

## Chapter LIV

### **Containing Some Particulars Relative To The Double Knock, And Other Matters: Among Which Certain Interesting Disclosures Relative To Mr Snodgrass And A Young Lady Are By No Means Irrelevant To This History**

The object that presented itself to the eyes of the astonished clerk, was a boy - a wonderfully fat boy - habited as a serving lad, standing upright on the mat, with his eyes closed as if in sleep. He had never seen such a fat boy, in or out of a travelling caravan; and this, coupled with the calmness and repose of his appearance, so very different from what was reasonably to have been expected of the inflicter of such knocks, smote him with wonder.

'What's the matter?' inquired the clerk.

The extraordinary boy replied not a word; but he nodded once, and seemed, to the clerk's imagination, to snore feebly.

'Where do you come from?' inquired the clerk.

The boy made no sign. He breathed heavily, but in all other respects was motionless.

The clerk repeated the question thrice, and receiving no answer, prepared to shut the door, when the boy suddenly opened his eyes, winked several times, sneezed once, and raised his hand as if to repeat the knocking. Finding the door open, he stared about him with astonishment, and at length fixed his eyes on Mr Lowten's face.

'What the devil do you knock in that way for?' inquired the clerk angrily.

'Which way?' said the boy, in a slow and sleepy voice.

'Why, like forty hackney-coachmen,' replied the clerk.

'Because master said, I wasn't to leave off knocking till they opened the door, for fear I should go to sleep,' said the boy.

'Well,' said the clerk, 'what message have you brought?'

'He's downstairs,' rejoined the boy.

'Who?'

'Master. He wants to know whether you're at home.'

Mr Lowten bethought himself, at this juncture, of looking out of the window. Seeing an open carriage with a hearty old gentleman in it, looking up very anxiously, he ventured to beckon him; on which, the old gentleman jumped out directly.

'That's your master in the carriage, I suppose?' said Lowten.

The boy nodded.

All further inquiries were superseded by the appearance of old Wardle, who, running upstairs and just recognising Lowten, passed at once into Mr Perker's room.

'Pickwick!' said the old gentleman. 'Your hand, my boy! Why have I never heard until the day before yesterday of your suffering yourself to be cooped up in jail? And why did you let him do it, Perker?'

'I couldn't help it, my dear Sir,' replied Perker, with a smile and a pinch of snuff; 'you know how obstinate he is?'

'Of course I do; of course I do,' replied the old gentleman. 'I am heartily glad to see him, notwithstanding. I will not lose sight of him again, in a hurry.'

With these words, Wardle shook Mr Pickwick's hand once more, and, having done the same by Perker, threw himself into an arm-chair, his jolly red face shining again with smiles and health.

'Well!' said Wardle. 'Here are pretty goings on - a pinch of your snuff, Perker, my boy - never were such times, eh?'

'What do you mean?' inquired Mr Pickwick.

'Mean!' replied Wardle. 'Why, I think the girls are all running mad; that's no news, you'll say? Perhaps it's not; but it's true, for all that.'

'You have not come up to London, of all places in the world, to tell us that, my dear Sir, have you?' inquired Perker.

'No, not altogether,' replied Wardle; 'though it was the main cause of my coming. How's Arabella?'

'Very well,' replied Mr Pickwick, 'and will be delighted to see you, I am sure.'

'Black-eyed little jilt!' replied Wardle. 'I had a great idea of marrying her myself, one of these odd days. But I am glad of it too, very glad.'

'How did the intelligence reach you?' asked Mr Pickwick.

'Oh, it came to my girls, of course,' replied Wardle. 'Arabella wrote, the day before yesterday, to say she had made a stolen match without her husband's father's consent, and so you had gone down to get it when his refusing it couldn't prevent the match, and all the rest of it. I thought it a very good time to say something serious to my girls; so I said what a dreadful thing it was that children should marry without their parents' consent, and so forth; but, bless your hearts, I couldn't make the least impression upon them. They thought it such a much more dreadful thing that there should have been a wedding without bridesmaids, that I might as well have preached to Joe himself.' Here the old gentleman stopped to laugh; and having done so to his heart's content, presently resumed -

'But this is not the best of it, it seems. This is only half the love-making and plotting that have been going forward. We have been walking on mines for the last six months, and they're sprung at last.'

'What do you mean?' exclaimed Mr Pickwick, turning pale; 'no other secret marriage, I hope?'

'No, no,' replied old Wardle; 'not so bad as that; no.'

'What then?' inquired Mr Pickwick; 'am I interested in it?'

'Shall I answer that question, Perker?' said Wardle.

'If you don't commit yourself by doing so, my dear Sir.'

'Well then, you are,' said Wardle.

'How?' asked Mr Pickwick anxiously. 'In what way?'

'Really,' replied Wardle, 'you're such a fiery sort of a young fellow that I am almost afraid to tell you; but, however, if Perker will sit between us to prevent mischief, I'll venture.'

Having closed the room door, and fortified himself with another application to Perker's snuff-box, the old gentleman proceeded with his great disclosure in these words -

'The fact is, that my daughter Bella - Bella, who married young Trundle, you know.'

'Yes, yes, we know,' said Mr Pickwick impatiently.

'Don't alarm me at the very beginning. My daughter Bella - Emily having gone to bed with a headache after she had read Arabella's letter to me - sat herself down by my side the other evening, and began to talk over this marriage affair. 'Well, pa,' she says, 'what do you think of it?' 'Why, my dear,' I said, 'I suppose it's all very well; I hope it's for the best.' I answered in this way because I was sitting before the fire at the time, drinking my grog rather thoughtfully, and I knew my throwing in an undecided word now and then, would induce her to continue talking. Both my girls are pictures of their dear mother, and as I grow old I like to sit with only them by me; for their voices and looks carry me back to the happiest period of my life, and make me, for the moment, as young as I used to be then, though not quite so light-hearted. 'It's quite a marriage of affection, pa,' said Bella, after a short silence. 'Yes, my dear,' said I, 'but such marriages do not always turn out the happiest.'

'I question that, mind!' interposed Mr Pickwick warmly. 'Very good,' responded Wardle, 'question anything you like when it's your turn to speak, but don't interrupt me.'

'I beg your pardon,' said Mr Pickwick.

'Granted,' replied Wardle. 'I am sorry to hear you express your opinion against marriages of affection, pa,' said Bella, colouring a little. 'I was wrong; I ought not to have said so, my dear, either,' said I, patting her cheek as kindly as a rough old fellow like me could pat it, 'for your mother's was one, and so was yours.' 'It's not that I meant, pa,' said Bella. 'The fact is, pa, I wanted to speak to you about Emily.'

Mr Pickwick started.

'What's the matter now?' inquired Wardle, stopping in his narrative.

'Nothing,' replied Mr Pickwick. 'Pray go on.'

'I never could spin out a story,' said Wardle abruptly. 'It must come out, sooner or later, and it'll save us all a great deal of time if it comes at once. The long and the short of it is, then, that Bella at last mustered up courage to tell me that Emily was very unhappy; that she and your young friend Snodgrass had been in constant correspondence and communication ever since last Christmas; that she had very dutifully made up her mind to run away with him, in laudable imitation of her old friend and school-fellow; but that having some compunctions of conscience on the subject, inasmuch as I had always been rather kindly disposed to both of them, they had thought it better in the first instance to pay me the compliment of asking whether I would have any objection to their being married in the usual matter-of-fact manner. There now, Mr Pickwick, if you can make it

convenient to reduce your eyes to their usual size again, and to let me hear what you think we ought to do, I shall feel rather obliged to you!

The testy manner in which the hearty old gentleman uttered this last sentence was not wholly unwarranted; for Mr Pickwick's face had settled down into an expression of blank amazement and perplexity, quite curious to behold.

'Snodgrass!-since last Christmas!' were the first broken words that issued from the lips of the confounded gentleman.

'Since last Christmas,' replied Wardle; 'that's plain enough, and very bad spectacles we must have worn, not to have discovered it before.'

'I don't understand it,' said Mr Pickwick, ruminating; 'I cannot really understand it.'

'It's easy enough to understand it,' replied the choleric old gentleman. 'If you had been a younger man, you would have been in the secret long ago; and besides,' added Wardle, after a moment's hesitation, 'the truth is, that, knowing nothing of this matter, I have rather pressed Emily for four or five months past, to receive favourably (if she could; I would never attempt to force a girl's inclinations) the addresses of a young gentleman down in our neighbourhood. I have no doubt that, girl-like, to enhance her own value and increase the ardour of Mr Snodgrass, she has represented this matter in very glowing colours, and that they have both arrived at the conclusion that they are a terribly- persecuted pair of unfortunates, and have no resource but clandestine matrimony, or charcoal. Now the question is, what's to be done?'

'What have YOU done?' inquired Mr Pickwick.

'I'

'I mean what did you do when your married daughter told you this?'

'Oh, I made a fool of myself of course,' rejoined Wardle.

'Just so,' interposed Perker, who had accompanied this dialogue with sundry twitchings of his watch-chain, vindictive rubbings of his nose, and other symptoms of impatience. 'That's very natural; but how?'

'I went into a great passion and frightened my mother into a fit,' said Wardle.

'That was judicious,' remarked Perker; 'and what else?'

'I fretted and fumed all next day, and raised a great disturbance,' rejoined the old gentleman. 'At last I got tired of rendering myself unpleasant and making everybody miserable; so I hired a carriage at Muggleton, and, putting my own horses in it, came up to town, under pretence of bringing Emily to see Arabella.'

'Miss Wardle is with you, then?' said Mr Pickwick.

'To be sure she is,' replied Wardle. 'She is at Osborne's Hotel in the Adelphi at this moment, unless your enterprising friend has run away with her since I came out this morning.'

'You are reconciled then?' said Perker.

'Not a bit of it,' answered Wardle; 'she has been crying and moping ever since, except last night, between tea and supper, when she made a great parade of writing a letter that I pretended to take no notice of.'

'You want my advice in this matter, I suppose?' said Perker, looking from the musing face of Mr Pickwick to the eager countenance of Wardle, and taking several consecutive pinches of his favourite stimulant.

'I suppose so,' said Wardle, looking at Mr Pickwick.

'Certainly,' replied that gentleman.

'Well then,' said Perker, rising and pushing his chair back, 'my advice is, that you both walk away together, or ride away, or get away by some means or other, for I'm tired of you, and just talk this matter over between you. If you have not settled it by the next time I see you, I'll tell you what to do.'

'This is satisfactory,' said Wardle, hardly knowing whether to smile or be offended.

'Pooh, pooh, my dear Sir,' returned Perker. 'I know you both a great deal better than you know yourselves. You have settled it already, to all intents and purposes.'

Thus expressing himself, the little gentleman poked his snuff-box first into the chest of Mr Pickwick, and then into the waistcoat of Mr Wardle, upon which they all three laughed, especially the two last-named gentlemen, who at once shook hands again, without any obvious or particular reason.

'You dine with me to-day,' said Wardle to Perker, as he showed them out.

'Can't promise, my dear Sir, can't promise,' replied Perker. 'I'll look in, in the evening, at all events.'

'I shall expect you at five,' said Wardle. 'Now, Joe!' And Joe having been at length awakened, the two friends departed in Mr Wardle's carriage, which in common humanity had a dickey behind for the fat boy, who, if there had been a footboard instead, would have rolled off and killed himself in his very first nap.

Driving to the George and Vulture, they found that Arabella and her maid had sent for a hackney-coach immediately on the receipt of a short note from Emily announcing her arrival in town, and had proceeded straight to the Adelphi. As Wardle had business to transact in the city, they sent the carriage and the fat boy to his hotel, with the information that he and Mr Pickwick would return together to dinner at five o'clock.

Charged with this message, the fat boy returned, slumbering as peaceably in his dickey, over the stones, as if it had been a down bed on watch springs. By some extraordinary miracle he awoke of his own accord, when the coach stopped, and giving himself a good shake to stir up his faculties, went upstairs to execute his commission.

Now, whether the shake had jumbled the fat boy's faculties together, instead of arranging them in proper order, or had roused such a quantity of new ideas within him as to render him oblivious of ordinary forms and ceremonies, or (which is also possible) had proved unsuccessful in preventing his falling asleep as he ascended the stairs, it is an undoubted fact that he walked into the sitting-room without previously knocking at the door; and so beheld a gentleman with his arms clasping his young mistress's waist, sitting very lovingly by her side on a sofa, while Arabella and her pretty handmaid feigned to be absorbed in looking out of a window at the other end of the room. At the sight of this phenomenon, the fat boy uttered an interjection, the ladies a scream, and the gentleman an oath, almost simultaneously.

'Wretched creature, what do you want here?' said the gentleman, who it is needless to say was Mr Snodgrass.

To this the fat boy, considerably terrified, briefly responded, 'Missis.'

'What do you want me for,' inquired Emily, turning her head aside, 'you stupid creature?'

'Master and Mr Pickwick is a-going to dine here at five,' replied the fat boy.

'Leave the room!' said Mr Snodgrass, glaring upon the bewildered youth.

'No, no, no,' added Emily hastily. 'Bella, dear, advise me.'

Upon this, Emily and Mr Snodgrass, and Arabella and Mary, crowded into a corner, and conversed earnestly in whispers for some minutes, during which the fat boy dozed.

'Joe,' said Arabella, at length, looking round with a most bewitching smile, 'how do you do, Joe?'

'Joe,' said Emily, 'you're a very good boy; I won't forget you, Joe.'

'Joe,' said Mr Snodgrass, advancing to the astonished youth, and seizing his hand, 'I didn't know you before. There's five shillings for you, Joe!'

'I'll owe you five, Joe,' said Arabella, 'for old acquaintance sake, you know;' and another most captivating smile was bestowed upon the corpulent intruder.

The fat boy's perception being slow, he looked rather puzzled at first to account for this sudden prepossession in his favour, and stared about him in a very alarming manner. At length his broad face began to show symptoms of a grin of proportionately broad dimensions; and then, thrusting half-a-crown into each of his pockets, and a hand and wrist after it, he burst into a horse laugh: being for the first and only time in his existence.

'He understands us, I see,' said Arabella. 'He had better have something to eat, immediately,' remarked Emily.

The fat boy almost laughed again when he heard this suggestion. Mary, after a little more whispering, tripped forth from the group and said -

'I am going to dine with you to-day, sir, if you have no objection.'

'This way,' said the fat boy eagerly. 'There is such a jolly meat-pie!'

With these words, the fat boy led the way downstairs; his pretty companion captivating all the waiters and angering all the chambermaids as she followed him to the eating-room.

There was the meat-pie of which the youth had spoken so feelingly, and there were, moreover, a steak, and a dish of potatoes, and a pot of porter.



'Sit down,' said the fat boy. 'Oh, my eye, how prime! I am SO hungry.'

Having apostrophised his eye, in a species of rapture, five or six times, the youth took the head of the little table, and Mary seated herself at the bottom.

'Will you have some of this?' said the fat boy, plunging into the pie up to the very ferules of the knife and fork.

'A little, if you please,' replied Mary.

The fat boy assisted Mary to a little, and himself to a great deal, and was just going to begin eating when he suddenly laid down his knife and fork, leaned forward in his chair, and letting his hands, with the knife and fork in them, fall on his knees, said, very slowly -

'I say! How nice you look!'

This was said in an admiring manner, and was, so far, gratifying; but still there was enough of the cannibal in the young gentleman's eyes to render the compliment a double one.

'Dear me, Joseph,' said Mary, affecting to blush, 'what do you mean?'

The fat boy, gradually recovering his former position, replied with a heavy sigh, and, remaining thoughtful for a few moments, drank a long draught of the porter. Having achieved this feat, he sighed again, and applied himself assiduously to the pie.

'What a nice young lady Miss Emily is!' said Mary, after a long silence.

The fat boy had by this time finished the pie. He fixed his eyes on Mary, and replied - 'I knows a nicerer.'

'Indeed!' said Mary.

'Yes, indeed!' replied the fat boy, with unwonted vivacity.

'What's her name?' inquired Mary.

'What's yours?'

'Mary.'

'So's hers,' said the fat boy. 'You're her.' The boy grinned to add point to the compliment, and put his eyes into something between a squint and a cast, which there is reason to believe he intended for an ogle.

'You mustn't talk to me in that way,' said Mary; 'you don't mean it.'

'Don't I, though?' replied the fat boy. 'I say?'

'Well?'

'Are you going to come here regular?'

'No,' rejoined Mary, shaking her head, 'I'm going away again to-night. Why?'

'Oh,' said the fat boy, in a tone of strong feeling; 'how we should have enjoyed ourselves at meals, if you had been!'

'I might come here sometimes, perhaps, to see you,' said Mary, plaiting the table-cloth in assumed coyness, 'if you would do me a favour.'

The fat boy looked from the pie-dish to the steak, as if he thought a favour must be in a manner connected with something to eat; and then took out one of the half-crowns and glanced at it nervously.

'Don't you understand me?' said Mary, looking slyly in his fat face.

Again he looked at the half-crown, and said faintly, 'No.'

'The ladies want you not to say anything to the old gentleman about the young gentleman having been upstairs; and I want you too.'

'Is that all?' said the fat boy, evidently very much relieved, as he pocketed the half-crown again. 'Of course I ain't a-going to.'

'You see,' said Mary, 'Mr Snodgrass is very fond of Miss Emily, and Miss Emily's very fond of him, and if you were to tell about it, the old gentleman would carry you all away miles into the country, where you'd see nobody.'

'No, no, I won't tell,' said the fat boy stoutly.

'That's a dear,' said Mary. 'Now it's time I went upstairs, and got my lady ready for dinner.'

'Don't go yet,' urged the fat boy.

'I must,' replied Mary. 'Good-bye, for the present.'

The fat boy, with elephantine playfulness, stretched out his arms to ravish a kiss; but as it required no great agility to elude him, his fair

enslaver had vanished before he closed them again; upon which the apathetic youth ate a pound or so of steak with a sentimental countenance, and fell fast asleep.

There was so much to say upstairs, and there were so many plans to concert for elopement and matrimony in the event of old Wardle continuing to be cruel, that it wanted only half an hour of dinner when Mr Snodgrass took his final adieu. The ladies ran to Emily's bedroom to dress, and the lover, taking up his hat, walked out of the room. He had scarcely got outside the door, when he heard Wardle's voice talking loudly, and looking over the banisters beheld him, followed by some other gentlemen, coming straight upstairs. Knowing nothing of the house, Mr Snodgrass in his confusion stepped hastily back into the room he had just quitted, and passing thence into an inner apartment (Mr Wardle's bedchamber), closed the door softly, just as the persons he had caught a glimpse of entered the sitting-room. These were Mr Wardle, Mr Pickwick, Mr Nathaniel Winkle, and Mr Benjamin Allen, whom he had no difficulty in recognising by their voices.

'Very lucky I had the presence of mind to avoid them,' thought Mr Snodgrass with a smile, and walking on tiptoe to another door near the bedside; 'this opens into the same passage, and I can walk quietly and comfortably away.'

There was only one obstacle to his walking quietly and comfortably away, which was that the door was locked and the key gone.

'Let us have some of your best wine to-day, waiter,' said old Wardle, rubbing his hands.

'You shall have some of the very best, sir,' replied the waiter.

'Let the ladies know we have come in.'

'Yes, Sir.'

Devoutly and ardently did Mr Snodgrass wish that the ladies could know he had come in. He ventured once to whisper, 'Waiter!' through the keyhole, but the probability of the wrong waiter coming to his relief, flashed upon his mind, together with a sense of the strong resemblance between his own situation and that in which another gentleman had been recently found in a neighbouring hotel (an account of whose misfortunes had appeared under the head of 'Police' in that morning's paper), he sat himself on a portmanteau, and trembled violently.

'We won't wait a minute for Perker,' said Wardle, looking at his watch; 'he is always exact. He will be here, in time, if he means to come; and if he does not, it's of no use waiting. Ha! Arabella!'

'My sister!' exclaimed Mr Benjamin Allen, folding her in a most romantic embrace.

'Oh, Ben, dear, how you do smell of tobacco,' said Arabella, rather overcome by this mark of affection.

'Do I?' said Mr Benjamin Allen. 'Do I, Bella? Well, perhaps I do.'

Perhaps he did, having just left a pleasant little smoking-party of twelve medical students, in a small back parlour with a large fire.

'But I am delighted to see you,' said Mr Ben Allen. 'Bless you, Bella!'

'There,' said Arabella, bending forward to kiss her brother; 'don't take hold of me again, Ben, dear, because you tumble me so.'

At this point of the reconciliation, Mr Ben Allen allowed his feelings and the cigars and porter to overcome him, and looked round upon the beholders with damp spectacles.

'is nothing to be said to me?' cried Wardle, with open arms.

'A great deal,' whispered Arabella, as she received the old gentleman's hearty caress and congratulation. 'You are a hard- hearted, unfeeling, cruel monster.'

'You are a little rebel,' replied Wardle, in the same tone, 'and I am afraid I shall be obliged to forbid you the house. People like you, who get married in spite of everybody, ought not to be let loose on society. But come!' added the old gentleman aloud, 'here's the dinner; you shall sit by me. Joe; why, damn the boy, he's awake!'

To the great distress of his master, the fat boy was indeed in a state of remarkable vigilance, his eyes being wide open, and looking as if they intended to remain so. There was an alacrity in his manner, too, which was equally unaccountable; every time his eyes met those of Emily or Arabella, he smirked and grinned; once, Wardle could have sworn, he saw him wink.

This alteration in the fat boy's demeanour originated in his increased sense of his own importance, and the dignity he acquired from having been taken into the confidence of the young ladies; and the smirks, and grins, and winks were so many condescending assurances that they might depend upon his fidelity. As these tokens were rather

calculated to awaken suspicion than allay it, and were somewhat embarrassing besides, they were occasionally answered by a frown or shake of the head from Arabella, which the fat boy, considering as hints to be on his guard, expressed his perfect understanding of, by smirking, grinning, and winking, with redoubled assiduity.

'Joe,' said Mr Wardle, after an unsuccessful search in all his pockets, 'is my snuff-box on the sofa?'

'No, sir,' replied the fat boy.

'Oh, I recollect; I left it on my dressing-table this morning,' said Wardle. 'Run into the next room and fetch it.'

The fat boy went into the next room; and, having been absent about a minute, returned with the snuff-box, and the palest face that ever a fat boy wore.

'What's the matter with the boy?' exclaimed Wardle.

'Nothen's the matter with me,' replied Joe nervously.

'Have you been seeing any spirits?' inquired the old gentleman.

'Or taking any?' added Ben Allen.

'I think you're right,' whispered Wardle across the table. 'He is intoxicated, I'm sure.'

Ben Allen replied that he thought he was; and, as that gentleman had seen a vast deal of the disease in question, Wardle was confirmed in an impression which had been hovering about his mind for half an hour, and at once arrived at the conclusion that the fat boy was drunk.

'Just keep your eye upon him for a few minutes,' murmured Wardle. 'We shall soon find out whether he is or not.'

The unfortunate youth had only interchanged a dozen words with Mr Snodgrass, that gentleman having implored him to make a private appeal to some friend to release him, and then pushed him out with the snuff-box, lest his prolonged absence should lead to a discovery. He ruminated a little with a most disturbed expression of face, and left the room in search of Mary.

But Mary had gone home after dressing her mistress, and the fat boy came back again more disturbed than before.

Wardle and Mr Ben Allen exchanged glances. 'Joe!' said Wardle.

'Yes, sir.'

'What did you go away for?'

The fat boy looked hopelessly in the face of everybody at table, and stammered out that he didn't know.

'Oh,' said Wardle, 'you don't know, eh? Take this cheese to Mr Pickwick.'

Now, Mr Pickwick being in the very best health and spirits, had been making himself perfectly delightful all dinner-time, and was at this moment engaged in an energetic conversation with Emily and Mr Winkle; bowing his head, courteously, in the emphasis of his discourse, gently waving his left hand to lend force to his observations, and all glowing with placid smiles. He took a piece of cheese from the plate, and was on the point of turning round to renew the conversation, when the fat boy, stooping so as to bring his head on a level with that of Mr Pickwick, pointed with his thumb over his shoulder, and made the most horrible and hideous face that was ever seen out of a Christmas pantomime.

'Dear me!' said Mr Pickwick, starting, 'what a very - Eh?' He stopped, for the fat boy had drawn himself up, and was, or pretended to be, fast asleep.

'What's the matter?' inquired Wardle.

'This is such an extremely singular lad!' replied Mr Pickwick, looking uneasily at the boy. 'It seems an odd thing to say, but upon my word I am afraid that, at times, he is a little deranged.'

'Oh! Mr Pickwick, pray don't say so,' cried Emily and Arabella, both at once.

'I am not certain, of course,' said Mr Pickwick, amidst profound silence and looks of general dismay; 'but his manner to me this moment really was very alarming. Oh!' ejaculated Mr Pickwick, suddenly jumping up with a short scream. 'I beg your pardon, ladies, but at that moment he ran some sharp instrument into my leg. Really, he is not safe.'

'He's drunk,' roared old Wardle passionately. 'Ring the bell! Call the waiters! He's drunk.'

'I ain't,' said the fat boy, falling on his knees as his master seized him by the collar. 'I ain't drunk.'

'Then you're mad; that's worse. Call the waiters,' said the old gentleman.

'I ain't mad; I'm sensible,' rejoined the fat boy, beginning to cry.

'Then, what the devil did you run sharp instruments into Mr Pickwick's legs for?' inquired Wardle angrily.

'He wouldn't look at me,' replied the boy. 'I wanted to speak to him.'

'What did you want to say?' asked half a dozen voices at once.

The fat boy gasped, looked at the bedroom door, gasped again, and wiped two tears away with the knuckle of each of his forefingers.

'What did you want to say?' demanded Wardle, shaking him.

'Stop!' said Mr Pickwick; 'allow me. What did you wish to communicate to me, my poor boy?'

'I want to whisper to you,' replied the fat boy.

'You want to bite his ear off, I suppose,' said Wardle. 'Don't come near him; he's vicious; ring the bell, and let him be taken downstairs.'

Just as Mr Winkle caught the bell-rope in his hand, it was arrested by a general expression of astonishment; the captive lover, his face burning with confusion, suddenly walked in from the bedroom, and made a comprehensive bow to the company.

'Hollo!' cried Wardle, releasing the fat boy's collar, and staggering back. 'What's this?'

'I have been concealed in the next room, sir, since you returned,' explained Mr Snodgrass.

'Emily, my girl,' said Wardle reproachfully, 'I detest meanness and deceit; this is unjustifiable and indelicate in the highest degree. I don't deserve this at your hands, Emily, indeed!'

'Dear papa,' said Emily, 'Arabella knows - everybody here knows - Joe knows - that I was no party to this concealment. Augustus, for Heaven's sake, explain it!'

Mr Snodgrass, who had only waited for a hearing, at once recounted how he had been placed in his then distressing predicament; how the fear of giving rise to domestic dissensions had alone prompted him to avoid Mr Wardle on his entrance; how he merely meant to depart by another door, but, finding it locked, had been compelled to stay against his will. It was a painful situation to be placed in; but he now regretted it the less, inasmuch as it afforded him an opportunity of acknowledging, before their mutual friends, that he loved Mr Wardle's daughter deeply and sincerely; that he was proud to avow that the feeling was mutual; and that if thousands of miles were placed between them, or oceans rolled their waters, he could never for an instant forget those happy days, when first - et cetera, et cetera.

Having delivered himself to this effect, Mr Snodgrass bowed again, looked into the crown of his hat, and stepped towards the door.

'Stop!' shouted Wardle. 'Why, in the name of all that's - '

'Inflammable,' mildly suggested Mr Pickwick, who thought something worse was coming.

'Well - that's inflammable,' said Wardle, adopting the substitute; 'couldn't you say all this to me in the first instance?'

'Or confide in me?' added Mr Pickwick.

'Dear, dear,' said Arabella, taking up the defence, 'what is the use of asking all that now, especially when you know you had set your covetous old heart on a richer son-in-law, and are so wild and fierce besides, that everybody is afraid of you, except me? Shake hands with him, and order him some dinner, for goodness gracious' sake, for he looks half starved; and pray have your wine up at once, for you'll not be tolerable until you have taken two bottles at least.'

The worthy old gentleman pulled Arabella's ear, kissed her without the smallest scruple, kissed his daughter also with great affection, and shook Mr Snodgrass warmly by the hand.

'She is right on one point at all events,' said the old gentleman cheerfully. 'Ring for the wine!'

The wine came, and Perker came upstairs at the same moment. Mr Snodgrass had dinner at a side table, and, when he had despatched it, drew his chair next Emily, without the smallest opposition on the old gentleman's part.

The evening was excellent. Little Mr Perker came out wonderfully, told various comic stories, and sang a serious song which was almost as



funny as the anecdotes. Arabella was very charming, Mr Wardle very jovial, Mr Pickwick very harmonious, Mr Ben Allen very uproarious, the lovers very silent, Mr Winkle very talkative, and all of them very happy.