already begun. There is perhaps no more solid and satisfactory love story in all Dickens than the affair of Dick Swiveller and his Marchioness. It has practically all the elements and dramatic movement necessary to a good love story. It begins with a casual act of kindness, when the male steps down like a god to the astonished and delighted female, who is still in her grub stage. This is more than repaid, during the time when Dick is delirious with fever and is nursed by the Marchioness, by that fierce feminine devotion which makes all possible masculine attentions seem merely casual and selfish. Then, after the Kit episode is rounded off and Dick comes into his annuity, it is his turn again, and he sends her to school for six years, during which time she passes from grub to chrysalis and finally wings her way out into the sunshine. The last scene is their cottage (with a smoking-box) at Hampstead, a happy marriage. That is our idea of a satisfactory love story, and perhaps it helps to compensate us, in spite of its earlier date, for Toots' loss of Florence Dombey, a black business, as Toots is, without a doubt, the greatest lover in Dickens.

We do not know what Mr. Swiveller did with himself on his retirement to Hampstead, beyond the fact that he ruminated in the smoking-box; played cribbage with his wife, and occasionally entertained his fellow Apollo, Mr. Chuckster. But we are told that when the
Marchioness was at school, the governor of the establishment, to which he paid a monthly visit, "looked upon him as a literary gentleman of eccentric habits, and of a most prodigious talent in quotation." That he had the literary sense, the poet's passion for and delight in words, we know already, but this opinion of the governor's affords us a clue to what he did with himself at Hampstead. He wrote. The form his writing chose to honour is matter for conjecture; but when we remember our friend's love of the theatre, his native touch of the histrionic, we must admit that it is more than likely that he wrote plays, tremendous things, full of the fire of soul, in five deeply tragic acts. There may come a day when one of us, rummaging in the threepenny box, will come upon: "Gonzalo: Or the Brigand's Vengeance. A Tragedy. By Richard Swiveller." It will be dedicated to the Marchioness.
MR. MICAWBER

IT is odd to think of the sinister Mr. Murdstone as the tool of Providence, acting unwittingly as its compensating finger, restoring the balance in the affairs of poor little Copperfield. But that is what he was. The ten-year-old David is immured in Murdstone and Grinby’s warehouse, with its dirt and decaying floors and scuffling old grey rats. But he must have lodgings, cheap lodgings, and so Mr. Murdstone bethinks himself of a certain not very successful agent of the firm who has a room to let in Windsor Terrace, City Road, and decides that David shall go there. David is taken into the counting-house and introduced to his new landlord:

“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, and with a very extensive face, which he turned full upon me. His clothes were shabby, but he had an imposing shirt-collar on. He carried a jaunty sort of stick, with a large pair of rusty tassels to it; and a quizzing-glass hung outside his coat,—for ornament, I afterwards found, as he very seldom
looked through it, and couldn’t see anything when he did. . . .

It is Mr. Micawber, the inimitable, the unique Mr. Micawber. Henceforward, we know that once our bottle-washing and label-pasting is done, in that dark warehouse at Blackfriars, there will be this god-like creature waiting for us at home; and that when Murdstone and Grinby’s is nothing more than an evil memory and we have almost forgotten Windsor Terrace, City Road, we have not yet done with the great Micawber, who will continue to pop up in odd places and send us letters when we are least expecting them, letters that are worth more than all the money he will contrive to borrow from us from time to time; and in short—as the great man himself would say—an account has been opened for us in the Bank of Humour where we have been given unlimited credit. Our whole existence has been enriched by the flavour of Micawber so that it can never taste quite the same again, can never be entirely flat and saltless whatever may happen to us. Little did Mr. Murdstone imagine that by an idle choice of a landlord he was to wipe off all our scores against him and actually leave us in his debt. Micawber has arrived, and the balance has been more than restored. Perhaps this is the only occasion in the life of that hard-pressed gentleman on which he and a credit balance have arrived together.
Mr. Micawber is unquestionably the greatest of all Dickens' comic figures. Unlike so many of the others, he is droll both in character and in speech; he would be vastly entertaining if he were only described to us, if we were only allowed to see him from a distance and never met him face to face or heard him speak; the idea of him is comic; but in addition to that, of course, he is infinitely droll in speech, always saying the kind of thing we expect him to say but always saying it better, being more himself, so to speak, every time we meet him, as such persons are in real life. He is not only the greatest of Dickens' comic figures, but, with the one exception of Falstaff, he is the greatest comic figure in the whole range of English literature, a literature supremely rich in such characters. Falstaff is greater because he is himself a comic genius; in him the two familiar types of characters, the comic rogue and the comic butt, are combined, for he is a comic rogue who is his own butt, and as such he is unique. To this must be added his extraordinary versatility, the teeming abundance of his wit and humour, ranging from crude horse-play to a kind of comic philosophy, which is only displayed within a comparatively small compass (and perhaps necessarily so, for no man, not even a Shakespeare, could have kept the Falstaff of Henry the Fourth, part 1, going long—only a god could have fed the furnace of that wit) but makes
him tower above any other comic character. Micawber must be included in quite another category, namely, that of the great solemn fools, who do not offer us their wit and humour but only themselves, who do not make jokes but are themselves one endless joke. If Micawber—and all the persons of his kind (and most of us have known a few)—should realise even for a moment that he is funny, he would be ruined for us; but happily he does not, and while we are actually in his presence—and what a presence—we too must be as solemn as he is, the greatest of all the great solemn fools. It is only when his majesty has departed that we can break into inextinguishable laughter.

The story that Micawber adorns is different from the other Dickens novels in having a certain autobiographical basis: Dickens is making direct use of a number of his own childish experiences. There strolled magnificently through all the memories of his childhood and youth one extraordinary figure, his father, John Dickens, and it was he who became Mr. Micawber. So close at times are the two, the "Prodigal Father" (as Dickens called him) and the great comic character, that the description of Micawber sitting in state with his petition to the King in the Marshalsea, at the end of the eleventh chapter, is taken almost word for word from his own autobiographical notes, describing an identical scene in the Marshalsea in
which his father figured prominently. Thus we can say that in the creation of this monument of humour, Nature herself laid the foundations and was responsible for the general lines of the structure, while Dickens simply added the decoration, those touches of art necessary when cold print has to take the place of warm breathing reality. It is more than likely that all the most successful characters of fiction and drama are created in this way; they are neither elaborate pieces of portrait painting, on the one hand, nor examples of pure creation, creatures dropped from the blue, on the other; but, if they are comic characters, have their origin in persons long known and humorously and lovingly observed, pondered over, rolled—as it were—on the author’s palate until he has the very flavour of them, and then subtly transformed by art, the non-essential parts pared away and the essential coloured and heightened, until at last we have characters who, in a short acquaintance begun and ended in a few chapters, have the same effect upon us that their originals would have in real life if we had known them for years. It is a pity that we have not chapter and verse for this creative process, the real person and the fictitious one side by side, so that we could actually observe the transformation.

Comic figures created in this fashion seize hold of our imagination so strongly because not only have they the
wild absurdity that a humorous and fanciful author, like Dickens, can give to the speech of his figures, they have also a certain solidity, a psychological richness, that sets them far above those brittle creatures who, like so many of Dickens' later characters, are simply an eccentric trick of speech and gesture and nothing more, characters that have no insides but are merely masks, clothes, and wires. Thus Micawber, in his talk, has all the wild absurdity of a comic individual, and particularly, of course, a comic Dickens individual, and he has too the psychological richness and solidity of a universal type and is therefore, unlike so many entertaining characters, a fruitful theme for any man's discourse. Volumes passing a score of philosophies under review could be written on the Micawbers.

Really great absurdities of speech are like really great passages of poetry, they cannot be analysed any more than a scent can be analysed; they are simply miraculous assemblages of words. Why they should be so ridiculous is, and must remain, a mystery. Faced with them, we can only enjoy and give thanks, taking our analysis elsewhere. In the last resort, speech and character cannot, of course, be separated, one being the expression of the other, and concerning Mr. Micawber's character there is a great deal to be said, so that his delicious conversation, which in its highest flights of absurdity, as we have seen, is
Mr. Micawber

beyond analysis, can be very briefly examined in passing. Its most obvious characteristic is its trick of anti-climax. Mr. Micawber indulges in a very florid and theatrical rhetoric that always breaks down; just when his fantastic bark appears to be safely launched on the flood of oratory, we hear the grating of the keel and discover that he has run aground; his habit of giving everything a false dignity in his talk (which perhaps reaches its climax in his reference to the man from the waterworks as a "Minion of Power"), as if he were not an impecunious commercial traveller chatting with his friends but a statesman addressing the senate of some vast empire, is ridiculous enough, but it is made still more ridiculous by the fact that he cannot keep it up, his invention or his vocabulary not being equal to the demand, so that he inevitably flounders and breaks down. But a further touch of absurdity is added by the fact that though—so to speak—the matter breaks down, the manner does not: we can realise that at the moment when his oratory is crashing down into the commonplace, his pompousness is becoming even more marked, that "certain condescending roll in his voice" and that "certain indescribable air of doing something genteel" being more noticeable than ever. Nothing, we imagine, that he ever says can be delivered with such a dignified and genteel air as that "In short" which always arrives when his first gushing
stream of oratory is drying up and he is casting about—
usually in vain—for other springs of noble and resounding
speech. We have only to take a single scene, let us say
that in which he says good-bye to David before leaving
for Plymouth in the earlier part of the book, to discover
several excellent examples of this oratorical anti-climax
and bathos. Mr. Micawber, with his capital histrionic
sense, is aware of the solemnity of the occasion and is in
a rather mournfully didactic mood "Procrastination,"
he remarks to David, "is the thief of time. Collar him."
Touching on Mrs. Micawber's father, who has been
hurled into the conversation by Mrs. Micawber, he
observes: "Take him for all in all, we ne'er shall—in
short, make the acquaintance, probably, of anybody else
possessing, at his time of life, the same legs for gaiters,
and able to read the same description of print, without
spectacles." And then later when he gives us his great
contribution to economics and ethics: "Annual income
twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen six,
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—in short, you
are for ever floored. As I am." And when he had said
this, we are told, Mr. Micawber drank a glass of punch
with an air of great enjoyment and satisfaction, and
whistled the College Hornpipe. And well he might, for, having expressed the misery of his position in what he considers such excellent rhetoric (for he himself soars high above bathos), he is perfectly happy, for he is an orator, an artist; he has the so-called "artistic temperament," and is indeed perhaps our very best example of it.

It is significant, however, that Mr. Micawber is not an artist by profession but a commercial gentleman. But just as many artists, perhaps the majority of them, have not even a glimmer of the artistic temperament, so many gentlemen engaged in business, particularly in its vaguer and looser forms, on its fringes, in dubious agencies and so forth, are, like Micawber, almost perfect specimens of the temperament. One of the greatest and most astonishing Bohemians I have ever met was a certain dissipated watchmaker of the town of Maidstone in Kent. It is on the lounging and strange borderlands of trade, where blossom for a season the odd little companies in odd little towns, that our Micawbers are to be encountered. "The truly gorgeous and great personality," Mr. Chesterton remarks very rightly, "he who talks as no one else could talk and feels with an elementary fire, you will never find this man on any cabinet bench, in any literary circle, at any society dinner. Least of all will you find him in artistic society; he is utterly unknown in Bohemia." No, he is tucked away in the general
office of the Bristol Leatherworks, or may be found in
East Lancashire, acting as the local representative of the
Imperial Patent Mat Company. In such places, behind
a door in some dingy provincial street, unhonoured and
unsung, are our Micawbers, personalities like sunsets,
and we are unfortunate, to say the least of it, if we have
not known at least one of them.

Too much has been made of Mr. Micawber's mere
hopefulness: the phrase about "waiting for something
to turn up" seems almost to have hypnotised everybody.
Not that he was not supremely hopeful, one of the ripest
of optimists, but he cannot be explained merely in terms
of optimism: the analysis must be carried much further.
His temperament is, of course, extremely elastic; his
moods are like quicksilver, and much of his drollery
arises from his astonishingly rapid changes from the very
depths of despair to the height of gaiety and good-fellow-
ship. When creditors, dirty-faced men for the most
part, called at his house and shouted "Swindlers" and
"Robbers" up the stairs, Mr. Micawber, it will be
remembered, "would be transported with grief and
mortification, even to the length (as I was once made
aware by a scream from his wife) of making motions at
himself with a razor; but within half an hour afterwards,
he would polish up his shoes with extraordinary pains,
and go out, humming a tune with a greater air of gentility
than ever." And when little David visited him in the Marshalsea, Mr. Micawber wept and solemnly conjured his youthful visitor to take warning by his fate, but then immediately afterwards borrowed a shilling, sent out for some porter, sat down to his room-mate's loin of mutton, and was his glorious self again. He positively juggles with his moods, and can touch the extremes within the space of a single sentence. One of the most amusing, though by no means one of the quickest, of his changes is that at Canterbury when he and David meet for the first time since the early days in London. The three of them (for Mrs. Micawber is there—seeing the Medway) sit down to fish, roast veal, fried sausage-meat, partridge, and pudding, wine, strong ale and, after dinner, a bowl of hot punch; the evening is decidedly festive, healths are drunk all round, Mr. Micawber delivers an eulogy on the character of Mrs. Micawber (as well he might), and they end by singing "Auld Lang Syne" and "Here's a hand, my trusty friere"—Mr. Micawber throughout being the very picture of conviviality and high spirits. Yet David receives the following letter, early the next morning, a letter clearly written within quarter of an hour after his departure the previous night:

My Dear Young Friend,

The die is cast—all is over. Hiding the ravages of care with a sickly mask of mirth, I have not informed
you, this evening, that there is no hope of the remittance! Under these circumstances, alike humiliating to contemplate, and humiliating to relate, I have discharged the pecuniary liability contracted at this establishment, by giving a note of hand, made payable fourteen days after date, at my residence, Pentonville, London. When it becomes due, it will not be taken up. The result is destruction. The bolt is impending, and the tree must fall.

Let the wretched man who now addresses you, my dear Copperfield, be a beacon to you through life. He writes with that intention, and in that hope. If he could think himself of so much use, one gleam of day might, by possibility, penetrate into the cheerless dungeon of his remaining existence—though his longevity is, at present (to say the least of it), extremely problematical.

This is the last communication, my dear Copperfield, you will ever receive

From
The
Beggared Outcast,
Wilkins Micawber.

On receipt of this startling communication, David immediately runs to the hotel in the hope of being able to comfort his friend, but on the way there he meets the London coach—"with Mr. and Mrs. Micawber up behind; Mr. Micawber, the very picture of tranquil enjoyment, smiling at Mrs. Micawber's conversation, eating walnuts out of a paper bag, with a bottle sticking out of his breast-pocket." The Beggared Outcast had promptly vanished once he had written that heart-rending
letter, and his place had been probably taken at once by
Mr. Micawber the genteel man of the world and, for the
nonce, the complacent author.

The secret of Mr. Micawber is that he does not really
live in this world at all: he lives in a world of his own.
It is a world in which he himself is clearly a man of talent,
for whom great prizes are waiting round the next corner,
where an I O U clearly set out and given to the proper
person or an entry in a little notebook is as good as
cash down, where everything is larger and simpler and
richer and more romantic than the things of this world.
In short—to echo him once more—he lives entirely in
his imagination: he has the real artistic temperament.
Let circumstances cast him down ever so little, then he
cries farewell and plunges headlong into the dark gulf of
despair; but within a short space of time he has not only
climbed out of that gulf into the common daylight of
ordinary cheerfulness, he has soared away into the very
empyrean of human happiness: he will have no half-
measures in his moods, because a robust, romantic, and (to
speak truth) somewhat theatrical imagination takes no
delight in half-measures; it demands either the green
limelight and the muted strings or every light in the house
ablaze and the full orchestra crashing in triumph. But
the real world, observing that Wilkins Micawber will not
consent to live in it, plans a hearty revenge. It contrives
that the said Micawber shall be for ever in difficulties; that his talent shall pass unrecognised (except by Mrs. Micawber) and his offers—as she herself tells us—received with contumely; that neither corn nor coals shall sustain him, and that he shall be for ever head over ears in debt, existing in a wilderness of notes of hand, discounted bills, and I O U’s; and so, eternally jostled by creditors and bailiffs, in and out of the debtors’ prison, exchanging one set of miserable lodgings for another, pawning the few remaining possessions in order to pay for the next meal, he and his wife and their ever-increasing family are for ever driven from pillar to post, can never breathe freely, clear themselves, settle down as decent citizens willing and able to look any man in the face; and thus would seem to be in a truly wretched condition. Short of actual crime—and borrowing on such a scale appears to be dangerously near a criminal proceeding—it is hardly possible to imagine an existence more squalid, uncomfortable, and hopeless. This world, it would seem, has revenged itself very thoroughly.

But actually it has done nothing of the kind, for Mr. Micawber remains unscathed, living as he does in some other world of his own. The above account of his way of life is true enough as it is glimpsed from the real world; but Mr. Micawber himself does not really see it like this, as we may gather from his talk, nor does his wife, nor,
indeed, does any one who is under the spell of his glamorous imagination and walks with him for a space in his own private Edén. If a man who has just been quarrelling with the turncock from the waterworks can dismiss the matter with a reference to “the momentary laceration of a wounded spirit, made sensitive by a recent collision with the Minion of Power,” he is beyond the corroding touch of bitter circumstance; the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune whistle by, leaving him unhurt; his imagination has provided him with one of those fairy cloaks that enable their wearers to brave all dangers. Mr. Micawber sees himself as the central figure in some colossal wild romance, to which even the most disastrous events do but add an intensely absorbing and moving chapter or so and call for nobler attitudes and more magnificent rhetoric on the part of the principal actor. Once things are seen in that romantic haze, so that they loom splendid or sinister and run riot in scarlet and black and gold, the dreariness, the hopelessness, of the petty tale that is the world’s report of Mr. Micawber’s life completely disappear: he goes his way to the sound of epic drums, the trumpets of tragedy, and the flutes and violins of romance. To him, the present is always a crisis, whether of good or ill; fortune matters not, a crisis to be enjoyed as the latest and strangest scene in the drama; the past, far from being a hopeless record from
which remembrance turns her face, is an Othello's tale of battles, sieges, fortunes, of moving accidents by flood and field, of hairbreadth 'scapes i' the imminent deadly breach; the future, shining round the next corner, is a happy ending.

What chance has poverty, with its poor shifts and wretched limitations, its dinginess and drabness, with a mind so wedded to high romance, so intoxicated with opulent images and phrases, so richly nourished by the milk and honey of words? What does it matter what facts have to be faced if they are first sent to the carnival of the romantic imagination and so always return the strangest and most fascinating company, still moving to music in their tragic and comic masks? David was a poor little fellow of ten, a timid little washer of bottles, when he lodged, dingily and precariously like a mouse, with the Micawbers; but Mr. Micawber, meeting him again after a lapse of years, can drink "to the days when my friend Copperfield and myself were younger, and fought our way in the world side by side." On their first meeting again, at Canterbury, when David tells him that he is now at school, he can remark: "Although a mind like my friend Copperfield's does not require that cultivation which, without his knowledge of men and things, it would require, still it is a rich soil teeming with latent vegetation." Later, when they meet in the
company of Traddles, Mr. Micawber refers to his affairs as a somewhat romantic historian, engaged in the chronicle of the whole world, might refer to the position of some great empire at a crisis in its history:

"You find us, Copperfield," said Mr. Micawber, with one eye on Traddles, "at present established, on what may be designated as a small and unassuming scale; but, you are aware that I have, in the course of my career, surmounted difficulties, and conquered obstacles. You are no stranger to the fact, that there have been periods of my life, when it has been requisite that I should pause, until certain unexpected events should turn up; when it has been necessary that I should fall back, before making what I trust I shall not be accused of presumption in terming—a spring. The present is one of those momentous stages in the life of man. You find me, fallen back, for a spring; and I have every reason to believe that a vigorous leap will shortly be the result."

And his subsequent review of the situation, his parting speech, in the manner in which it succeeds in casting a curious glamour over everything, transforming the most trumpery and prosaic matter into something rich and strange, gives us the complete Micawber, soaring high above this world of "offices and the witness-box":

"My dear Copperfield, I need hardly tell you that to have beneath our roof, under existing circumstances, a mind like that which gleams—if I may be allowed the expression—which gleams—in your friend Traddles, is
an unspeakable comfort. With a washerwoman, who exposes hard-bake for sale in her parlor-window, dwelling next door, and a Bow-street officer residing over the way, you may imagine that his society is a source of consolation to myself and to Mrs. Micawber. I am at present, my dear Copperfield, engaged in the sale of corn upon commission. It is not an avocation of a remunerative description—in other words, it does not pay—and some temporary embarrassments of a pecuniary nature have been the consequence. I am, however, delighted to add that I have now an immediate prospect of something turning up (I am not at liberty to say in what direction), which I trust will enable me to provide, permanently, both for myself and for your friend Traddles, in whom I have an unaffected interest. You may, perhaps, be prepared to hear that Mrs. Micawber is in a state of health which renders it not wholly improbable that an addition may be ultimately made to those pledges of affection which—in short, to the infantine group. Mrs. Micawber’s family have been so good as to express their dissatisfaction at this state of things. I have merely to observe that I am not aware it is any business of theirs, and that I repel that exhibition of feeling with scorn, and with defiance!"

An excellent example of our friend’s Front Bench manner, in which every polysyllabic phrase suggests at least five thousand a year and a substantial pension. What is an empty pocket compared to such verbal riches? Selling corn upon commission may be a poor business, but once it is referred to as “not an avocation of a remunerative description,” it somehow suggests that immense wealth
Mr. Micawber

is lying only just beyond the speaker's grasp; it takes us immediately into an atmosphere of prosperity. What is a balance at the bank to a man who has only to open his mouth to shower riches about him like some one in a fairy tale, whose very tongue is an alchemist?

- Living in the world as he does, not as some poor devil trying to patch together a bare existence and evade his creditors, but as the central and heroic figure in that amazing chronicle, The Life and Times of Wilkins Micawber, Lover, Husband, Father, Financier, and Philosopher, Mr. Micawber instinctively seizes hold of every situation, good or evil, that presents itself and makes the most of it. Faced with such romantic gusto, so fine an appreciation of a crisis, revelling even in profound despair and last farewells, ill fortune, try as it may, can hardly make itself felt. And the commonplace, that drab stuff which is the fabric of most of our days, vanishes entirely: it is hardly conceivable that Mr. Micawber can ever have had a dull moment. It would be difficult to imagine anything more dreary than the prospect of being a clerk to a petty solicitor in a small cathedral town, or anything less exciting and romantic than a family removal from London to Canterbury; but Mr. Micawber, on the eve of his removal to Uriah Heep's, stands before us as a man who has just seen Troy burn and is now about to embark on an Odyssey. And so,
of course, he is: it is we who are blind and deaf and spiritless in our boredom. "It may be expected," the great creature declares to his friends, "that on the eve of a migration which will consign us to a perfectly new existence, I should offer a few valedictory remarks to two such friends as I see before me. But all that I have to say in this way, I have said. Whatever station in society I may attain, through the medium of the learned profession of which I am about to become an unworthy member, I shall endeavour not to disgrace, and Mrs. Micawber will be safe to adorn." Being able now to cast off his disguise (the name "Mortimer" and a pair of spectacles—and who can doubt that he enjoyed both immensely?), he speaks as one who has long been an exile or spent half a lifetime in remote hiding-places, and his language leaps up to grapple with the romantic moment: "The cloud has passed from the dreary scene, and the God of Day is once more high upon the mountain tops. On Monday next, on the arrival of the four o'clock afternoon coach at Canterbury, my foot will be on my native heath—my name, Micawber."

No sooner is Australia mentioned ("the land, the only land, for myself and my family")—though he has obviously never given it a thought before—than he sees a new part for himself and plunges into it. Within an hour or so, we are told, he is walking the streets of
Mr. Micawber

Canterbury—"expressing, in the hardy roving manner he assumed, the unsettled habits of a temporary sojourner in the land; and looking at the bullocks, as they came by, with the eye of an Australian farmer." And as the plans for emigration mature, he becomes still more wildly colonial. What could be better than the steps he has taken to familiarise himself and his family with the conditions of Australian life?

"My eldest daughter attends at five every morning at a neighbouring establishment, to acquire the process—if process it may be called—of milking cows. My younger children are instructed to observe, as closely as circumstances will permit, the habits of the pigs and poultry maintained in the poorer parts of this city: a pursuit from which they have, on two occasions, been brought home, within an inch of being run over. I have myself directed some attention, during the past week, to the art of baking; and my son Wilkins has issued forth with a walking-stick and driven cattle, when permitted, by the rugged hirelings who had them in charge, to render any voluntary service in that direction—which I regret to say, for the credit of our nature, was not often; he being generally warned, with imprecations, to desist."

Once on board the ship, he combines, with great skill, both the colonial and nautical characters. With a low-crowned straw hat, a complete suit of oilskins, a telescope, and a trick of "casting up his eye at the sky, as looking out for dirty weather," he is nothing less than an old salt,
and we can be sure that he carried out his intention of spinning an occasional yarn before the galley-fire. And he has also provided himself and his family with enormous clasp-knives and wooden spoons, and insists upon their drinking out of “villainous little tin pots” although there are plenty of glasses in the room, so determined is he that they shall stand before Albion as “denizens of the forest.” “The luxuries of the old country we abandon,” he announces with an intense pleasure that is the very height of luxury. Happy Mr. Micawber, with every hour adding pages to his romantic history, moving sublimely in a world of his own creation, clad in the armour of his soaring fancy, the conqueror of circumstance, merely adding its variations to his swelling moods as he adds the lemons to the punch. He is a greater figure in the history of romantic idealism than most of its professors, for he lays bare more of its secrets, as he rolls out his “few remarks” and points his single eyeglass over the steaming bowl, than whole volumes of our Schellings and Schlegels. Happy Mr. Micawber, joyously combining the rôles of financier, sailor, and pioneer, but, in truth, only travelling in a dream, from an England that was never there to an Australia that he will invent, sailing from moonshine to moonshine.

It was a fortunate day for Mr. Micawber when he visited a certain house (presumably in Plymouth) and
heard the daughter of the family sing her two ballads, *The Dashing White Serjeant* and *Little Tafflin*, for by the time he had heard *Little Tafflin*, we are told, he had resolved to win the fair singer or perish in the attempt, and, as we know, was successful, so that Emma became 'in due course the companion of his travels, his partner in joy and sorrow, Mrs. Micawber. He could not have made a better choice. Mrs. Micawber is entitled to a place, by the side of Lady Macbeth, among the great wives of literature. Micawber himself is a great man, but we must not allow our appreciation of that fact to blind us to another fact, namely, that great as he is, he would be like a ship robbed of its compass without "that pervading influence which sanctifies while it enhances the—in short, the influence of Woman in the lofty character of Wife." There never was a man more suitably and happily mated. If an unswerving loyalty, an unconquerable fidelity, are necessary to the character of a good wife, as they are, then Mrs. Micawber takes her place among the best, for her loyalty and fidelity are almost matchless. Though buffeted by the world, pursued by duns, hampered by her ever-increasing family, at odds with her relatives, she will never desert Mr. Micawber. If there should 'be any cynic who should doubt the strength of her attachment, let him read once more the chronicles of the Micawbers, and he will be
compelled to agree: Mrs. Micawber will never desert Mr. Micawber. If a certain similarity in tastes and temperament is one of the conditions of a happy marriage, as it is, this similarity is not difficult to find in the Micawbers. Fortunately, Mrs. Micawber has all her husband's elasticity, his power of rising from the depths of despair to the heights of conviviality in an incredibly short space of time. Had she been a woman of another temperament, a creature of fixed moods, gazing with stony eyes at the rapidly oscillating needle of her husband's humour, all her loyalty would have been to little purpose: the God of Day would inevitably have gone down upon the dreary scene. But she is as elastic as he is. "I have known her," David tells us, "to be thrown into fainting fits by the king's taxes at three o'clock, and to eat lamb-chops breaded, and drink warm ale (paid for with two teaspoons that had gone to the pawnbroker's), at four. On one occasion, when an execution had just been put in, coming home through some chance as early as six o'clock, I saw her lying (of course with a twin) under the grate in a swoon, with her hair all torn about her face; but I never knew her more cheerful than she was, that very same night, over a veal-cutlet before the kitchen fire, telling me stories about her papa and mamma, and the company they used to keep." But a happy marriage demands not only unity but variety. The two
partners must not be identical in character, a mere reflection of one another, but must be sufficiently diverse so that each one can put something into the joint concern that the other partner lacks, so that they can act as both a check and a stimulus upon one another. Does this final condition clang the gates before Mrs. Micawber’s face, barring her out of the ultimate Eden? It does not.

If Wilkins is the imaginative partner, the rhetorician, of the Micawbers, Emma is the logician. Her task it is to stand behind her fiery and impetuous spouse, restraining him until she has pointed the way. Never was a devoted woman better equipped for the task. “Emma’s form is fragile, but her grasp of a subject is inferior to none,” her father was in the habit of saying, and undoubtedly her father was a man of some discernment. Mrs. Micawber’s grasp of a subject compels our admiration. Mr. Micawber, with his swelling and opulent imagination, is capable of conceiving the most colossal projects and of hurling himself into the fray, but to Mrs. Micawber is left the arduous task of clearing away, with a ruthlessness that appals lesser intellects, the non-essentials of a problem and then of stating it, in its barest terms, with an exquisite and almost superhuman lucidity. Not even in the early days of Political Economy, the days of the Economic Man, when the textbooks were as repulsive as they are to-day but differed from our
modern works in being intelligible, were economic problems stated so clearly as they are by Mrs. Micawber. Her approach to the matter of the Medway Coal Trade is a model of reasoning:

"We all came back again," replied Mrs. Micawber. "Since then, I have consulted other branches of my family on the course which it is most expedient for Mr. Micawber to take—for I maintain that he must take some course, Master Copperfield," said Mrs. Micawber, argumentatively. "It is clear that a family of six, not including a domestic, cannot live upon air."

"Certainly, ma'am," said I.

"The opinion of those other branches of my family," pursued Mrs. Micawber, "is, that Mr. Micawber should immediately turn his attention to coals."

"To what, ma'am?"

"To coals," said Mrs. Micawber. "To the coal trade. Mr. Micawber was induced to think, on inquiry, that there might be an opening for a man of his talent in the Medway Coal Trade. Then, as Mr. Micawber very properly said, the first step to be taken clearly was, to come and see the Medway. Which we came and saw. I say 'we,' Master Copperfield; for I never will," said Mrs. Micawber with emotion, "I never will desert Mr. Micawber."

I murmured my admiration and approbation.

"We came," repeated Mrs. Micawber, "and saw the Medway. My opinion of the coal trade on that river is, that it may require talent, but that it certainly requires capital. Talent, Mr. Micawber has; capital, Mr. Micawber has not. We saw, I think, the greater
part of the Medway; and that is my individual conclusion. Being so near here, Mr. Micawber was of opinion that it would be rash not to come on, and see the Cathedral. Firstly, on account of its being so well worth seeing, and our never having seen it; and secondly, on account of the great probability of something turning up in a cathedral town.

Apart from that one emotional outburst on this subject of never deserting Mr. Micawber, not only excusable but even admirable in itself, showing as it does that the crystal-clear brain is only the servant of a woman’s warm heart, a treatise by a master of the subject could not achieve greater lucidity. Equally good is her later survey, at the dinner-party given by David, when she goes into the whole question of her husband’s prospects with characteristic thoroughness and grasp. Coals are not to be relied upon; and corn, we are told, though gentlemanly is not remunerative—“Commission to the extent of two and ninepence in a fortnight cannot, however limited our ideas, be considered remunerative.” Brewing and banking are both discussed by this devoted and clear-sighted helpmate, but both have shown themselves adamant in the face of Mr. Micawber’s offers. It is clear, as Mrs. Micawber remarks, that we must live. What is to be done? Let us hear the lady herself on the subject, and so discover her at the height of her powers:
“Very well,” said Mrs. Micawber. “Then what do I recommend? Here is Mr. Micawber with a variety of qualifications—with great talent—”

“Really, my love,” said Mr. Micawber.

“Pray, my dear, allow me to conclude. Here is Mr. Micawber, with a variety of qualifications, with great talent—I should say, with genius, but that may be the partiality of a wife—”

Traddles and I both murmured “No.”

“And here is Mr. Micawber without any suitable position or employment. Where does that responsibility rest? Clearly on society. Then I would make a fact so disgraceful known, and boldly challenge society to set it right. It appears to me, my dear Mr. Copperfield,” said Mrs. Micawber, forcibly, “that what Mr. Micawber has to do, is to throw down the gauntlet to society, and say, in effect, ‘Show me who will take that up. Let the party immediately step forward.’”

I ventured to ask Mrs. Micawber how this was to be done.

“By advertising,” said Mrs. Micawber—“in all the papers. It appears to me, that what Mr. Micawber has to do, in justice to himself, in justice to his family, and I will even go so far as to say in justice to society, by which he has been hitherto overlooked, is to advertise in all the papers; to describe himself plainly as so-and-so, with such and such qualifications, and to put it thus: ‘Now employ me, on remunerative terms, and address, post-paid, to W. M., Post Office, Camden Town.’”

Does Mr. Micawber think of taking up the Law—then Mrs. Micawber is quick to ask whether, in applying
himself to a subordinate branch of the profession, he will place it out of his power to rise ultimately to the "top of the tree," seeing him, in her mind's eye, as a Judge or a Chancellor. When Australia is suggested, she is on hand to inquire as to the climate and the circumstances of the country—are they such that a man of Mr. Micawber's abilities would have a fair chance of rising in the social scale? When they are actually on the boat, how nobly she devotes herself to the task of making her husband (who has declared that "Britannia must take her chance") see that his duty, in this distant clime, will be to strengthen and not to weaken the connection between himself and Albion. No wife could do more in furthering the best interests of her husband and of society at once and the same time. How inspiring is her very last piece of advice:

"I wish Mr. Micawber to take his stand upon that vessel's prow, and firmly say, 'This country I am come to conquer! Have you honours? Have you riches? Have you 'posts of profitable pecuniary emolument? Let them be brought forward. They are mine.'"

Mr. Micawber, glancing at us all, seemed to think there was a good deal in this idea.

"I wish Mr. Micawber, if I make myself understood," said Mrs. Micawber, in her argumentative tone, "to be the Caesar of his own fortunes. That, my dear Mr. Copperfield, appears to be his true position. From the first moment of this voyage, I wish Mr. Micawber to
The English Comic Characters

stand upon that vessel's prow and say, 'Enough of delay: enough of disappointment: enough of limited means. That was in the old country. This is the new. Produce your reparation. Bring it forward!'

After this, there is no excuse for Mr. Micawber if he does not "wield the rod of talent and of power in Australia." A fine fighting spirit, womanly wit, and a devoted heart can do no more for him.

Mrs. Micawber is one of the severest logicians with whom we have ever been acquainted; but she is not really reasoning about this world at all: she lives in Mr. Micawber's world, and, indeed, represents the logical and scientific point of view in that world. Existing as she does in the fire and light of Mr Micawber's rich imagination, walking for ever in his gigantic shadow, it naturally follows that she has long since lost sight of common reality, which has been swallowed up by the strange and romantic world created for himself by Mr. Micawber. And since there is no reason why such a world, however strange and romantic and shadowy it may be, should not have its own logicians, we find Mrs. Micawber in the part, thereby supplementing her husband's more emotional, rhetorical, and imaginative outlook, manner, and speech, completing—as it were—his world for him just as she rounds off his life by her partnership in their happy marriage. Nor is it strange
Mr. Micawber

that a lady who, notwithstanding her fragility of form, has a grasp of a subject inferior to none, should be so consistently and happily moonstruck. The rich and fiery imagination, incessantly creating, must always acquire the ascendancy: the most austere and determined logic can never, in the last resort, be anything more than its willing servant. Ourselves both creations and creative, living half in and half out of some gigantic tragi-comedy of black night and unnumbered stars, in which we willy-nilly play a part laid down for us and yet contrive before we have done to have some tiny say in its authorship, putting in a cry here, a gesture there, that are our own, we must instinctively recognise and do homage to the creative imagination, bearing as it does the marks of divinity, so that sooner or later we come under its spell and are wetted by its spectral rain and warmed by its fabulous suns. In the fable, perhaps the loveliest and most significant of them all, of the crazy knight, Sancho Panza is most grossly and realistically minded, a man of common-sense, with his eyes fixed on solid objects; and yet after he has jogged behind his master down so many winding roads, he becomes in the end as high fantastical as the Don himself and capers among enchantments. So too Mrs. Micawber, for all her fierce feminine lucidity, has taken to her bosom not only the person of Mr. Micawber but all his host of dreams.
and legends, so that she too moves happily among enchantments, the picture of a good wife and a fitting subject for innumerable parables.

Nothing has been said so far about the part that Mr. Micawber is made to play in the story, a part that has been severely criticised, not least by his greatest admirers. Of the emigration and Mr. Micawber's purely material success at the end of the story, Mr. Chesterton has remarked: "But how did it happen that the man who created this Micawber could pension him off at the end of the story and make him a successful colonial mayor? Micawber never did succeed, never ought to succeed; his kingdom is not of this world." This is well said; but even if we agree with this view of Micawber, it is possible to defend Dickens. If the material success is offered us as a kind of poetic justice (and the choice of the Colonies suggests this, as the Victorians seemed to regard the Colonies as a rough-and-ready kind of Christian Heaven, with a scheme of poetic justice that would, reward, let us say, the Squire's son, who has been wrongly accused of forgery and promptly exiled, with ten thousand head of sheep), then it is entirely unnecessary, for Mr. Micawber himself is a kind of poet, who lives in poetry, and does not need poetic justice. But if it is simply regarded as a new setting for Mr. Micawber, giving him, as it were, more scope for his Micawberishness, then it
can be justified. Our last news of him is as “a diligent and esteemed correspondent” of the Port Middlebay Times, and obviously he was entirely at ease, as happy as a king, dashing off leaders for that influential organ. Is there anything nearer Micawber in this world than the early Colonial and American Press, existing sumptuously on magnificent phrases, rhetoric, and capital letters?

Once the actual work had begun and the pioneers were busy, Micawber was worth his weight in diamonds and rubies to any colony (not merely as a character—as that, he was worth his weight anywhere) as a rhetorician, a fount of glorious phrases, an ever-gushing spring of eloquence, as the very embodiment of the romantic outlook upon life, of unconquerable faith and hope. Hard labour and easy rhetoric have tamed many a wilderness. Pioneering demands, first, the great workers, and then, afterwards, the great talkers; and it is not merely a coincidence that of all modern states America should have produced the largest crop of orators and offered them the greatest rewards. Mr. Micawber, I have no doubt, talked Port Middlebay into existence, and so deserved its highest honours.

But of his part as a detective in the history of David Copperfield it is impossible to put forward any defence. It is impossible to read those chapters without feeling that Micawber is being constrained by his creator: even
the humour is forced and unreal. Indeed, the whole episode is preposterous. Uriah Heep would never have dreamed of employing such a person; Mr. Micawber would never have remained in the office a week; and, even supposing that both actions were possible, he would never have been able to conceal his knowledge of Uriah's shady transactions or, what is yet more unlikely, have been able to ferret them all out, tabulate them in a formal document, and then bide his time until the proper moment for disclosure had arrived. Mr. Micawber as a financial detective is no more convincing than Shelley as a Bow Street runner. This trick of hurling his great drolls into the plot of the story and compelling them to play some quite unlikely part is, of course, one of the most notable defects in Dickens. Nor can we understand how a man could have the wit to create such creatures and yet the folly to treat them so badly, until we reflect that we do not regard a Dickens tale as he regarded it. We think the stories exist for the sake of the characters; we do not care what happens so long as the delicious creatures make their appearance from time to time; many of us, who know the Dickens characters as we know our friends, could not set down on paper a single plot of his, having long since forgotten the machinery of the tale. But Dickens, an extremely conscientious author, thought that the characters existed for the sake of the stories—it
is only in *Pickwick* that the characters exist for their own sweet sakes; and so when he had created some colossal droll, a Micawber, a Pecksniff, a Skimpole, and the like, he felt that he had to justify the space taken up by the great creature and so forced him to further the interests of the plot, usually in some outrageous manner. This was only the view of the conventional author, the superficial Dickens; the real man knew better and, in his heart of hearts, realised that these great comic figures of his were their own excuse and needed no complicated intrigue to justify their existence. Had he not realised this, he would never have allowed them to occupy so much room in his story, but would have curtailed their antics and bound them fast to the plot.

There is only one thing better than a story, and that is—a character. A character is half-a-hundred stories at once, the source of endless fables; and it is something more, particularly if it is a comic character. The tragic figures can hardly be separated from their particular chronicles, for we envisage them in the awful light of their destiny and doom; but the great comic figures wander out of their books, which are only so many introductions to them, for they are nothing if not children of freedom, and so we find them and their starry folly at large in our minds. The books themselves we may have forgotten, their very names may have faded out of our memories,
but these figures, long since our friends that we are ready to laugh and cry over, we do not forget. Their happy absurdities have added something to the whole flavour of our existence: these great fools, dissolving us into laughter, have touched our minds with the mellow philosophy of their creators: leaving their company, the parlour door closed behind us, the tavern lights that illumined them now blurred in the wind and rain, we question the night, which has swallowed our last peal of laughter, more curiously, and await, in a heightened mood of expectancy, the pageant and comedy of the approaching day. Only this humour of character can stir the depths. The humour of incident and situation that does not proceed from character, however artfully it may be contrived, is at its best only an elaborate play, making a glitter and commotion on the surface of things. But the humour of character goes down and touches, surely but tenderly, the very roots of our common human nature.