

# HALF HOUR PORTRAITS OF DICKENS GREATEST CHARACTERS

The Micawbers—Dickens' Greatest Humorous Characters

By J. W. Muller

When Charles Dickens began "The Personal History of David Copperfield," which was issued first in monthly numbers from 1849 to 1850, there grew under his wonderful hand enough characters to make mank books. To say that the figure of Wilkins Micawber towers far above the rest in a story that contains the Peggottys, Little Emily, Dora, Uriah Heep, Steerforth Traddles and Betsey Trotwood, is a suggestion of the greatness of this extraordinary creation. As the novel progresses, Mr. Micawber grows until it is at last, not as if Charles Dickens were inventing Mr. Micawber, but as if Mr. Micawber were challenging Charles Dickens to depict him. Hopelessly hopeful, contemplating his own moral and mental grandeur with innocent,

something very genteel. This was Mr. Micawber.

He carried a jaunty stick with a large pair of rusty tassels on it, and on the outside of his coat hung a large eye-glass, purely for effect, as he looked through it very rarely and could not possibly see anything when he did.

Though his clothes were vastly shabby, he wore a magnificent shirt collar that made an overpowering effect on the beholder especially when he settled his chin in it, as he did whenever he had something more than usually condescending or impressive to announce.

Mr. Micawber explained that he was willing to receive the young beginner whom he now had the pleas-

he would polish his shoes with extraordinary pains and go out humming a tune, with an air of greater gentility than ever.

## Something Unpleasant Turns Up.

Saturday nights were Mr. Micawber's most difficult times. Then he would engage in heartrending confidences, accusing himself so bitterly that he sobbed; but, happily, though he might contemplate self-annihilation at the beginning of one of these confessions, he was fairly certain to sing a merry song toward the end of it. He might arrive home with tears flooding his fine face, and with the declaration that nothing was left but a jail, and he would go to bed making a calculation of the expense of putting bow windows to the house in case anything turned

new manner, if—in short, if anything turns up."

Mr. Micawber's creditors were implacable. Even the most merciful of them, a bootmaker, declared in open court that he bore him no malice, but when money was paid to him he liked to be paid. He thought it was human nature. Mr. Micawber was discharged and left the prison after a harmonious arrangement given by the prison chaplain in honor.

## Mr. Micawber Gives Some Advice.

Free once more, Mr. Micawber embraced with many tears and spent a most depressing evening. They had become accustomed to their old difficulties that they were quite shipwrecked when they were released from them. The evening of the day, combined with a heavy flip that they brewed in recognition of the important tide in their affairs, led Mrs. Micawber to mournful introspection about her mamma, who had departed this life before Mr. Micawber's difficulties commenced, or, at least, before they became pressing; and her papa, who lived to see Mr. Micawber several times, and then expired, regretted by a numerous circle. Becoming slightly hysterical, she exclaimed: "Mr. Micawber may have concealed his difficulties from me in the first instance. The pearl necklace and bracelet which I inherited from mamma have been disposed of for less than their value, and the set of china which was the wedding gift of my papa, has been actually thrown away for nothing. But I never will assist Mr. Micawber. No!" cried Mrs. Micawber, more affected than ever, "never will do it!"

"My life!" said Mr. Micawber, clinging her into his arms.

However, to Mrs. Micawber there came an intuition that her husband might do something in the way of a position in the Custom House in Plymouth for a man of Mr. Micawber's great talents, and Mr. Micawber instantly resolved to set out on that place to be on the spot in case anything turned up.

They celebrated their resolution by giving a farewell supper to David Copperfield, at which Mr. Micawber praised him as being one who had a heart to feel, and a head to plan, and a hand to—"in short," said Mr. Micawber, "a general ability to dispose of such available property as could be made away with, and having done errands to the brewer's at times when Mr. Micawber was prevented from it by the poynancy of his feelings and Mrs. Micawber by the twins. "My dear friend," said Mr. Micawber, "I am older than you; a man of some experience in—" and—of some experience, in short, in difficulties, generally speaking. At present, until something turns up (which I am, I may say, hourly expecting), I have nothing to bestow but advice. Still, my advice is so far worth taking that—in short, that I have never taken it myself, and am therefore Mr. Micawber, who had been beaming and smiling all over his head and face, checked himself and frowned—"the miserable wretch you now behold!"

"My dear Micawber!" urged Mrs. Micawber.

"I say," returned Mr. Micawber, forgetting himself and smiling again, "the miserable wretch you now behold. My advice is, never do tomorrow what you can do today. The procrastination is the thief of time. I'll tell him. My other piece of advice, Copperfield! Annual income, twenty pounds; annual expenditure, nineteen, nineteen, nineteen; result, happiness. Annual income, twenty pounds; annual expenditure, twenty pounds ought and six; result, misery. The blossom is blighted, the leaf is withered, the God of Day goes down upon the dreary scene, and—and, in short, you are forever floored. As I am!"

To make his example more impressive, Mr. Micawber drank a glass of punch and whistled the "Collect Hornpipe."

Although Mr. Micawber arrived on the spot in Plymouth, nothing turned up. Talent, he discovered, was not wanted in the Custom House. In fact, as he and Mrs. Micawber saw clearly, they would rather not have a man of Mr. Micawber's talents in the Custom House. Mrs. Micawber's family, also, failed to receive him with the ardor which he had reasonably expected, as one so newly released from captivity. In fact, his reception was not only cool, but one branch of the family became quite personal to Mr. Micawber before he had been there a week. Under the circumstances there was nothing for a man of Mr. Micawber's spirit left to do but to borrow from that branch of the family the money to return to London at any sacrifice.

## Waiting for a Remittance to Turn Up.

On their way back, as they went near the ancient town of Canterbury, Mr. Micawber was of the opinion that it would be rash not to go there and see the Cathedral, first on account of its being so well worth seeing, and secondly on account of the great probability of something turning up in a cathedral town.

Here David Copperfield, now living in Canterbury, found them waiting for what Mrs. Micawber hopefully

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"APPROACH ME AGAIN—YOU—YOU—YOU HEAP OF INFAMY—GASPED MR. MICAWBER."  
(From the original block illustration by Fred Barnard.)

delightful worship, dissipated, borrowing, beaming, he stands, eternally alive, an eternally magnificent cavalier of smiling misfortune; and Mrs. Micawber stands by his side, hardly as a second character, but as his complement. The two are one. Old in sordid things, they are splendidly young with hope. They are children, wonderful, great children, to whom everything is real the moment it is conceived. And so, as we live with them and laugh at their audacious absurdity, we grow to love them, hardly knowing why, till we realize that it is this: that they possess that childhood immortality that most of us lose with its years.

Mr. Micawber long has been a favorite citation for those who hold that Dickens' characters are extravagant. If there is any extravagance in Wilkins Micawber, it seems to the writer that the extravagance is only in the extravagance of genius that he lavished on him. Micawber is a marvellous object, reared imperishable in a market place of perishing things, to astound and delight those who saw it reared, and as it will astound and delight those who come after us.

On the day when David Copperfield began his duties in the wine warehouse of Murdstone & Grinby in London, he was introduced to a stoutish, middle-aged person in a brown surtout and black tights and shoes, with no more hair upon his head (which was a large one and very shining) than there is upon an egg. His face was very extensive and bore a certain indescribable expression as of being about to say

ure to behold as an inmate of his domicile, in short, as a lodger.

Mr. Micawber's house in Windsor Terrace, shabby like himself and like himself, making all the show it could, had the blinds down on the first floor in order to delude the neighbors, that floor being entirely unfurnished. Mrs. Micawber, a thin and faded lady, was sitting in the parlor with a baby at her breast. This baby was one of twins; and nobody ever saw both the twins detached from Mrs. Micawber at the same time. One of them always was taking refreshment. Two other children, Master and Miss Micawber, completed the establishment, with a dark young woman who had a habit of snorting and acted as servant to the family, being, as she explained, an "orfling from St. Luke's Work House, close by."

Mrs. Micawber welcomed Master Copperfield with the sorrowful statement that when she lived with papa and mamma she never expected to take a lodger, "but," said she bravely, "Mr. Micawber being in difficulties, all considerations of a private character must give way."

Poor Mrs. Micawber had tried to exert herself. The center of the street door was quite covered by a great brass plate on which was engraved: "Mrs. Micawber's Boarding Establishment for Young Ladies." But no young lady ever had been to school there, nor had the least preparation ever been made to receive any young lady. The only visitors were creditors, some quite ferocious. At these times Mr. Micawber would be transported with grief and mortification, even to the length of making motions at himself with a razor; but within half an hour

up, the hope of something turning up being one that sustained Mr. and Mrs. Micawber through all afflictions.

So little turned up, however, that at last, after the family plate (six teaspoons, two salt spoons and a pair of sugar tongs) had been pawned, and even Mr. Micawber's library (a few books on a little chiffonier) had gone to a second-hand shop, Mr. Micawber was arrested and carried to the King's Bench Prison, announcing to the world that the God of Day had now gone down on him, but being able to recover his courage sufficiently to play a very lively game of skittles before noon and to give a very pleasant little dinner as a sort of joint-stock repast with some other prisoners.

Mrs. Micawber fainted when Mr. Micawber was carried off, and did not recover till she had made and enjoyed a little jug of egg-nog. The furniture, with the exception of a bed, a few chairs and a kitchen table, having been sold, she encamped in the two parlors of the emptied house with the twins, the youthful Micawbers and the Orfling till she resolved to move to Mr. Micawber in the prison, where they lived more comfortably than they had lived out of prison. Mr. Micawber's affairs were extremely involved on account of a former composition with his creditors which was referred to majestically by Mr. and Mrs. Micawber as "The Deed." At last this rock was removed, and Mr. Micawber applied for his release under the insolvent debtor's act, which would set him free within about six weeks.

"And then," said Mr. Micawber, "I have no doubt I shall, please Heaven, begin to be beforehand with the world, and to live in a perfectly