

Chapter LII

Involving A Serious Change In The Weller Family, And The Untimely Downfall Of Mr Stiggins

Considering it a matter of delicacy to abstain from introducing either Bob Sawyer or Ben Allen to the young couple, until they were fully prepared to expect them, and wishing to spare Arabella's feelings as much as possible, Mr Pickwick proposed that he and Sam should alight in the neighbourhood of the George and Vulture, and that the two young men should for the present take up their quarters elsewhere. To this they very readily agreed, and the proposition was accordingly acted upon; Mr Ben Allen and Mr Bob Sawyer betaking themselves to a sequestered pot-shop on the remotest confines of the Borough, behind the bar door of which their names had in other days very often appeared at the head of long and complex calculations worked in white chalk.

'Dear me, Mr Weller,' said the pretty housemaid, meeting Sam at the door.

'Dear ME I vish it vos, my dear,' replied Sam, dropping behind, to let his master get out of hearing. 'Wot a sweet- lookin' creetur you are, Mary!'

'Lot, Mr Weller, what nonsense you do talk!' said Mary. 'Oh! don't, Mr Weller.'

'Don't what, my dear?' said Sam.

'Why, that,' replied the pretty housemaid. 'Lor, do get along with you.' Thus admonishing him, the pretty housemaid pushed Sam against the wall, declaring that he had tumbled her cap, and put her hair quite out of curl.

'And prevented what I was going to say, besides,' added Mary. 'There's a letter been waiting here for you four days; you hadn't gone away, half an hour, when it came; and more than that, it's got 'immediate,' on the outside.'

'Vere is it, my love?' inquired Sam.

'I took care of it, for you, or I dare say it would have been lost long before this,' replied Mary. 'There, take it; it's more than you deserve.'

With these words, after many pretty little coquettish doubts and fears, and wishes that she might not have lost it, Mary produced the letter

from behind the nicest little muslin tucker possible, and handed it to Sam, who thereupon kissed it with much gallantry and devotion.

'My goodness me!' said Mary, adjusting the tucker, and feigning unconsciousness, 'you seem to have grown very fond of it all at once.'

To this Mr Weller only replied by a wink, the intense meaning of which no description could convey the faintest idea of; and, sitting himself down beside Mary on a window-seat, opened the letter and glanced at the contents.

'Hollo!' exclaimed Sam, 'wot's all this?'

'Nothing the matter, I hope?' said Mary, peeping over his shoulder.

'Bless them eyes o' yourn!' said Sam, looking up.

'Never mind my eyes; you had much better read your letter,' said the pretty housemaid; and as she said so, she made the eyes twinkle with such slyness and beauty that they were perfectly irresistible.

Sam refreshed himself with a kiss, and read as follows: -

'MARKIS GRAN 'By DORKEN 'Wensdy.

'My DEAR SAMMLE,

'I am werry sorry to have the pleasure of being a Bear of ill news your Mother in law cort cold consekens of imprudently settin too long on the damp grass in the rain a hearing of a shepherd who warnt able to leave off till late at night owen to his having vound his-self up vith brandy and vater and not being able to stop his-self till he got a little sober which took a many hours to do the doctor says that if she'd svallo'd varm brandy and vater arterwards insted of afore she mightn't have been no vus her veels vos immedety greased and everythink done to set her agoin as could be inwented your father had hopes as she vould have vorked round as usual but just as she vos a turnen the corner my boy she took the wrong road and vent down hill vith a velosity you never see and notvithstandin that the drag vos put on directly by the medikel man it wornt of no use at all for she paid the last pike at twenty minutes afore six o'clock yesterday evenin havin done the journey wery much under the reglar time vich praps vos partly owen to her haven taken in wery little luggage by the vay your father says that if you vill come and see me Sammy he vill take it as a wery great favor for I am wery lonely Samivel n. b. he VILL have it spelt that vay vich I say ant right and as there is sich a many things to settle he is sure your guvner wont object of course he vill not

Sammy for I knows him better so he sends his dooty in which I join and am Samivel infernally yours 'TONY VELLER.'

'Wot a incomprehensible letter,' said Sam; 'who's to know wot it means, vith all this he-ing and I-ing! It ain't my father's writin', 'cept this here signater in print letters; that's his.'

'Perhaps he got somebody to write it for him, and signed it himself afterwards,' said the pretty housemaid. 'Stop a minit,' replied Sam, running over the letter again, and pausing here and there, to reflect, as he did so. 'You've hit it. The gen'l'm'n as wrote it wos a-tellin' all about the misfortun' in a proper vay, and then my father comes a-lookin' over him, and complicates the whole concern by puttin' his oar in. That's just the wery sort o' thing he'd do. You're right, Mary, my dear.'

Having satisfied himself on this point, Sam read the letter all over, once more, and, appearing to form a clear notion of its contents for the first time, ejaculated thoughtfully, as he folded it up -

'And so the poor creetur's dead! I'm sorry for it. She warn't a bad-disposed 'ooman, if them shepherds had let her alone. I'm wery sorry for it.'

Mr Weller uttered these words in so serious a manner, that the pretty housemaid cast down her eyes and looked very grave.

'Hows'ever,' said Sam, putting the letter in his pocket with a gentle sigh, 'it wos to be - and wos, as the old lady said arter she'd married the footman. Can't be helped now, can it, Mary?'

Mary shook her head, and sighed too.

'I must apply to the hemperor for leave of absence,' said Sam.

Mary sighed again - the letter was so very affecting.

'Good-bye!' said Sam.

'Good-bye,' rejoined the pretty housemaid, turning her head away.

'Well, shake hands, won't you?' said Sam.

The pretty housemaid put out a hand which, although it was a housemaid's, was a very small one, and rose to go.

'I shan't be wery long away,' said Sam.

'You're always away,' said Mary, giving her head the slightest possible toss in the air. 'You no sooner come, Mr Weller, than you go again.'

Mr Weller drew the household beauty closer to him, and entered upon a whispering conversation, which had not proceeded far, when she turned her face round and condescended to look at him again. When they parted, it was somehow or other indispensably necessary for her to go to her room, and arrange the cap and curls before she could think of presenting herself to her mistress; which preparatory ceremony she went off to perform, bestowing many nods and smiles on Sam over the banisters as she tripped upstairs.

'I shan't be away more than a day, or two, Sir, at the furthest,' said Sam, when he had communicated to Mr Pickwick the intelligence of his father's loss.

'As long as may be necessary, Sam,' replied Mr Pickwick, 'you have my full permission to remain.'

Sam bowed.

'You will tell your father, Sam, that if I can be of any assistance to him in his present situation, I shall be most willing and ready to lend him any aid in my power,' said Mr Pickwick.

'Thank'ee, sir,' rejoined Sam. 'I'll mention it, sir.'

And with some expressions of mutual good-will and interest, master and man separated.

It was just seven o'clock when Samuel Weller, alighting from the box of a stage-coach which passed through Dorking, stood within a few hundred yards of the Marquis of Granby. It was a cold, dull evening; the little street looked dreary and dismal; and the mahogany countenance of the noble and gallant marquis seemed to wear a more sad and melancholy expression than it was wont to do, as it swung to and fro, creaking mournfully in the wind. The blinds were pulled down, and the shutters partly closed; of the knot of loungers that usually collected about the door, not one was to be seen; the place was silent and desolate.

Seeing nobody of whom he could ask any preliminary questions, Sam walked softly in, and glancing round, he quickly recognised his parent in the distance.

The widower was seated at a small round table in the little room behind the bar, smoking a pipe, with his eyes intently fixed upon the fire. The funeral had evidently taken place that day, for attached to his

hat, which he still retained on his head, was a hatband measuring about a yard and a half in length, which hung over the top rail of the chair and streamed negligently down. Mr Weller was in a very abstracted and contemplative mood. Notwithstanding that Sam called him by name several times, he still continued to smoke with the same fixed and quiet countenance, and was only roused ultimately by his son's placing the palm of his hand on his shoulder.

'Sammy,' said Mr Weller, 'you're welcome.'

'I've been a-callin' to you half a dozen times,' said Sam, hanging his hat on a peg, 'but you didn't hear me.'

'No, Sammy,' replied Mr Weller, again looking thoughtfully at the fire. 'I was in a referee, Sammy.'

'Wot about?' inquired Sam, drawing his chair up to the fire.

'In a referee, Sammy,' replied the elder Mr Weller, 'regarding HER, Samivel.' Here Mr Weller jerked his head in the direction of Dorking churchyard, in mute explanation that his words referred to the late Mrs. Weller.

'I wos a-thinkin', Sammy,' said Mr Weller, eyeing his son, with great earnestness, over his pipe, as if to assure him that however extraordinary and incredible the declaration might appear, it was nevertheless calmly and deliberately uttered. 'I wos a-thinkin', Sammy, that upon the whole I wos verry sorry she wos gone.'

'Vell, and so you ought to be,' replied Sam.

Mr Weller nodded his acquiescence in the sentiment, and again fastening his eyes on the fire, shrouded himself in a cloud, and mused deeply.

'Those wos verry sensible observations as she made, Sammy,' said Mr Weller, driving the smoke away with his hand, after a long silence.

'Wot observations?' inquired Sam.

'Them as she made, arter she wos took ill,' replied the old gentleman. 'Wot wos they?'

'Somethin' to this here effect. 'Veller,' she says, 'I'm afeered I've not done by you quite wot I ought to have done; you're a verry kind-hearted man, and I might ha' made your home more comfortabler. I begin to see now,' she says, 'ven it's too late, that if a married 'ooman wishes to be religious, she should begin vith dischargin' her dooties at

home, and makin' them as is about her cheerful and happy, and that vile she goes to church, or chapel, or wot not, at all proper times, she should be verry careful not to con-wert this sort o' thing into a excuse for idleness or self-indulgence. I have done this,' she says, 'and I've wasted time and substance on them as has done it more than me; but I hope ven I'm gone, Veller, that you'll think on me as I was afore I know'd them people, and as I raly was by natur.'

'Susan,' says I - I was took up wery short by this, Samivel; I von't deny it, my boy - 'Susan,' I says, 'you've been a verry good vife to me, altogether; don't say nothin' at all about it; keep a good heart, my dear; and you'll live to see me punch that 'ere Stiggins's head yet.' She smiled at this, Samivel,' said the old gentleman, stifling a sigh with his pipe, 'but she died arter all!'

'Vell,' said Sam, venturing to offer a little homely consolation, after the lapse of three or four minutes, consumed by the old gentleman in slowly shaking his head from side to side, and solemnly smoking, 'vell, gov'nor, ve must all come to it, one day or another.'

'So we must, Sammy,' said Mr Weller the elder.

'There's a Providence in it all,' said Sam.

'O' course there is,' replied his father, with a nod of grave approval. 'Wot 'ud become of the undertakers vithout it, Sammy?'

Lost in the immense field of conjecture opened by this reflection, the elder Mr Weller laid his pipe on the table, and stirred the fire with a meditative visage.

While the old gentleman was thus engaged, a very buxom- looking cook, dressed in mourning, who had been bustling about, in the bar, glided into the room, and bestowing many smirks of recognition upon Sam, silently stationed herself at the back of his father's chair, and announced her presence by a slight cough, the which, being disregarded, was followed by a louder one.

'Hollo!' said the elder Mr Weller, dropping the poker as he looked round, and hastily drew his chair away. 'Wot's the matter now?'

'Have a cup of tea, there's a good soul,' replied the buxom female coaxingly. 'I von't,' replied Mr Weller, in a somewhat boisterous manner. 'I'll see you - ' Mr Weller hastily checked himself, and added in a low tone, 'further fust.'

'Oh, dear, dear! How adwersity does change people!' said the lady, looking upwards.

'It's the only thing 'twixt this and the doctor as shall change my condition,' muttered Mr Weller.

'I really never saw a man so cross,' said the buxom female.

'Never mind. It's all for my own good; vich is the reflection vith vich the penitent school-boy comforted his feelin's ven they flogged him,' rejoined the old gentleman.

The buxom female shook her head with a compassionate and sympathising air; and, appealing to Sam, inquired whether his father really ought not to make an effort to keep up, and not give way to that lowness of spirits.

'You see, Mr Samuel,' said the buxom female, 'as I was telling him yesterday, he will feel lonely, he can't expect but what he should, sir, but he should keep up a good heart, because, dear me, I'm sure we all pity his loss, and are ready to do anything for him; and there's no situation in life so bad, Mr Samuel, that it can't be mended. Which is what a very worthy person said to me when my husband died.' Here the speaker, putting her hand before her mouth, coughed again, and looked affectionately at the elder Mr Weller.

'As I don't rekvire any o' your conversation just now, mum, vill you have the goodness to re-tire?' inquired Mr Weller, in a grave and steady voice.

'Well, Mr Weller,' said the buxom female, 'I'm sure I only spoke to you out of kindness.'

'Wery likely, mum,' replied Mr Weller. 'Samivel, show the lady out, and shut the door after her.'

This hint was not lost upon the buxom female; for she at once left the room, and slammed the door behind her, upon which Mr Weller, senior, falling back in his chair in a violent perspiration, said -

'Sammy, if I wos to stop here alone vun week - only vun week, my boy - that 'ere 'ooman 'ud marry me by force and wiolence afore it was over.'

'Wot! is she so wery fond on you?' inquired Sam.

'Fond!' replied his father. 'I can't keep her away from me. If I was locked up in a fireproof chest vith a patent Brahmin, she'd find means to get at me, Sammy.'

'Wot a thing it is to be so sought arter!' observed Sam, smiling.

'I don't take no pride out on it, Sammy,' replied Mr Weller, poking the fire vehemently, 'it's a horrid sitiuation. I'm actiually drove out o' house and home by it. The breath was scarcely out o' your poor mother-in-law's body, ven vun old 'ooman sends me a pot o' jam, and another a pot o' jelly, and another brews a blessed large jug o' camomile-tea, vich she brings in vith her own hands.' Mr Weller paused with an aspect of intense disgust, and looking round, added in a whisper, 'They wos all widders, Sammy, all on 'em, 'cept the camomile-tea vun, as wos a single young lady o' fifty-three.'

Sam gave a comical look in reply, and the old gentleman having broken an obstinate lump of coal, with a countenance expressive of as much earnestness and malice as if it had been the head of one of the widows last-mentioned, said:

'In short, Sammy, I feel that I ain't safe anyveres but on the box.'

'How are you safer there than anyveres else?' interrupted Sam.

'Cos a coachman's a privileged indiividual,' replied Mr Weller, looking fixedly at his son. "Cos a coachman may do vithout suspicion wot other men may not; 'cos a coachman may be on the wery amicablest terms with eighty mile o' females, and yet nobody think that he ever means to marry any vun among 'em. And wot other man can say the same, Sammy?'

'Vell, there's somethin' in that,' said Sam.

'If your gov'nor had been a coachman,' reasoned Mr Weller, 'do you s'pose as that 'ere jury 'ud ever ha' convicted him, s'posin' it possible as the matter could ha' gone to that extremity? They dustn't ha' done it.'

'Wy not?' said Sam, rather disparagingly.

'Wy not!' rejoined Mr Weller; "cos it 'ud ha' gone agin their consciences. A reg'lar coachman's a sort o' con-nectin' link betwixt singleness and matrimony, and every practicable man knows it.'

'Wot! You mean, they're gen'ral favorites, and nobody takes advantage on 'em, p'raps?' said Sam.

His father nodded.

'How it ever come to that 'ere pass,' resumed the parent Weller, 'I can't say. Wy it is that long-stage coachmen possess such insiniuations, and is always looked up to - a-dored I may say - by ev'ry young 'ooman in ev'ry town he vurks through, I don't know. I only know that so it is.'

It's a regulation of natur - a dispensary, as your poor mother-in-law used to say.'

'A dispensation,' said Sam, correcting the old gentleman.

'Wery good, Samivel, a dispensation if you like it better,' returned Mr Weller; 'I call it a dispensary, and it's always writ up so, at the places vere they gives you physic for nothin' in your own bottles; that's all.'

With these words, Mr Weller refilled and relighted his pipe, and once more summoning up a meditative expression of countenance, continued as follows -

'Therefore, my boy, as I do not see the adwisability o' stoppin here to be married vether I vant to or not, and as at the same time I do not vish to separate myself from them interestin' members o' society altogether, I have come to the determination o' driving the Safety, and puttin' up vunce more at the Bell Savage, vich is my nat'ral born element, Sammy.'

'And wot's to become o' the bis'ness?' inquired Sam.

'The bis'ness, Samivel,' replied the old gentleman, 'good-vill, stock, and fixters, vill be sold by private contract; and out o' the money, two hundred pound, agreeable to a rekvest o' your mother-in-law's to me, a little afore she died, vill be invested in your name in - What do you call them things agin?'

'Wot things?' inquired Sam.

'Them things as is always a-goin' up and down, in the city.'

'Omnibuses?' suggested Sam.

'Nonsense,' replied Mr Weller. 'Them things as is always a-fluctooatin', and gettin' theirselves involved somehow or another vith the national debt, and the chequers bill; and all that.'

'Oh! the funds,' said Sam.

'Ah!' rejoined Mr Weller, 'the funs; two hundred pounds o' the money is to be invested for you, Samivel, in the funs; four and a half per cent. reduced counsels, Sammy.'

'Wery kind o' the old lady to think o' me,' said Sam, 'and I'm wery much obliged to her.'

'The rest will be investid in my name,' continued the elder Mr Weller; 'and wen I'm took off the road, it'll come to you, so take care you don't spend it all at vunst, my boy, and mind that no widders gets a inklin' o' your fortun', or you're done.'

Having delivered this warning, Mr Weller resumed his pipe with a more serene countenance; the disclosure of these matters appearing to have eased his mind considerably.

'Somebody's a-tappin' at the door,' said Sam.

'Let 'em tap,' replied his father, with dignity.

Sam acted upon the direction. There was another tap, and another, and then a long row of taps; upon which Sam inquired why the tapper was not admitted.

'Hush,' whispered Mr Weller, with apprehensive looks, 'don't take no notice on 'em, Sammy, it's vun o' the widders, p'raps.'

No notice being taken of the taps, the unseen visitor, after a short lapse, ventured to open the door and peep in. It was no female head that was thrust in at the partially-opened door, but the long black locks and red face of Mr Stiggins. Mr Weller's pipe fell from his hands.

The reverend gentleman gradually opened the door by almost imperceptible degrees, until the aperture was just wide enough to admit of the passage of his lank body, when he glided into the room and closed it after him, with great care and gentleness. Turning towards Sam, and raising his hands and eyes in token of the unspeakable sorrow with which he regarded the calamity that had befallen the family, he carried the high-backed chair to his old corner by the fire, and, seating himself on the very edge, drew forth a brown pocket-handkerchief, and applied the same to his optics.

While this was going forward, the elder Mr Weller sat back in his chair, with his eyes wide open, his hands planted on his knees, and his whole countenance expressive of absorbing and overwhelming astonishment. Sam sat opposite him in perfect silence, waiting, with eager curiosity, for the termination of the scene.

Mr Stiggins kept the brown pocket-handkerchief before his eyes for some minutes, moaning decently meanwhile, and then, mastering his feelings by a strong effort, put it in his pocket and buttoned it up. After this, he stirred the fire; after that, he rubbed his hands and looked at Sam.

'Oh, my young friend,' said Mr Stiggins, breaking the silence, in a very low voice, 'here's a sorrowful affliction!'

Sam nodded very slightly.

'For the man of wrath, too!' added Mr Stiggins; 'it makes a vessel's heart bleed!' Mr Weller was overheard by his son to murmur something relative to making a vessel's nose bleed; but Mr Stiggins heard him not. 'Do you know, young man,' whispered Mr Stiggins, drawing his chair closer to Sam, 'whether she has left Emanuel anything?'

'Who's he?' inquired Sam.

'The chapel,' replied Mr Stiggins; 'our chapel; our fold, Mr Samuel.'

'She hasn't left the fold nothin', nor the shepherd nothin', nor the animals nothin',' said Sam decisively; 'nor the dogs neither.'

Mr Stiggins looked slyly at Sam; glanced at the old gentleman, who was sitting with his eyes closed, as if asleep; and drawing his chair still nearer, said -

'Nothing for ME, Mr Samuel?'

Sam shook his head.

'I think there's something,' said Stiggins, turning as pale as he could turn. 'Consider, Mr Samuel; no little token?'

'Not so much as the vorth o' that 'ere old umberella o' yourn,' replied Sam.

'Perhaps,' said Mr Stiggins hesitatingly, after a few moments' deep thought, 'perhaps she recommended me to the care of the man of wrath, Mr Samuel?'

'I think that's wery likely, from what he said,' rejoined Sam; 'he wos a-speakin' about you, jist now.'

'Was he, though?' exclaimed Stiggins, brightening up. 'Ah! He's changed, I dare say. We might live very comfortably together now, Mr Samuel, eh? I could take care of his property when you are away - good care, you see.'

Heaving a long-drawn sigh, Mr Stiggins paused for a response.

Sam nodded, and Mr Weller the elder gave vent to an extraordinary sound, which, being neither a groan, nor a grunt, nor a gasp, nor a growl, seemed to partake in some degree of the character of all four.

Mr Stiggins, encouraged by this sound, which he understood to betoken remorse or repentance, looked about him, rubbed his hands, wept, smiled, wept again, and then, walking softly across the room to a well-remembered shelf in one corner, took down a tumbler, and with great deliberation put four lumps of sugar in it. Having got thus far, he looked about him again, and sighed grievously; with that, he walked softly into the bar, and presently returning with the tumbler half full of pine-apple rum, advanced to the kettle which was singing gaily on the hob, mixed his grog, stirred it, sipped it, sat down, and taking a long and hearty pull at the rum-and-water, stopped for breath.

The elder Mr Weller, who still continued to make various strange and uncouth attempts to appear asleep, offered not a single word during these proceedings; but when Stiggins stopped for breath, he darted upon him, and snatching the tumbler from his hand, threw the remainder of the rum-and-water in his face, and the glass itself into the grate. Then, seizing the reverend gentleman firmly by the collar, he suddenly fell to kicking him most furiously, accompanying every application of his top-boot to Mr Stiggins's person, with sundry violent and incoherent anathemas upon his limbs, eyes, and body.

'Sammy,' said Mr Weller, 'put my hat on tight for me.'

Sam dutifully adjusted the hat with the long hatband more firmly on his father's head, and the old gentleman, resuming his kicking with greater agility than before, tumbled with Mr Stiggins through the bar, and through the passage, out at the front door, and so into the street - the kicking continuing the whole way, and increasing in vehemence, rather than diminishing, every time the top-boot was lifted.

It was a beautiful and exhilarating sight to see the red-nosed man writhing in Mr Weller's grasp, and his whole frame quivering with anguish as kick followed kick in rapid succession; it was a still more exciting spectacle to behold Mr Weller, after a powerful struggle, immersing Mr Stiggins's head in a horse-trough full of water, and holding it there, until he was half suffocated.

'There!' said Mr Weller, throwing all his energy into one most complicated kick, as he at length permitted Mr Stiggins to withdraw his head from the trough, 'send any vun o' them lazy shepherds here, and I'll pound him to a jelly first, and drownd him arterwards! Sammy, help me in, and fill me a small glass of brandy. I'm out o' breath, my boy.'