neckerchief; another was a stout, burly person, dressed in the same apparel, with a great reddish-black cloth round his neck; a third was a little weazen, drunken-looking body, with a pimply face. They were loitering about, with their hands behind them, and now and then with an anxious countenance whispered something in the ear of some of the gentlemen with papers, as they hurried by. Mr Pickwick remembered to have very often observed them lounging under the archway when he had been walking past; and his curiosity was quite excited to know to what branch of the profession these dingy-looking loungers could possibly belong.

He was about to propound the question to Namby, who kept close beside him, sucking a large gold ring on his little finger, when Perker bustled up, and observing that there was no time to lose, led the way into the inn. As Mr Pickwick followed, the lame man stepped up to him, and civilly touching his hat, held out a written card, which Mr Pickwick, not wishing to hurt the man's feelings by refusing, courteously accepted and deposited in his waistcoat pocket.

'Now,' said Perker, turning round before he entered one of the offices, to see that his companions were close behind him. 'In here, my dear sir. Hallo, what do you want?'

This last question was addressed to the lame man, who, unobserved by Mr Pickwick, made one of the party. In reply to it, the lame man touched his hat again, with all imaginable politeness, and motioned towards Mr Pickwick.

'No, no,' said Perker, with a smile. 'We don't want you, my dear friend, we don't want you.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said the lame man. 'The gentleman took my card. I hope you will employ me, sir. The gentleman nodded to me. I'll be judged by the gentleman himself. You nodded to me, sir?'

'Pooh, pooh, nonsense. You didn't nod to anybody, Pickwick? A mistake, a mistake,' said Perker.

'The gentleman handed me his card,' replied Mr Pickwick, producing it from his waistcoat pocket. 'I accepted it, as the gentleman seemed to wish it - in fact I had some curiosity to look at it when I should be at leisure. I - '

The little attorney burst into a loud laugh, and returning the card to the lame man, informing him it was all a mistake, whispered to Mr Pickwick as the man turned away in dudgeon, that he was only a bail.

'A what!' exclaimed Mr Pickwick.

'A bail,' replied Perker.

'A bail!' 'Yes, my dear sir - half a dozen of 'em here. Bail you to any amount, and only charge half a crown. Curious trade, isn't it?' said Perker, regaling himself with a pinch of snuff.

'What! Am I to understand that these men earn a livelihood by waiting about here, to perjure themselves before the judges of the land, at the rate of half a crown a crime?' exclaimed Mr Pickwick, quite aghast at the disclosure.

'Why, I don't exactly know about perjury, my dear sir,' replied the little gentleman. 'Harsh word, my dear sir, very harsh word indeed. It's a legal fiction, my dear sir, nothing more.' Saying which, the attorney shrugged his shoulders, smiled, took a second pinch of snuff, and led the way into the office of the judge's clerk.

This was a room of specially dirty appearance, with a very low ceiling and old panelled walls; and so badly lighted, that although it was broad day outside, great tallow candles were burning on the desks. At one end, was a door leading to the judge's private apartment, round which were congregated a crowd of attorneys and managing clerks,

who were called in, in the order in which their respective appointments stood upon the file. Every time this door was opened to let a party out, the next party made a violent rush to get in; and, as in addition to the numerous dialogues which passed between the gentlemen who were waiting to see the judge, a variety of personal squabbles ensued between the greater part of those who had seen him, there was as much noise as could well be raised in an apartment of such confined dimensions.

Nor were the conversations of these gentlemen the only sounds that broke upon the ear. Standing on a box behind a wooden bar at another end of the room was a clerk in spectacles who was 'taking the affidavits'; large batches of which were, from time to time, carried into the private room by another clerk for the judge's signature. There were a large number of attorneys' clerks to be sworn, and it being a moral impossibility to swear them all at once, the struggles of these gentlemen to reach the clerk in spectacles, were like those of a crowd to get in at the pit door of a theatre when Gracious Majesty honours it with its presence. Another functionary, from time to time, exercised his lungs in calling over the names of those who had been sworn, for the purpose of restoring to them their affidavits after they had been signed by the judge, which gave rise to a few more scuffles; and all these things going on at the same time, occasioned as much bustle as the most active and excitable person could desire to behold. There were yet another class of persons - those who were waiting to attend summonses their employers had taken out, which it was optional to the attorney on the opposite side to attend or not - and whose business it was, from time to time, to cry out the opposite attorney's name; to make certain that he was not in attendance without their knowledge.

For example. Leaning against the wall, close beside the seat Mr Pickwick had taken, was an office-lad of fourteen, with a tenor voice; near him a common-law clerk with a bass one.

A clerk hurried in with a bundle of papers, and stared about him.

'Sniggle and Blink,' cried the tenor.

'Porkin and Snob,' growled the bass. 'Stumpy and Deacon,' said the new-comer.

Nobody answered; the next man who came in, was bailed by the whole three; and he in his turn shouted for another firm; and then somebody else roared in a loud voice for another; and so forth.

All this time, the man in the spectacles was hard at work, swearing the clerks; the oath being invariably administered, without any effort at punctuation, and usually in the following terms: -

'Take the book in your right hand this is your name and hand- writing you swear that the contents of this your affidavit are true so help you God a shilling you must get change I haven't got it.'

'Well, Sam,' said Mr Pickwick, 'I suppose they are getting the HABEAS-CORPUS ready?'

'Yes,' said Sam, 'and I wish they'd bring out the have-his- carcass. It's very unpleasant keepin' us waitin' here. I'd ha' got half a dozen have-his-carcasses ready, pack'd up and all, by this time.'

What sort of cumbrous and unmanageable machine, Sam Weller imagined a habeas-corpus to be, does not appear; for Perker, at that moment, walked up and took Mr Pickwick away.

The usual forms having been gone through, the body of Samuel Pickwick was soon afterwards confided to the custody of the tipstaff, to be by him taken to the warden of the Fleet Prison, and there detained until the amount of the damages and costs in the action of Bardell against Pickwick was fully paid and satisfied.

'And that,' said Mr Pickwick, laughing, 'will be a very long time. Sam, call another hackney-coach. Perker, my dear friend, good-bye.'

'I shall go with you, and see you safe there,' said Perker.

'Indeed,' replied Mr Pickwick, 'I would rather go without any other attendant than Sam. As soon as I get settled, I will write and let you know, and I shall expect you immediately. Until then, good-bye.'

As Mr Pickwick said this, he got into the coach which had by this time arrived, followed by the tipstaff. Sam having stationed himself on the box, it rolled away.

'A most extraordinary man that!' said Perker, as he stopped to pull on his gloves.

'What a bankrupt he'd make, Sir,' observed Mr Lowten, who was standing near. 'How he would bother the commissioners! He'd set 'em at defiance if they talked of committing him, Sir.'

The attorney did not appear very much delighted with his clerk's professional estimate of Mr Pickwick's character, for he walked away without deigning any reply.

The hackney-coach jolted along Fleet Street, as hackney-coaches usually do. The horses 'went better', the driver said, when they had anything before them (they must have gone at a most extraordinary pace when there was nothing), and so the vehicle kept behind a cart; when the cart stopped, it stopped; and when the cart went on again, it did the same. Mr Pickwick sat opposite the tipstaff; and the tipstaff sat with his hat between his knees, whistling a tune, and looking out of the coach window.

Time performs wonders. By the powerful old gentleman's aid, even a hackney-coach gets over half a mile of ground. They stopped at length, and Mr Pickwick alighted at the gate of the Fleet.

The tipstaff, just looking over his shoulder to see that his charge was following close at his heels, preceded Mr Pickwick into the prison; turning to the left, after they had entered, they passed through an open door into a lobby, from which a heavy gate, opposite to that by which they had entered, and which was guarded by a stout turnkey with the key in his hand, led at once into the interior of the prison.

Here they stopped, while the tipstaff delivered his papers; and here Mr Pickwick was apprised that he would remain, until he had undergone the ceremony, known to the initiated as 'sitting for your portrait.'

'Sitting for my portrait?' said Mr Pickwick.

'Having your likeness taken, sir,' replied the stout turnkey. 'We're capital hands at likenesses here. Take 'em in no time, and always exact. Walk in, sir, and make yourself at home.'

Mr Pickwick complied with the invitation, and sat himself down; when Mr Weller, who stationed himself at the back of the chair, whispered that the sitting was merely another term for undergoing an inspection by the different turnkeys, in order that they might know prisoners from visitors.

'Well, Sam,' said Mr Pickwick, 'then I wish the artists would come. This is rather a public place.'

'They von't be long, Sir, I des-say,' replied Sam. 'There's a Dutch clock, sir.'

'So I see,' observed Mr Pickwick.

'And a bird-cage, sir,' says Sam. 'Veels vithin veels, a prison in a prison. Ain't it, Sir?'

As Mr Weller made this philosophical remark, Mr Pickwick was aware that his sitting had commenced. The stout turnkey having been relieved from the lock, sat down, and looked at him carelessly, from time to time, while a long thin man who had relieved him, thrust his hands beneath his coat tails, and planting himself opposite, took a good long view of him. A third rather surly-looking gentleman, who had apparently been disturbed at his tea, for he was disposing of the last remnant of a crust and butter when he came in, stationed himself close to Mr Pickwick; and, resting his hands on his hips, inspected him narrowly; while two others mixed with the group, and studied his features with most intent and thoughtful faces. Mr Pickwick winced a good deal under the operation, and appeared to sit very uneasily in his chair; but he made no remark to anybody while it was being performed, not even to Sam, who reclined upon the back of the chair, reflecting, partly on the situation of his master, and partly on the great satisfaction it would have afforded him to make a fierce assault upon all the turnkeys there assembled, one after the other, if it were lawful and peaceable so to do.

At length the likeness was completed, and Mr Pickwick was informed that he might now proceed into the prison.

'Where am I to sleep to-night?' inquired Mr Pickwick.

'Why, I don't rightly know about to-night,' replied the stout turnkey. 'You'll be chummed on somebody to-morrow, and then you'll be all snug and comfortable. The first night's generally rather unsettled, but you'll be set all squares to-morrow.'

After some discussion, it was discovered that one of the turnkeys had a bed to let, which Mr Pickwick could have for that night. He gladly agreed to hire it.

'If you'll come with me, I'll show it you at once,' said the man. 'It ain't a large 'un; but it's an out-and-outer to sleep in. This way, sir.'

They passed through the inner gate, and descended a short flight of steps. The key was turned after them; and Mr Pickwick found himself, for the first time in his life, within the walls of a debtors' prison.