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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter XV	1
Chapter XVI.....	30
Chapter XVII.....	70
Chapter XVIII.....	88
Chapter XIX.....	110
Chapter XX.....	140
Chapter XXI.....	175

《THE PICKWICK PAPERS》

By Charles Dickens

(三)

Chapter XV

IN WHICH IS GIVEN A FAITHFUL
PORTRAITURE OF TWO DISTINGUISHED
PERSONS: AND AN ACCURATE DESCRIPTION OF
A PUBLIC BREAKFAST IN THEIR HOUSE AND
GROUNDS; WHICH PUBLIC BREAKFAST LEADS
TO THE RECOGNITION OF AN OLD
ACQUAINTANCE, AND THE COMMENCEMENT
OF ANOTHER CHAPTER

MR. PICKWICK'S conscience had been somewhat reproaching him for his recent neglect of his friends at the Peacock; and he was just on the point of walking forth in quest of them, on the third morning after the election had terminated, when his faithful valet put into his hand a card, on which was engraved the following inscription:--

Mrs. Leo Hunter.

The Den. Eatanswill.

"Person's a waitin'," said Sam, epigrammatically.

"Does the person want me, Sam?" inquired Mr. Pickwick.

"He wants you particklar; and no one else'll do, as the Devil's private secretary said ven he fetched away Doctor Faustus," replied Mr. Weller.

"He. Is it a gentleman?" said Mr. Pickwick.

"A wery good imitation o' one, if it an't," replied Mr. Weller.

"But this is a lady's card," said Mr. Pickwick.

"Given me by a gen'l'm'n, hows'ever," replied Sam, "and he's a waitin' in the drawing-room--said he'd rather wait all day, than not see you."

Mr. Pickwick, on hearing this determination, descended to the drawing-room, where sat a grave man, who started up on his entrance, and said, with an air of profound respect:

"Mr. Pickwick, I presume?"

"The same."

"Allow me, sir, the honour of grasping your hand. Permit me, sir, to shake it," said the grave man.

"Certainly," said Mr. Pickwick.

The stranger shook the extended hand, and then continued.

"We have heard of your fame, sir. The noise of your antiquarian discussion has reached the ears of Mrs. Leo Hunter--my wife, sir; I am Mr. Leo Hunter"--the stranger paused, as if he expected that Mr. Pickwick would be overcome by the disclosure; but seeing that he remained perfectly calm, proceeded.

"My wife, sir--Mrs. Leo Hunter--is proud to number among her acquaintance all those who have rendered themselves celebrated by their works and talents. Permit me, sir, to place in a conspicuous part of the list the name of Mr. Pickwick, and his brother members of the club that derives its name from him."

"I shall be extremely happy to make the acquaintance of such a lady, sir," replied Mr. Pickwick.

"You shall make it, sir," said the grave man. "Tomorrow morning, sir, we give a public breakfast--a fete champetre--to a great number of those who have rendered themselves celebrated by their works and talents. Permit Mrs. Leo Hunter, sir, to have the gratification of seeing you at the Den."

"With great pleasure," replied Mr. Pickwick.

"Mrs. Leo Hunter has many of these breakfasts, sir," resumed the new acquaintance--" `feasts of reason, sir, and flows of soul,' as somebody who wrote a sonnet to Mrs. Leo Hunter on her breakfasts, feelingly and originally observed."

"Was he celebrated for his works and talents?" inquired Mr. Pickwick.

"He was, sir," replied the grave man, "all Mrs. Leo Hunter's acquaintance are; it is her ambition, sir, to have no other acquaintance."

"It is a very noble ambition," said Mr. Pickwick.

"When I inform Mrs. Leo Hunter, that that remark fell from your lips, sir, she will indeed be proud," said the grave man. "You have a gentleman in your train, who has produced some beautiful little poems, I think, sir."

"My friend Mr. Snodgrass has a great taste for poetry," replied Mr. Pickwick.

"So has Mrs. Leo Hunter, sir. She dotes on poetry, sir. She adores it; I may say that her whole soul and mind are wound up, and entwined with it. She has

produced some delightful pieces, herself, sir. You may have met with her 'Ode to an Expiring Frog,' sir."

"I don't think I have," said Mr. Pickwick.

"You astonish me, sir," said Mr. Leo Hunter. "It created an immense sensation. It was signed with an 'L' and eight stars, and appeared originally in a Lady's Magazine. It commenced

'Can I view thee panting, lying
On thy stomach, without sighing;
Can I unmoved see thee dying
On a log,
Expiring frog!'"

"Beautiful!" said Mr. Pickwick.

"Fine," said Mr. Leo Hunter, "so simple."

"Very," said Mr. Pickwick.

"The next verse is still more touching. Shall I repeat it?"

"If you please," said Mr. Pickwick.

"It runs thus," said the grave man, still more gravely.

'Say, have fiends in shape of boys,
With wild halloo, and brutal noise,

Hunted thee from marshy joys,
With a dog,
Expiring frog!" "

"Finely expressed," said Mr. Pickwick.

"All point, sir," said Mr. Leo Hunter, "but you shall hear Mrs. Leo Hunter repeat it. She can do justice to it, sir. She will repeat it, in character, sir, to-morrow morning."

"In character!"

"As Minerva. But I forgot--it's a fancy-dress breakfast."

"Dear me," said Mr. Pickwick, glancing at his own figure--"I can't possibly--"

"Can't, sir; can't!" exclaimed Mr. Leo Hunter. "Solomon Lucas, the Jew in the High Street, has thousands of fancy dresses. Consider, sir, how many appropriate characters are open for your selection. Plato, Zeno, Epicurus, Pythagoras--all founders of clubs."

"I know that," said Mr. Pickwick, "but as I cannot put myself in competition with those great men, I cannot presume to wear their dresses."

The grave man considered deeply, for a few seconds, and then said,

"On reflection, sir, I don't know whether it would not afford Mrs. Leo Hunter greater pleasure, if her guests saw a gentleman of your celebrity in his own costume, rather than in an assumed one. I may venture to promise an exception in your case, sir--yes, I am quite certain that on behalf of Mrs. Leo Hunter, I may venture to do so."

"In that case," said Mr. Pickwick, "I shall have great pleasure in coming."

"But I waste your time, sir," said the grave man, as if suddenly recollecting himself. "I know its value, sir. I will not detain you. I may tell Mrs. Leo Hunter, then, that she may confidently expect you and your distinguished friends? Good morning, sir, I am proud to have beheld so eminent a personage--not a step, sir; not a word." And without giving Mr. Pickwick time to offer remonstrance or denial, Mr. Leo Hunter stalked gravely away.

Mr. Pickwick took up his hat, and repaired to the Peacock, but Mr. Winkle had conveyed the intelligence

of the fancy ball there, before him.

"Mrs. Pott's going," were the first words with which he saluted his leader.

"Is she?" said Mr. Pickwick.

"As Apollo," replied Mr. Winkle. "Only Pott objects to the tunic."

"He is right. He is quite right," said Mr. Pickwick emphatically.

"Yes;--so she's going to wear a white satin gown with gold spangles."

"They'll hardly know what she's meant for; will they?" inquired Mr. Snodgrass.

"Of course they will," replied Mr. Winkle indignantly. "They'll see her lyre, won't they?"

"True; I forgot that," said Mr. Snodgrass.

"I shall go as a Bandit," interrupted Mr. Tupman.

"What!" said Mr. Pickwick, with a sudden start.

"As a bandit," repeated Mr. Tupman, mildly.

"You don't mean to say," said Mr. Pickwick, gazing with solemn sternness at his friend, "You don't mean to say, Mr. Tupman, that it is your intention to put yourself into a green velvet jacket, with a two-inch tail?"

"Such is my intention, sir," replied Mr. Tupman warmly. "And why not, sir?"

"Because, sir," said Mr. Pickwick, considerably excited. "Because you are too old, sir."

"Too old!" exclaimed Mr. Tupman.

"And if any further ground of objection be wanting," continued Mr. Pickwick, "you are too fat, sir."

"Sir," said Mr. Tupman, his face suffused with a crimson glow. "This is an insult."

"Sir," replied Mr. Pickwick in the same tone, "It is not half the insult to you, that your appearance in my presence in a green velvet jacket, with a two-inch tail, would be to me."

"Sir," said Mr. Tupman, "you're a fellow."

"Sir," said Mr. Pickwick, "you're another!"

Mr. Tupman advanced a step or two, and glared at Mr. Pickwick. Mr. Pickwick returned the glare, concentrated into a focus by means of his spectacles, and breathed a bold defiance. Mr. Snodgrass and Mr. Winkle looked on, petrified at beholding such a scene between two such men.

"Sir," said Mr. Tupman, after a short pause,

speaking in a low, deep voice, "you have called me old."

"I have," said Mr. Pickwick.

"And fat."

"I reiterate the charge."

"And a fellow."

"So you are!"

There was a fearful pause.

"My attachment to your person, sir," said Mr. Tupman, speaking in a voice tremulous with emotion, and tucking up his wristbands meanwhile, "is great--very great--but upon that person, I must take summary vengeance."

"Come on, sir!" replied Mr. Pickwick. Stimulated by the exciting nature of the dialogue, the heroic man actually threw himself into a paralytic attitude, confidently supposed by the two by-standers to have been intended as a posture of defence.

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Snodgrass, suddenly recovering the power of speech, of which intense astonishment had previously bereft him, and rushing between the two, at the imminent hazard of receiving an application on the temple from each. "What! Mr.

Pickwick, with the eyes of the world upon you! Mr. Tupman! Who, in common with us all, derives a lustre from his undying name! For shame, gentlemen; for shame."

The unwonted lines which momentary passion had ruled in Mr. Pickwick's clear and open brow, gradually melted away, as his young friend spoke, like the marks of a black-lead pencil beneath the softening influence of India rubber. His countenance had resumed its usual benign expression, ere he concluded.

"I have been hasty," said Mr. Pickwick, "very hasty. Tupman; your hand."

The dark shadow passed from Mr. Tupman's face, as he warmly grasped the hand of his friend.

"I have been hasty, too," said he.

"No, no," interrupted Mr. Pickwick, "the fault was mine. You will wear the green velvet jacket?"

"No, no," replied Mr. Tupman.

"To oblige me, you will," resumed Mr. Pickwick.

"Well, well, I will," said Mr. Tupman.

It was accordingly settled that Mr. Tupman, Mr. Winkle, and Mr. Snodgrass, should all wear fancy

dresses. Thus Mr. Pickwick was led by the very warmth of his own good feelings to give his consent to a proceeding from which his better judgment would have recoiled--a more striking illustration of his amiable character could hardly have been conceived, even if the events recorded in these pages had been wholly imaginary.

Mr. Leo Hunter had not exaggerated the resources of Mr. Solomon Lucas. His wardrobe was extensive--very extensive--not strictly classical perhaps, nor quite new, nor did it contain any one garment made precisely after the fashion of any age or time, but everything was more or less spangled; and what can be prettier than spangles! It may be objected that they are not adapted to the daylight, but everybody knows that they would glitter if there were lamps; and nothing can be clearer than that if people give fancy balls in the day-time, and the dresses do not show quite as well as they would by night, the fault lies solely with the people who give the fancy balls, and is in no wise chargeable on the spangles. Such was the convincing reasoning of Mr. Solomon Lucas; and influenced by such arguments did Mr.

Tupman, Mr. Winkle, and Mr. Snodgrass, engage to array themselves in costumes which his taste and experience induced him to recommend as admirably suited to the occasion.

A carriage was hired from the Town Arms, for the accommodation of the Pickwickians, and a chariot was ordered from the same repository, for the purpose of conveying Mr. and Mrs. Pott to Mrs. Leo Hunter's grounds, which Mr. Pott, as a delicate acknowledgment of having received an invitation, had already confidently predicted in the Eatanswill Gazette "would present a scene of varied and delicious enchantment--a bewildering coruscation of beauty and talent--a lavish and prodigal display of hospitality--above all, a degree of splendour softened by the most exquisite taste; and adornment refined with perfect harmony and the chastest good keeping--compared with which, the fabled gorgeousness of Eastern Fairy-land itself, would appear to be clothed in as many dark and murky colours, as must be the mind of the splenetic and unmanly being who could presume to taint with the venom of his envy, the preparations made by the virtuous and highly