While interested London circles gossiped about Robert Seymour’s suicide, William Makepeace Thackeray thought about applying to fill the vacancy he had left on *The Pickwick Papers*. In early 1836, the young man still planned to become a painter rather than a writer: he had practiced etching at Cambridge under Robert Buss’s friend, Mr. Roe, an engraver and printseller; and after he came to London, where he was befriended by artists like Frank Stone, Maclise, Cattermole, and other future Portwiners, he studied with his longtime idol, George Cruikshank, who doubted that his pupil, an ingenious wit but a poor draftsman, had the requisite patience to become an artist. It was probably at Cruikshank’s urging that the aspiring artist applied directly to Dickens for the *Pickwick* position. The commission to write *Pickwick* had enabled Dickens to marry Catherine Hogarth; aside from the boost it would give his professional aspirations, Thackeray hoped to become its illustrator in order that he might wed Isabella Shawe.

Dickens opened his door at Furnival’s Inn to the tall, bespectacled stranger (fig. 201), who quickly got down to business. Having brought two or three specimen drawings, Thackeray left them for Dickens to inspect. One legend, of doubtful veracity, maintains that Thackeray parted from Dickens thinking he had been hired and celebrated his success over dinner with his colleague, Hablot Browne. It is much more likely that Dickens studied the designs, one of them on the title-page of *Pickwick* (fig. 201), and was impressed by what he saw.
which may have been for the *Sketches by Boz* wrapper (fig. 202). If so, he probably would not have admired the center figure, perhaps a gross caricature of "Boz," and the bottom mask anticipated those in the border around "The Last Song" in Grimaldi's *Memoirs*, usually attributed to Cruikshank, that was quickly suppressed. Noting their crude lines and grotesque faces—so different from Seymour's relatively realistic and carefully detailed ones—Dickens understandably must have decided Thackeray would not be a suitable illustrator for *Pickwick*.

It would have been characteristic of Thackeray, however, upon learning that Browne had been selected to illustrate *The Pickwick Papers*, to be among the first to congratulate him. Meanwhile he wrote nothing of his disappointment to Isabella Shawe, mentioning only that they would not be parted long. He subsequently began to vacillate between the professions of painting and writing: Macready, who encountered him at the Garrick Club, thought that Thackeray, having exhausted his funds, was about to settle in Paris as a painter; Cruikshank, however, recalled his saying that he might "presently break out into another element and stay there." Indeed, the following year Dickens accepted one of his stories, "The Professor," for the September issue of *Bentley's Miscellany*. Ironically, the very success of the Dickens work he had failed to illustrate provided him with an ideal, commercially viable medium for his combination of verbal and graphic talents, which the influential Count D'Orsay apparently made voguish at this time. In a little more than a decade, after the appearance of *Vanity Fair* in 1847–48, Thackeray became Dickens's chief competitor as a writer of serial fiction, which he often illustrated himself. This rivalry inevitably sharpened the acrimony between the two authors during the Edmund Yates-Garrick Club controversy; they were finally reconciled through Kate and Charles Collins's friendship with the Thackerays.

Just before their differences peaked, however, Thackeray, rising in response to Dickens's toast to literature at the Royal Academy banquet in May, 1858, alluded to their first encounter as "Mr. Pickwick's lucky escape," in humorously recalling that "unfortunate blight" to his early prospects that influenced his decision to become a writer. Their fabled early meeting was recalled as briefly but more soberly by Dickens in the opening of his *Cornhill Magazine* tribute after the death of his main literary rival in 1863 (*CP*, 1: 97-101). By that time, it had long been apparent that Dickens's rejection of Thackeray's artistic services had turned out to be a stroke of rare good fortune for the English-speaking world.