“Sit down without your glasses, can’t you?” returned his son. “You don’t eat or drink out of ‘em, I think; and where’s that sleepy-headed old Chuffey got to! Now, stupid. Oh! you know your name, do you?”

It would seem that he didn’t, for he didn’t come until the father called. As he spoke, the door of a small glass office, which was partitioned off from the rest of the room, was slowly opened, and a little blear-eyed, weazen-faced, ancient man came creeping out. He was of a remote fashion, and dusty, like the rest of the furniture: he was dressed in a decayed suit of black; with breeches garnished at the knees with rusty wisps of ribbon, the very paupers of shoe-strings; on the lower portion of his spindle legs were dingy worsted stockings of the same colour. He looked as if he had been put away and forgotten half a century before, and somebody had just found him in a lumbercloset.

Such as he was, he came slowly creeping on towards the table, until at last he crept into the vacant chair, from which, as his dim faculties became conscious of the presence of strangers, and those strangers ladies, he rose again, apparently intending to make a bow. But he sat down once more without having made it, and breathing on his shrivelled hands to warm them, remained with his poor blue nose immovable about his plate, looking at nothing, with eyes that saw nothing, and a face that meant nothing. Take him in that state, and he was an embodiment of nothing. Nothing else.

“Our clerk,” said Mr. Jonas, as host and master of the ceremonies: “old Chuffey.”—Chapter 11, “Wherein a Certain Gentleman becomes particular in his attentions to a certain lady; and more coming events than one, cast their shadows before,” p. 186.
Commentary: Old Chuffey, Pecksniff Family Retainer

This portrait of the ancient clerk in the house of Anthony Chuzzlewit, Warehousemen, Manchester and London, highlights the importance of a minor character associated with a plot secret. His very decrepitude rendered him an interesting subject for a caricaturist such as Hablot Knight Browne, Dickens's co-presenter since the death of Robert Seymour in 1836. Phiz cleverly works Chuffey into a parlour scene in Chapter 11 as Jonas courts the Pecksniff sisters: "Chuffey fell back into a corner of the fireplace; Miss Nancy yawned over a newspaper; Anthony went to sleep, so Jonas and Cherry had a clear stage to themselves" (102), but does not offer the kind of detailed examination that Barnard offers in his first novel, The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club in 1836. Phiz cleverly works Chuffey into a parlour scene in Chapter 11 as Jonas courts the Pecksniff sisters: "Chuffey fell back into a corner of the fireplace; Miss Nancy yawned over a newspaper; Anthony went to sleep, so Jonas and Cherry had a clear stage to themselves." Does not offer the kind of detailed examination that Barnard offers in The door of a small glass partitioned off from the rest of the room, was slowly opened, and a little bleary-eyed, weazen-faced man came creeping out in this same chapter. A minor character, Chuffey is a plot device to develop the possible poisoning of Antony Chuzzlewit and a means of developing Mrs. Gamp's position in the various novel — hence, Francis Octavius Carr Darley's associating the ailing clerk with her in the frontispiece of the 1863 New York "Household" Edition.

Relevant Illustrations, 1843-1872

Left: Hablot Knight Browne's Mr. Jonas Chuzzlewit Entertains his Cousins (Chapter 11, May 1843). Centre: Sol Eytinge, Jr. portrait of the Chuzzlewit business associates, Anthony and Jonas Chuzzlewit and Chuffey (1867). Right: F. O. C. Darley's studies including a failing Chuffey, "The creature's head's so hot," said Mrs. Gamp (1863). [Click on images to enlarge them.]

Above: Fred Barnard's more dramatic realisation of the introduction of the elderly clerk in Chapter 11, The door of a small glass office, which was partitioned off from the rest of the room, was slowly opened, and a little bleary-eyed, weazen-faced man came creeping out (1872). [Click on the image to enlarge it.]

References

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