Nicholas Nickleby Vol.III

By

Charles Dickens

Nicholas Nickleby

CHAPTER 45

Containing Matter of a surprising Kind

'As we gang awa' fra' Lunnun tomorrow neeght, and as I dinnot know that I was e'er so happy in a' my days, Misther Nickleby, Ding! but I WILL tak' anoother glass to our next merry meeting!'

So said John Browdie, rubbing his hands with great joyousness, and looking round him with a ruddy shining face, quite in keeping with the declaration.

The time at which John found himself in this enviable condition was the same evening to which the last chapter bore reference; the place was the cottage; and the assembled company were Nicholas, Mrs Nickleby, Mrs Browdie, Kate Nickleby, and Smike.

A very merry party they had been. Mrs Nickleby, knowing of her son's obligations to the honest Yorkshireman, had, after some demur, yielded her consent to Mr and Mrs Browdie being invited out to tea; in the way of which arrangement, there were at first sundry difficulties and obstacles, arising out of

her not having had an opportunity of 'calling' upon Mrs Browdie first; for although Mrs Nickleby very often observed with much complacency (as most punctilious people do), that she had not an atom of pride or formality about her, still she was a great stickler for dignity and ceremonies; and as it was manifest that, until a call had been made, she could not be (politely speaking, and according to the laws of society) even cognisant of the fact of Mrs Browdie's existence, she felt her situation to be one of peculiar delicacy and difficulty.

'The call MUST originate with me, my dear,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'that's indispensable. The fact is, my dear, that it's necessary there should be a sort of condescension on my part, and that I should show this young person that I am willing to take notice of her. There's a very respectablelooking young man,' added Mrs Nickleby, after a short consideration, 'who is conductor to one of the omnibuses that go by here, and who wears a glazed hatyour sister and I have noticed him very oftenhe has a wart upon his nose, Kate, you know, exactly like a gentleman's servant.'

'Have all gentlemen's servants warts upon their noses, mother?' asked Nicholas.

'Nicholas, my dear, how very absurd you are,' returned his mother; 'of course I mean that his glazed hat looks like a gentleman's servant, and not the wart upon his nose; though even that is not so ridiculous as it may seem to you, for we had a footboy once, who had not only a wart, but a wen also, and a very large wen too, and he demanded to have his wages raised in consequence, because he found it came very expensive. Let me see, what was Ioh yes, I know. The best way that I can think of would be to send a card, and my compliments, (I've no doubt he'd take 'em for a pot of porter,) by this young man, to the Saracen with Two Necks. If the waiter took him for a gentleman's servant, so much the better. Then all Mrs Browdie would have to do would be to send her card back by the carrier (he could easily come with a double knock), and there's an end of it.'

'My dear mother,' said Nicholas, 'I don't suppose such unsophisticated people as these ever had a card of their own, or ever will have.'

'Oh that, indeed, Nicholas, my dear,' returned Mrs Nickleby, 'that's another thing. If you put it upon that ground, why, of course, I have no more to say, than that I have no doubt they are very good sort of persons, and that I have no kind of objection to their coming here to tea if they like, and shall make a point of being very civil to them if they do.'

The point being thus effectually set at rest, and Mrs Nickleby duly placed in

the patronising and mildlycondescending position which became her rank and matrimonial years, Mr and Mrs Browdie were invited and came; and as they were very deferential to Mrs Nickleby, and seemed to have a becoming appreciation of her greatness, and were very much pleased with everything, the good lady had more than once given Kate to understand, in a whisper, that she thought they were the very bestmeaning people she had ever seen, and perfectly well behaved.

And thus it came to pass, that John Browdie declared, in the parlour after supper, to wit, and twenty minutes before eleven o'clock p.m., that he had never been so happy in all his days.

Nor was Mrs Browdie much behind her husband in this respect, for that young matron, whose rustic beauty contrasted very prettily with the more delicate loveliness of Kate, and without suffering by the contrast either, for each served as it were to set off and decorate the other, could not sufficiently admire the gentle and winning manners of the young lady, or the engaging affability of the elder one. Then Kate had the art of turning the conversation to subjects upon which the country girl, bashful at first in strange company, could feel herself at home; and if Mrs Nickleby was not quite so felicitous at times in the selection of topics of discourse, or if she did seem, as Mrs Browdie expressed it, 'rather high in her notions,' still nothing could be kinder, and that she took considerable interest in the young couple was manifest from the very long lectures on housewifery with which she was so obliging as to entertain Mrs Browdie's private ear, which were illustrated by various references to the domestic economy of the cottage, in which (those duties falling exclusively upon Kate) the good lady had about as much share, either in theory or practice, as any one of the statues of the Twelve Apostles which embellish the exterior of St Paul's Cathedral.

'Mr Browdie,' said Kate, addressing his young wife, 'is the besthumoured, the kindest and heartiest creature I ever saw. If I were oppressed with I don't know how many cares, it would make me happy only to look at him.'

'He does seem indeed, upon my word, a most excellent creature, Kate,' said Mrs Nickleby; 'most excellent. And I am sure that at all times it will give me pleasurereally pleasure nowto have you, Mrs Browdie, to see me in this plain and homely manner. We make no display,' said Mrs Nickleby, with an air which seemed to insinuate that they could make a vast deal if they were so disposed; 'no fuss, no preparation; I wouldn't allow it. I said, "Kate, my dear, you will only make Mrs Browdie feel uncomfortable, and how very foolish and inconsiderate that would be!"'

'I am very much obliged to you, I am sure, ma'am,' returned Mrs Browdie,

gratefully. 'It's nearly eleven o'clock, John. I am afraid we are keeping you up very late, ma'am.'

'Late!' cried Mrs Nickleby, with a sharp thin laugh, and one little cough at the end, like a note of admiration expressed. 'This is quite early for us. We used to keep such hours! Twelve, one, two, three o'clock was nothing to us. Balls, dinners, cardparties! Never were such rakes as the people about where we used to live. I often think now, I am sure, that how we ever could go through with it is quite astonishing, and that is just the evil of having a large connection and being a great deal sought after, which I would recommend all young married people steadily to resist; though of course, and it's perfectly clear, and a very happy thing too, I think, that very few young married people can be exposed to such temptations. There was one family in particular, that used to live about a mile from usnot straight down the road, but turning sharp off to the left by the turnpike where the Plymouth mail ran over the donkeythat were quite extraordinary people for giving the most extravagant parties, with artificial flowers and champagne, and variegated lamps, and, in short, every delicacy of eating and drinking that the most singular epicure could possibly require. I don't think that there ever were such people as those Peltiroguses. You remember the Peltiroguses, Kate?'

Kate saw that for the ease and comfort of the visitors it was high time to stay this flood of recollection, so answered that she entertained of the Peltiroguses a most vivid and distinct remembrance; and then said that Mr Browdie had half promised, early in the evening, that he would sing a Yorkshire song, and that she was most impatient that he should redeem his promise, because she was sure it would afford her mama more amusement and pleasure than it was possible to express.

Mrs Nickleby confirming her daughter with the best possible gracefor there was patronage in that too, and a kind of implication that she had a discerning taste in such matters, and was something of a criticJohn Browdie proceeded to consider the words of some northcountry ditty, and to take his wife's recollection respecting the same. This done, he made divers ungainly movements in his chair, and singling out one particular fly on the ceiling from the other flies there asleep, fixed his eyes upon him, and began to roar a meek sentiment (supposed to be uttered by a gentle swain fast pining away with love and despair) in a voice of thunder.

At the end of the first verse, as though some person without had waited until then to make himself audible, was heard a loud and violent knocking at the streetdoor; so loud and so violent, indeed, that the ladies started as by one accord, and John Browdie stopped.

'It must be some mistake,' said Nicholas, carelessly. 'We know nobody who would come here at this hour.'

Mrs Nickleby surmised, however, that perhaps the countinghouse was burnt down, or perhaps 'the Mr Cheerybles' had sent to take Nicholas into partnership (which certainly appeared highly probable at that time of night), or perhaps Mr Linkinwater had run away with the property, or perhaps Miss La Creevy was taken in, or perhaps

But a hasty exclamation from Kate stopped her abruptly in her conjectures, and Ralph Nickleby walked into the room.

'Stay,' said Ralph, as Nicholas rose, and Kate, making her way towards him, threw herself upon his arm. 'Before that boy says a word, hear me.'

Nicholas bit his lip and shook his head in a threatening manner, but appeared for the moment unable to articulate a syllable. Kate clung closer to his arm, Smike retreated behind them, and John Browdie, who had heard of Ralph, and appeared to have no great difficulty in recognising him, stepped between the old man and his young friend, as if with the intention of preventing either of them from advancing a step further.

'Hear me, I say,' said Ralph, 'and not him.'

'Say what thou'st gotten to say then, sir,' retorted John; 'and tak' care thou dinnot put up angry bluid which thou'dst betther try to quiet.'

'I should know YOU,' said Ralph, 'by your tongue; and HIM' (pointing to Smike) 'by his looks.'

'Don't speak to him,' said Nicholas, recovering his voice. 'I will not have it. I will not hear him. I do not know that man. I cannot breathe the air that he corrupts. His presence is an insult to my sister. It is shame to see him. I will not bear it.'

'Stand!' cried John, laying his heavy hand upon his chest.

'Then let him instantly retire,' said Nicholas, struggling. 'I am not going to lay hands upon him, but he shall withdraw. I will not have him here. John, John Browdie, is this my house, am I a child? If he stands there,' cried Nicholas, burning with fury, 'looking so calmly upon those who know his black and dastardly heart, he'll drive me mad.'

To all these exclamations John Browdie answered not a word, but he retained his hold upon Nicholas; and when he was silent again, spoke.

'There's more to say and hear than thou think'st for,' said John. 'I tell'ee I ha' gotten scent o' thot already. Wa'at be that shadow ootside door there? Noo, schoolmeasther, show thyself, mun; dinnot be sheamefeaced. Noo, auld gen'l'man, let's have schoolmeasther, coom.'

Hearing this adjuration, Mr Squeers, who had been lingering in the passage until such time as it should be expedient for him to enter and he could appear with effect, was fain to present himself in a somewhat undignified and sneaking way; at which John Browdie laughed with such keen and heartfelt delight, that even Kate, in all the pain, anxiety, and surprise of the scene, and though the tears were in her eyes, felt a disposition to join him.

'Have you done enjoying yourself, sir?' said Ralph, at length.

'Pratty nigh for the prasant time, sir,' replied John.

'I can wait,' said Ralph. 'Take your own time, pray.'

Ralph waited until there was a perfect silence, and then turning to Mrs Nickleby, but directing an eager glance at Kate, as if more anxious to watch his effect upon her, said:

'Now, ma'am, listen to me. I don't imagine that you were a party to a very fine tirade of words sent me by that boy of yours, because I don't believe that under his control, you have the slightest will of your own, or that your advice, your opinion, your wants, your wishes, anything which in nature and reason (or of what use is your great experience?) ought to weigh with him, has the slightest influence or weight whatever, or is taken for a moment into account.'

Mrs Nickleby shook her head and sighed, as if there were a good deal in that, certainly.

'For this reason,' resumed Ralph, 'I address myself to you, ma'am. For this reason, partly, and partly because I do not wish to be disgraced by the acts of a vicious stripling whom I was obliged to disown, and who, afterwards, in his boyish majesty, feigns toha! ha!to disown ME, I present myself here tonight. I have another motive in coming: a motive of humanity. I come here,' said Ralph, looking round with a biting and triumphant smile, and gloating and dwelling upon the words as if he were loath to lose the pleasure of saying them, 'to restore a parent his child. Ay, sir,' he continued, bending eagerly forward, and addressing Nicholas, as he marked the change of his countenance, 'to restore a parent his child; his son, sir; trepanned, waylaid, and guarded at every turn by you, with the base design of robbing him some day of any little wretched pittance of which he might become possessed.'

'In that, you know you lie,' said Nicholas, proudly.

'In this, I know I speak the truth. I have his father here,' retorted Ralph.

'Here!' sneered Squeers, stepping forward. 'Do you hear that? Here! Didn't I tell you to be careful that his father didn't turn up and send him back to me? Why, his father's my friend; he's to come back to me directly, he is. Now, what do you sayeh!nowcomewhat do you say to thatan't you sorry you took so much trouble for nothing? an't you? an't you?'

'You bear upon your body certain marks I gave you,' said Nicholas, looking quietly away, 'and may talk in acknowledgment of them as much as you please. You'll talk a long time before you rub them out, Mr Squeers.'

The estimable gentleman last named cast a hasty look at the table, as if he were prompted by this retort to throw a jug or bottle at the head of Nicholas, but he was interrupted in this design (if such design he had) by Ralph, who, touching him on the elbow, bade him tell the father that he might now appear and claim his son.

This being purely a labour of love, Mr Squeers readily complied, and leaving the room for the purpose, almost immediately returned, supporting a sleek personage with an oily face, who, bursting from him, and giving to view the form and face of Mr Snawley, made straight up to Smike, and tucking that poor fellow's head under his arm in a most uncouth and awkward embrace, elevated his broadbrimmed hat at arm's length in the air as a token of devout thanksgiving, exclaiming, meanwhile, 'How little did I think of this here joyful meeting, when I saw him last! Oh, how little did I think it!'

'Be composed, sir,' said Ralph, with a gruff expression of sympathy, 'you have got him now.'

'Got him! Oh, haven't I got him! Have I got him, though?' cried Mr Snawley, scarcely able to believe it. 'Yes, here he is, flesh and blood, flesh and blood.'

'Vary little flesh,' said John Browdie.

Mr Snawley was too much occupied by his parental feelings to notice this remark; and, to assure himself more completely of the restoration of his child, tucked his head under his arm again, and kept it there.

'What was it,' said Snawley, 'that made me take such a strong interest in him, when that worthy instructor of youth brought him to my house? What was it that made me burn all over with a wish to chastise him severely for cutting away from his best friends, his pastors and masters?'

'It was parental instinct, sir,' observed Squeers.

'That's what it was, sir,' rejoined Snawley; 'the elevated feeling, the feeling of the ancient Romans and Grecians, and of the beasts of the field and birds of the air, with the exception of rabbits and tomcats, which sometimes devour their offspring. My heart yearned towards him. I could haveI don't know what I couldn't have done to him in the anger of a father.'

'It only shows what Natur is, sir,' said Mr Squeers. 'She's rum 'un, is Natur.'

'She is a holy thing, sir,' remarked Snawley.

'I believe you,' added Mr Squeers, with a moral sigh. 'I should like to know how we should ever get on without her. Natur,' said Mr Squeers, solemnly, 'is more easier conceived than described. Oh what a blessed thing, sir, to be in a state of natur!'

Pending this philosophical discourse, the bystanders had been quite stupefied with amazement, while Nicholas had looked keenly from Snawley to Squeers, and from Squeers to Ralph, divided between his feelings of disgust, doubt, and surprise. At this juncture, Smike escaping from his father fled to Nicholas, and implored him, in most moving terms, never to give him up, but to let him live and die beside him.

'If you are this boy's father,' said Nicholas, 'look at the wreck he is, and tell me that you purpose to send him back to that loathsome den from which I brought him.'

'Scandal again!' cried Squeers. 'Recollect, you an't worth powder and shot, but I'll be even with you one way or another.'

'Stop,' interposed Ralph, as Snawley was about to speak. 'Let us cut this matter short, and not bandy words here with harebrained profligates. This is your son, as you can prove. And you, Mr Squeers, you know this boy to be the same that was with you for so many years under the name of Smike. Do you?'

'Do I!' returned Squeers. 'Don't I?'

'Good,' said Ralph; 'a very few words will be sufficient here. You had a son by your first wife, Mr Snawley?'

'I had,' replied that person, 'and there he stands.'

'We'll show that presently,' said Ralph. 'You and your wife were separated, and she had the boy to live with her, when he was a year old. You received a communication from her, when you had lived apart a year or two, that the boy

was dead; and you believed it?'

'Of course I did!' returned Snawley. 'Oh the joy of'

'Be rational, sir, pray,' said Ralph. 'This is business, and transports interfere with it. This wife died a year and a half ago, or thereaboutsnot morein some obscure place, where she was housekeeper in a family. Is that the case?'

'That's the case,' replied Snawley.

'Having written on her deathbed a letter or confession to you, about this very boy, which, as it was not directed otherwise than in your name, only reached you, and that by a circuitous course, a few days since?'

'Just so,' said Snawley. 'Correct in every particular, sir.'

'And this confession,' resumed Ralph, 'is to the effect that his death was an invention of hers to wound youwas a part of a system of annoyance, in short, which you seem to have adopted towards each otherthat the boy lived, but was of weak and imperfect intellectthat she sent him by a trusty hand to a cheap school in Yorkshirethat she had paid for his education for some years, and then, being poor, and going a long way off, gradually deserted him, for which she prayed forgiveness?'

Snawley nodded his head, and wiped his eyes; the first slightly, the last violently.

'The school was Mr Squeers's,' continued Ralph; 'the boy was left there in the name of Smike; every description was fully given, dates tally exactly with Mr Squeers's books, Mr Squeers is lodging with you at this time; you have two other boys at his school: you communicated the whole discovery to him, he brought you to me as the person who had recommended to him the kidnapper of his child; and I brought you here. Is that so?'

'You talk like a good book, sir, that's got nothing in its inside but what's the truth,' replied Snawley.

'This is your pocketbook,' said Ralph, producing one from his coat; 'the certificates of your first marriage and of the boy's birth, and your wife's two letters, and every other paper that can support these statements directly or by implication, are here, are they?'

'Every one of 'em, sir.'

'And you don't object to their being looked at here, so that these people may be convinced of your power to substantiate your claim at once in law and reason,

and you may resume your control over your own son without more delay. Do I understand you?'

'I couldn't have understood myself better, sir.'

'There, then,' said Ralph, tossing the pocketbook upon the table. 'Let them see them if they like; and as those are the original papers, I should recommend you to stand near while they are being examined, or you may chance to lose some.'

With these words Ralph sat down unbidden, and compressing his lips, which were for the moment slightly parted by a smile, folded his arms, and looked for the first time at his nephew.

Nicholas, stung by the concluding taunt, darted an indignant glance at him; but commanding himself as well as he could, entered upon a close examination of the documents, at which John Browdie assisted. There was nothing about them which could be called in question. The certificates were regularly signed as extracts from the parish books, the first letter had a genuine appearance of having been written and preserved for some years, the handwriting of the second tallied with it exactly, (making proper allowance for its having been written by a person in extremity,) and there were several other corroboratory scraps of entries and memoranda which it was equally difficult to question.

'Dear Nicholas,' whispered Kate, who had been looking anxiously over his shoulder, 'can this be really the case? Is this statement true?'

'I fear it is,' answered Nicholas. 'What say you, John?'

John scratched his head and shook it, but said nothing at all.

'You will observe, ma'am,' said Ralph, addressing himself to Mrs Nickleby, 'that this boy being a minor and not of strong mind, we might have come here tonight, armed with the powers of the law, and backed by a troop of its myrmidons. I should have done so, ma'am, unquestionably, but for my regard for the feelings of yourself, and your daughter.'

'You have shown your regard for HER feelings well,' said Nicholas, drawing his sister towards him.

'Thank you,' replied Ralph. 'Your praise, sir, is commendation, indeed.'

'Well,' said Squeers, 'what's to be done? Them hackneycoach horses will catch cold if we don't think of moving; there's one of 'em a sneezing now, so that he blows the street door right open. What's the order of the day? Is Master Snawley to come along with us?'

'No, no, no,' replied Smike, drawing back, and clinging to Nicholas.

'No. Pray, no. I will not go from you with him. No, no.'

'This is a cruel thing,' said Snawley, looking to his friends for support. 'Do parents bring children into the world for this?'

'Do parents bring children into the world for THOT?' said John Browdie bluntly, pointing, as he spoke, to Squeers.

'Never you mind,' retorted that gentleman, tapping his nose derisively.

'Never I mind!' said John, 'no, nor never nobody mind, say'st thou, schoolmeasther. It's nobody's minding that keeps sike men as thou afloat. Noo then, where be'est thou coomin' to? Dang it, dinnot coom treadin' ower me, mun.'

Suiting the action to the word, John Browdie just jerked his elbow into the chest of Mr Squeers who was advancing upon Smike; with so much dexterity that the schoolmaster reeled and staggered back upon Ralph Nickleby, and being unable to recover his balance, knocked that gentleman off his chair, and stumbled heavily upon him.

This accidental circumstance was the signal for some very decisive proceedings. In the midst of a great noise, occasioned by the prayers and entreaties of Smike, the cries and exclamations of the women, and the vehemence of the men, demonstrations were made of carrying off the lost son by violence. Squeers had actually begun to haul him out, when Nicholas (who, until then, had been evidently undecided how to act) took him by the collar, and shaking him so that such teeth as he had, chattered in his head, politely escorted him to the roomdoor, and thrusting him into the passage, shut it upon him.

'Now,' said Nicholas to the other two, 'have the goodness to follow your friend.'

'I want my son,' said Snawley.

'Your son,' replied Nicholas, 'chooses for himself. He chooses to remain here, and he shall.'

'You won't give him up?' said Snawley.

'I would not give him up against his will, to be the victim of such brutality as that to which you would consign him,' replied Nicholas, 'if he were a dog or a rat.'

'Knock that Nickleby down with a candlestick,' cried Mr Squeers, through the keyhole, 'and bring out my hat, somebody, will you, unless he wants to steal it.'

'I am very sorry, indeed,' said Mrs Nickleby, who, with Mrs Browdie, had stood crying and biting her fingers in a corner, while Kate (very pale, but perfectly quiet) had kept as near her brother as she could. 'I am very sorry, indeed, for all this. I really don't know what would be best to do, and that's the truth. Nicholas ought to be the best judge, and I hope he is. Of course, it's a hard thing to have to keep other people's children, though young Mr Snawley is certainly as useful and willing as it's possible for anybody to be; but, if it could be settled in any friendly mannerif old Mr Snawley, for instance, would settle to pay something certain for his board and lodging, and some fair arrangement was come to, so that we undertook to have fish twice a week, and a pudding twice, or a dumpling, or something of that sortI do think that it might be very satisfactory and pleasant for all parties.'

This compromise, which was proposed with abundance of tears and sighs, not exactly meeting the point at issue, nobody took any notice of it; and poor Mrs Nickleby accordingly proceeded to enlighten Mrs Browdie upon the advantages of such a scheme, and the unhappy results flowing, on all occasions, from her not being attended to when she proffered her advice.

'You, sir,' said Snawley, addressing the terrified Smike, 'are an unnatural, ungrateful, unlovable boy. You won't let me love you when I want to. Won't you come home, won't you?'

'No, no, no,' cried Smike, shrinking back.

'He never loved nobody,' bawled Squeers, through the keyhole. 'He never loved me; he never loved Wackford, who is next door but one to a cherubim. How can you expect that he'll love his father? He'll never love his father, he won't. He don't know what it is to have a father. He don't understand it. It an't in him.'

Mr Snawley looked steadfastly at his son for a full minute, and then covering his eyes with his hand, and once more raising his hat in the air, appeared deeply occupied in deploring his black ingratitude. Then drawing his arm across his eyes, he picked up Mr Squeers's hat, and taking it under one arm, and his own under the other, walked slowly and sadly out.

'Your romance, sir,' said Ralph, lingering for a moment, 'is destroyed, I take it. No unknown; no persecuted descendant of a man of high degree; but the weak, imbecile son of a poor, petty tradesman. We shall see how your sympathy melts before plain matter of fact.'

'You shall,' said Nicholas, motioning towards the door.

'And trust me, sir,' added Ralph, 'that I never supposed you would give him up tonight. Pride, obstinacy, reputation for fine feeling, were all against it. These must be brought down, sir, lowered, crushed, as they shall be soon. The protracted and wearing anxiety and expense of the law in its most oppressive form, its torture from hour to hour, its weary days and sleepless nights, with these I'll prove you, and break your haughty spirit, strong as you deem it now. And when you make this house a hell, and visit these trials upon yonder wretched object (as you will; I know you), and those who think you now a youngfledged hero, we'll go into old accounts between us two, and see who stands the debtor, and comes out best at last, even before the world.'

Ralph Nickleby withdrew. But Mr Squeers, who had heard a portion of this closing address, and was by this time wound up to a pitch of impotent malignity almost unprecedented, could not refrain from returning to the parlour door, and actually cutting some dozen capers with various wry faces and hideous grimaces, expressive of his triumphant confidence in the downfall and defeat of Nicholas.

Having concluded this wardance, in which his short trousers and large boots had borne a very conspicuous figure, Mr Squeers followed his friends, and the family were left to meditate upon recent occurrences.

CHAPTER 46

Throws some Light upon Nicholas's Love; but whether for Good or Evil the Reader must determine

After an anxious consideration of the painful and embarrassing position in which he was placed, Nicholas decided that he ought to lose no time in frankly stating it to the kind brothers. Availing himself of the first opportunity of being alone with Mr Charles Cheeryble at the close of next day, he accordingly related Smike's little history, and modestly but firmly expressed his hope that the good old gentleman would, under such circumstances as he described, hold him justified in adopting the extreme course of interfering between parent and child, and upholding the latter in his disobedience; even though his horror and dread of his father might seem, and would doubtless be represented as, a thing so repulsive and unnatural, as to render those who countenanced him in it, fit objects of general detestation and abhorrence.

'So deeply rooted does this horror of the man appear to be,' said Nicholas, 'that I can hardly believe he really is his son. Nature does not seem to have implanted in his breast one lingering feeling of affection for him, and surely she can never err.'

'My dear sir,' replied brother Charles, 'you fall into the very common mistake of charging upon Nature, matters with which she has not the smallest connection, and for which she is in no way responsible. Men talk of Nature as an abstract thing, and lose sight of what is natural while they do so. Here is a poor lad who has never felt a parent's care, who has scarcely known anything all his life but suffering and sorrow, presented to a man who he is told is his father, and whose first act is to signify his intention of putting an end to his short term of happiness, of consigning him to his old fate, and taking him from the only friend he has ever hadwhich is yourself. If Nature, in such a case, put into that lad's breast but one secret prompting which urged him towards his father and away from you, she would be a liar and an idiot.'

Nicholas was delighted to find that the old gentleman spoke so warmly, and in the hope that he might say something more to the same purpose, made no reply.

'The same mistake presents itself to me, in one shape or other, at every turn,' said brother Charles. 'Parents who never showed their love, complain of want of natural affection in their children; children who never showed their duty, complain of want of natural feeling in their parents; lawmakers who find both so miserable that their affections have never had enough of life's sun to develop them, are loud in their moralisings over parents and children too, and cry that the very ties of nature are disregarded. Natural affections and instincts, my dear sir, are the most beautiful of the Almighty's works, but like other beautiful works of His, they must be reared and fostered, or it is as natural that they should be wholly obscured, and that new feelings should usurp their place, as it is that the sweetest productions of the earth, left untended, should be choked with weeds and briers. I wish we could be brought to consider this, and remembering natural obligations a little more at the right time, talk about them a little less at the wrong one.'

After this, brother Charles, who had talked himself into a great heat, stopped to cool a little, and then continued:

'I dare say you are surprised, my dear sir, that I have listened to your recital with so little astonishment. That is easily explained. Your uncle has been here this morning.'

Nicholas coloured, and drew back a step or two.

'Yes,' said the old gentleman, tapping his desk emphatically, 'here, in this room. He would listen neither to reason, feeling, nor justice. But brother Ned was hard upon him; brother Ned, sir, might have melted a pavingstone.'

'He came to' said Nicholas.

'To complain of you,' returned brother Charles, 'to poison our ears with calumnies and falsehoods; but he came on a fruitless errand, and went away with some wholesome truths in his ear besides. Brother Ned, my dear My Nicklebybrother Ned, sir, is a perfect lion. So is Tim Linkinwater; Tim is quite a lion. We had Tim in to face him at first, and Tim was at him, sir, before you could say "Jack Robinson."'

'How can I ever thank you for all the deep obligations you impose upon me every day?' said Nicholas.

'By keeping silence upon the subject, my dear sir,' returned brother Charles. 'You shall be righted. At least you shall not be wronged. Nobody belonging to you shall be wronged. They shall not hurt a hair of your head, or the boy's head, or your mother's head, or your sister's head. I have said it, brother Ned has said it, Tim Linkinwater has said it. We have all said it, and we'll all do it. I have seen the fatherif he is the fatherand I suppose he must be. He is a barbarian and a hypocrite, Mr Nickleby. I told him, "You are a barbarian, sir." I did. I said, "You're a barbarian, sir." And I'm glad of it, I am VERY glad I told him he was a barbarian, very glad indeed!'

By this time brother Charles was in such a very warm state of indignation, that Nicholas thought he might venture to put in a word, but the moment he essayed to do so, Mr Cheeryble laid his hand softly upon his arm, and pointed to a chair.

'The subject is at an end for the present,' said the old gentleman, wiping his face. 'Don't revive it by a single word. I am going to speak upon another subject, a confidential subject, Mr Nickleby. We must be cool again, we must be cool.'

After two or three turns across the room he resumed his seat, and drawing his chair nearer to that on which Nicholas was seated, said:

'I am about to employ you, my dear sir, on a confidential and delicate mission.'

'You might employ many a more able messenger, sir,' said Nicholas, 'but a more trustworthy or zealous one, I may be bold to say, you could not find.'

'Of that I am well assured,' returned brother Charles, 'well assured. You will give me credit for thinking so, when I tell you that the object of this mission is

a young lady.'

'A young lady, sir!' cried Nicholas, quite trembling for the moment with his eagerness to hear more.

'A very beautiful young lady,' said Mr Cheeryble, gravely.

'Pray go on, sir,' returned Nicholas.

'I am thinking how to do so,' said brother Charles; sadly, as it seemed to his young friend, and with an expression allied to pain. 'You accidentally saw a young lady in this room one morning, my dear sir, in a fainting fit. Do you remember? Perhaps you have forgotten.'

'Oh no,' replied Nicholas, hurriedly. 'IIremember it very well indeed.'

'SHE is the lady I speak of,' said brother Charles. Like the famous parrot, Nicholas thought a great deal, but was unable to utter a word.

'She is the daughter,' said Mr Cheeryble, 'of a lady who, when she was a beautiful girl herself, and I was very many years younger, Iit seems a strange word for me to utter nowI loved very dearly. You will smile, perhaps, to hear a greyheaded man talk about such things. You will not offend me, for when I was as young as you, I dare say I should have done the same.'

'I have no such inclination, indeed,' said Nicholas.

'My dear brother Ned,' continued Mr Cheeryble, 'was to have married her sister, but she died. She is dead too now, and has been for many years. She married her choice; and I wish I could add that her afterlife was as happy as God knows I ever prayed it might be!'

A short silence intervened, which Nicholas made no effort to break.

'If trial and calamity had fallen as lightly on his head, as in the deepest truth of my own heart I ever hoped (for her sake) it would, his life would have been one of peace and happiness,' said the old gentleman calmly. 'It will be enough to say that this was not the case; that she was not happy; that they fell into complicated distresses and difficulties; that she came, twelve months before her death, to appeal to my old friendship; sadly changed, sadly altered, brokenspirited from suffering and illusage, and almost brokenhearted. He readily availed himself of the money which, to give her but one hour's peace of mind, I would have poured out as freely as waternay, he often sent her back for moreand yet even while he squandered it, he made the very success of these, her applications to me, the groundwork of cruel taunts and jeers, protesting that he knew she thought with bitter remorse of the choice she had

made, that she had married him from motives of interest and vanity (he was a gay young man with great friends about him when she chose him for her husband), and venting in short upon her, by every unjust and unkind means, the bitterness of that ruin and disappointment which had been brought about by his profligacy alone. In those times this young lady was a mere child. I never saw her again until that morning when you saw her also, but my nephew, Frank'

Nicholas started, and indistinctly apologising for the interruption, begged his patron to proceed.

'My nephew, Frank, I say,' resumed Mr Cheeryble, 'encountered her by accident, and lost sight of her almost in a minute afterwards, within two days after he returned to England. Her father lay in some secret place to avoid his creditors, reduced, between sickness and poverty, to the verge of death, and she, a child,we might almost think, if we did not know the wisdom of all Heaven's decreeswho should have blessed a better man, was steadily braving privation, degradation, and everything most terrible to such a young and delicate creature's heart, for the purpose of supporting him. She was attended, sir,' said brother Charles, 'in these reverses, by one faithful creature, who had been, in old times, a poor kitchen wench in the family, who was then their solitary servant, but who might have been, for the truth and fidelity of her heartwho might have beenah! the wife of Tim Linkinwater himself, sir!'

Pursuing this encomium upon the poor follower with such energy and relish as no words can describe, brother Charles leant back in his chair, and delivered the remainder of his relation with greater composure.

It was in substance this: That proudly resisting all offers of permanent aid and support from her late mother's friends, because they were made conditional upon her quitting the wretched man, her father, who had no friends left, and shrinking with instinctive delicacy from appealing in their behalf to that true and noble heart which he hated, and had, through its greatest and purest goodness, deeply wronged by misconstruction and ill report, this young girl had struggled alone and unassisted to maintain him by the labour of her hands. That through the utmost depths of poverty and affliction she had toiled, never turning aside for an instant from her task, never wearied by the petulant gloom of a sick man sustained by no consoling recollections of the past or hopes of the future; never repining for the comforts she had rejected, or bewailing the hard lot she had voluntarily incurred. That every little accomplishment she had acquired in happier days had been put into requisition for this purpose, and directed to this one end. That for two long years, toiling by day and often too by night, working at the needle, the pencil, and the pen, and submitting, as a daily governess, to such caprices and indignities as women (with daughters

too) too often love to inflict upon their own sex when they serve in such capacities, as though in jealousy of the superior intelligence which they are necessitated to employ,indignities, in ninetynine cases out of every hundred, heaped upon persons immeasurably and incalculably their betters, but outweighing in comparison any that the most heartless blackleg would put upon his groomthat for two long years, by dint of labouring in all these capacities and wearying in none, she had not succeeded in the sole aim and object of her life, but that, overwhelmed by accumulated difficulties and disappointments, she had been compelled to seek out her mother's old friend, and, with a bursting heart, to confide in him at last.

'If I had been poor,' said brother Charles, with sparkling eyes; 'if I had been poor, Mr Nickleby, my dear sir, which thank God I am not, I would have denied myself (of course anybody would under such circumstances) the commonest necessaries of life, to help her. As it is, the task is a difficult one. If her father were dead, nothing could be easier, for then she should share and cheer the happiest home that brother Ned and I could have, as if she were our child or sister. But he is still alive. Nobody can help him; that has been tried a thousand times; he was not abandoned by all without good cause, I know.'

'Cannot she be persuaded to' Nicholas hesitated when he had got thus far.

'To leave him?' said brother Charles. 'Who could entreat a child to desert her parent? Such entreaties, limited to her seeing him occasionally, have been urged upon hernot by mebut always with the same result.'

'Is he kind to her?' said Nicholas. 'Does he requite her affection?'

'True kindness, considerate selfdenying kindness, is not in his nature,' returned Mr Cheeryble. 'Such kindness as he knows, he regards her with, I believe. The mother was a gentle, loving, confiding creature, and although he wounded her from their marriage till her death as cruelly and wantonly as ever man did, she never ceased to love him. She commended him on her deathbed to her child's care. Her child has never forgotten it, and never will.'

'Have you no influence over him?' asked Nicholas.

'I, my dear sir! The last man in the world. Such are his jealousy and hatred of me, that if he knew his daughter had opened her heart to me, he would render her life miserable with his reproaches; althoughthis is the inconsistency and selfishness of his characteralthough if he knew that every penny she had came from me, he would not relinquish one personal desire that the most reckless expenditure of her scanty stock could gratify.'

'An unnatural scoundrel!' said Nicholas, indignantly.

'We will use no harsh terms,' said brother Charles, in a gentle voice; 'but accommodate ourselves to the circumstances in which this young lady is placed. Such assistance as I have prevailed upon her to accept, I have been obliged, at her own earnest request, to dole out in the smallest portions, lest he, finding how easily money was procured, should squander it even more lightly than he is accustomed to do. She has come to and fro, to and fro, secretly and by night, to take even this; and I cannot bear that things should go on in this way, Mr Nickleby, I really cannot bear it.'

Then it came out by little and little, how that the twins had been revolving in their good old heads manifold plans and schemes for helping this young lady in the most delicate and considerate way, and so that her father should not suspect the source whence the aid was derived; and how they had at last come to the conclusion, that the best course would be to make a feint of purchasing her little drawings and ornamental work at a high price, and keeping up a constant demand for the same. For the furtherance of which end and object it was necessary that somebody should represent the dealer in such commodities, and after great deliberation they had pitched upon Nicholas to support this character.

'He knows me,' said brother Charles, 'and he knows my brother Ned. Neither of us would do. Frank is a very good fellowa very fine fellowbut we are afraid that he might be a little flighty and thoughtless in such a delicate matter, and that he might, perhapsthat he might, in short, be too susceptible (for she is a beautiful creature, sir; just what her poor mother was), and falling in love with her before he knew well his own mind, carry pain and sorrow into that innocent breast, which we would be the humble instruments of gradually making happy. He took an extraordinary interest in her fortunes when he first happened to encounter her; and we gather from the inquiries we have made of him, that it was she in whose behalf he made that turmoil which led to your first acquaintance.'

Nicholas stammered out that he had before suspected the possibility of such a thing; and in explanation of its having occurred to him, described when and where he had seen the young lady himself.

'Well; then you see,' continued brother Charles, 'that HE wouldn't do. Tim Linkinwater is out of the question; for Tim, sir, is such a tremendous fellow, that he could never contain himself, but would go to loggerheads with the father before he had been in the place five minutes. You don't know what Tim is, sir, when he is aroused by anything that appeals to his feelings very strongly; then he is terrific, sir, is Tim Linkinwater, absolutely terrific. Now, in you we can repose the strictest confidence; in you we have seenor at least I have seen, and that's the same thing, for there's no difference between me and

my brother Ned, except that he is the finest creature that ever lived, and that there is not, and never will be, anybody like him in all the worldin you we have seen domestic virtues and affections, and delicacy of feeling, which exactly qualify you for such an office. And you are the man, sir.'

'The young lady, sir,' said Nicholas, who felt so embarrassed that he had no small difficulty in saying anything at all'Doesisis she a party to this innocent deceit?'

'Yes, yes,' returned Mr Cheeryble; 'at least she knows you come from us; she does NOT know, however, but that we shall dispose of these little productions that you'll purchase from time to time; and, perhaps, if you did it very well (that is, VERY well indeed), perhaps she might be brought to believe that wethat we made a profit of them. Eh? Eh?'

In this guileless and most kind simplicity, brother Charles was so happy, and in this possibility of the young lady being led to think that she was under no obligation to him, he evidently felt so sanguine and had so much delight, that Nicholas would not breathe a doubt upon the subject.

All this time, however, there hovered upon the tip of his tongue a confession that the very same objections which Mr Cheeryble had stated to the employment of his nephew in this commission applied with at least equal force and validity to himself, and a hundred times had he been upon the point of avowing the real state of his feelings, and entreating to be released from it. But as often, treading upon the heels of this impulse, came another which urged him to refrain, and to keep his secret to his own breast. 'Why should I,' thought Nicholas, 'why should I throw difficulties in the way of this benevolent and highminded design? What if I do love and reverence this good and lovely creature. Should I not appear a most arrogant and shallow coxcomb if I gravely represented that there was any danger of her falling in love with me? Besides, have I no confidence in myself? Am I not now bound in honour to repress these thoughts? Has not this excellent man a right to my best and heartiest services, and should any considerations of self deter me from rendering them?'

Asking himself such questions as these, Nicholas mentally answered with great emphasis 'No!' and persuading himself that he was a most conscientious and glorious martyr, nobly resolved to do what, if he had examined his own heart a little more carefully, he would have found he could not resist. Such is the sleight of hand by which we juggle with ourselves, and change our very weaknesses into stanch and most magnanimous virtues!

Mr Cheeryble, being of course wholly unsuspicious that such reflections were

presenting themselves to his young friend, proceeded to give him the needful credentials and directions for his first visit, which was to be made next morning; and all preliminaries being arranged, and the strictest secrecy enjoined, Nicholas walked home for the night very thoughtfully indeed.

The place to which Mr Cheeryble had directed him was a row of mean and not overcleanly houses, situated within 'the Rules' of the King's Bench Prison, and not many hundred paces distant from the obelisk in St George's Fields. The Rules are a certain liberty adjoining the prison, and comprising some dozen streets in which debtors who can raise money to pay large fees, from which their creditors do NOT derive any benefit, are permitted to reside by the wise provisions of the same enlightened laws which leave the debtor who can raise no money to starve in jail, without the food, clothing, lodging, or warmth, which are provided for felons convicted of the most atrocious crimes that can disgrace humanity. There are many pleasant fictions of the law in constant operation, but there is not one so pleasant or practically humorous as that which supposes every man to be of equal value in its impartial eye, and the benefits of all laws to be equally attainable by all men, without the smallest reference to the furniture of their pockets.

To the row of houses indicated to him by Mr Charles Cheeryble, Nicholas directed his steps, without much troubling his head with such matters as these; and at this row of housesafter traversing a very dirty and dusty suburb, of which minor theatricals, shellfish, gingerbeer, spring vans, greengrocery, and brokers' shops, appeared to compose the main and most prominent featureshe at length arrived with a palpitating heart. There were small gardens in front which, being wholly neglected in all other respects, served as little pens for the dust to collect in, until the wind came round the corner and blew it down the road. Opening the rickety gate which, dangling on its broken hinges before one of these, half admitted and half repulsed the visitor, Nicholas knocked at the street door with a faltering hand.

It was in truth a shabby house outside, with very dim parlour windows and very small show of blinds, and very dirty muslin curtains dangling across the lower panes on very loose and limp strings. Neither, when the door was opened, did the inside appear to belie the outward promise, as there was faded carpeting on the stairs and faded oilcloth in the passage; in addition to which discomforts a gentleman Ruler was smoking hard in the front parlour (though it was not yet noon), while the lady of the house was busily engaged in turpentining the disjointed fragments of a tentbedstead at the door of the back parlour, as if in preparation for the reception of some new lodger who had been fortunate enough to engage it.

Nicholas had ample time to make these observations while the little boy, who

went on errands for the lodgers, clattered down the kitchen stairs and was heard to scream, as in some remote cellar, for Miss Bray's servant, who, presently appearing and requesting him to follow her, caused him to evince greater symptoms of nervousness and disorder than so natural a consequence of his having inquired for that young lady would seem calculated to occasion.

Upstairs he went, however, and into a front room he was shown, and there, seated at a little table by the window, on which were drawing materials with which she was occupied, sat the beautiful girl who had so engrossed his thoughts, and who, surrounded by all the new and strong interest which Nicholas attached to her story, seemed now, in his eyes, a thousand times more beautiful than he had ever yet supposed her.

But how the graces and elegancies which she had dispersed about the poorlyfurnished room went to the heart of Nicholas! Flowers, plants, birds, the harp, the old piano whose notes had sounded so much sweeter in bygone times; how many struggles had it cost her to keep these two last links of that broken chain which bound her yet to home! With every slender ornament, the occupation of her leisure hours, replete with that graceful charm which lingers in every little tasteful work of woman's hands, how much patient endurance and how many gentle affections were entwined! He felt as though the smile of Heaven were on the little chamber; as though the beautiful devotion of so young and weak a creature had shed a ray of its own on the inanimate things around, and made them beautiful as itself; as though the halo with which old painters surround the bright angels of a sinless world played about a being akin in spirit to them, and its light were visibly before him.

And yet Nicholas was in the Rules of the King's Bench Prison! If he had been in Italy indeed, and the time had been sunset, and the scene a stately terrace! But, there is one broad sky over all the world, and whether it be blue or cloudy, the same heaven beyond it; so, perhaps, he had no need of compunction for thinking as he did.

It is not to be supposed that he took in everything at one glance, for he had as yet been unconscious of the presence of a sick man propped up with pillows in an easychair, who, moving restlessly and impatiently in his seat, attracted his attention.

He was scarce fifty, perhaps, but so emaciated as to appear much older. His features presented the remains of a handsome countenance, but one in which the embers of strong and impetuous passions were easier to be traced than any expression which would have rendered a far plainer face much more prepossessing. His looks were very haggard, and his limbs and body literally worn to the bone, but there was something of the old fire in the large sunken

eye notwithstanding, and it seemed to kindle afresh as he struck a thick stick, with which he seemed to have supported himself in his seat, impatiently on the floor twice or thrice, and called his daughter by her name.

'Madeline, who is this? What does anybody want here? Who told a stranger we could be seen? What is it?'

'I believe' the young lady began, as she inclined her head with an air of some confusion, in reply to the salutation of Nicholas.

'You always believe,' returned her father, petulantly. 'What is it?'

By this time Nicholas had recovered sufficient presence of mind to speak for himself, so he said (as it had been agreed he should say) that he had called about a pair of handscreens, and some painted velvet for an ottoman, both of which were required to be of the most elegant design possible, neither time nor expense being of the smallest consideration. He had also to pay for the two drawings, with many thanks, and, advancing to the little table, he laid upon it a bank note, folded in an envelope and sealed.

'See that the money is right, Madeline,' said the father. 'Open the paper, my dear.'

'It's quite right, papa, I'm sure.'

'Here!' said Mr Bray, putting out his hand, and opening and shutting his bony fingers with irritable impatience. 'Let me see. What are you talking about, Madeline? You're sure? How can you be sure of any such thing? Five poundswell, is THAT right?'

'Quite,' said Madeline, bending over him. She was so busily employed in arranging the pillows that Nicholas could not see her face, but as she stooped he thought he saw a tear fall.

'Ring the bell, ring the bell,' said the sick man, with the same nervous eagerness, and motioning towards it with such a quivering hand that the bank note rustled in the air. 'Tell her to get it changed, to get me a newspaper, to buy me some grapes, another bottle of the wine that I had last weekandandI forget half I want just now, but she can go out again. Let her get those first, those first. Now, Madeline, my love, quick, quick! Good God, how slow you are!'

'He remembers nothing that SHE wants!' thought Nicholas. Perhaps something of what he thought was expressed in his countenance, for the sick man, turning towards him with great asperity, demanded to know if he waited for a receipt.

'It is no matter at all,' said Nicholas.

'No matter! what do you mean, sir?' was the tart rejoinder. 'No matter! Do you think you bring your paltry money here as a favour or a gift; or as a matter of business, and in return for value received? Dn you, sir, because you can't appreciate the time and taste which are bestowed upon the goods you deal in, do you think you give your money away? Do you know that you are talking to a gentleman, sir, who at one time could have bought up fifty such men as you and all you have? What do you mean?'

'I merely mean that as I shall have many dealings with this lady, if she will kindly allow me, I will not trouble her with such forms,' said Nicholas.

'Then I mean, if you please, that we'll have as many forms as we can, returned the father. 'My daughter, sir, requires no kindness from you or anybody else. Have the goodness to confine your dealings strictly to trade and business, and not to travel beyond it. Every petty tradesman is to begin to pity her now, is he? Upon my soul! Very pretty. Madeline, my dear, give him a receipt; and mind you always do so.'

While she was feigning to write it, and Nicholas was ruminating upon the extraordinary but by no means uncommon character thus presented to his observation, the invalid, who appeared at times to suffer great bodily pain, sank back in his chair and moaned out a feeble complaint that the girl had been gone an hour, and that everybody conspired to goad him.

'When,' said Nicholas, as he took the piece of paper, 'when shall I call again?'

This was addressed to the daughter, but the father answered immediately.

'When you're requested to call, sir, and not before. Don't worry and persecute. Madeline, my dear, when is this person to call again?'

'Oh, not for a long time, not for three or four weeks; it is not necessary, indeed; I can do without,' said the young lady, with great eagerness.

'Why, how are we to do without?' urged her father, not speaking above his breath. 'Three or four weeks, Madeline! Three or four weeks!'

'Then sooner, sooner, if you please,' said the young lady, turning to Nicholas.

'Three or four weeks!' muttered the father. 'Madeline, what on earthdo nothing for three or four weeks!'

'It is a long time, ma'am,' said Nicholas.

'YOU think so, do you?' retorted the father, angrily. 'If I chose to beg, sir, and stoop to ask assistance from people I despise, three or four months would not

be a long time; three or four years would not be a long time. Understand, sir, that is if I chose to be dependent; but as I don't, you may call in a week.'

Nicholas bowed low to the young lady and retired, pondering upon Mr Bray's ideas of independence, and devoutly hoping that there might be few such independent spirits as he mingling with the baser clay of humanity.

He heard a light footstep above him as he descended the stairs, and looking round saw that the young lady was standing there, and glancing timidly towards him, seemed to hesitate whether she should call him back or no. The best way of settling the question was to turn back at once, which Nicholas did.

'I don't know whether I do right in asking you, sir,' said Madeline, hurriedly, 'but pray, pray, do not mention to my poor mother's dear friends what has passed here today. He has suffered much, and is worse this morning. I beg you, sir, as a boon, a favour to myself.'

'You have but to hint a wish,' returned Nicholas fervently, 'and I would hazard my life to gratify it.'

'You speak hastily, sir.'

'Truly and sincerely,' rejoined Nicholas, his lips trembling as he formed the words, 'if ever man spoke truly yet. I am not skilled in disguising my feelings, and if I were, I could not hide my heart from you. Dear madam, as I know your history, and feel as men and angels must who hear and see such things, I do entreat you to believe that I would die to serve you.'

The young lady turned away her head, and was plainly weeping.

'Forgive me,' said Nicholas, with respectful earnestness, 'if I seem to say too much, or to presume upon the confidence which has been intrusted to me. But I could not leave you as if my interest and sympathy expired with the commission of the day. I am your faithful servant, humbly devoted to you from this hour, devoted in strict truth and honour to him who sent me here, and in pure integrity of heart, and distant respect for you. If I meant more or less than this, I should be unworthy his regard, and false to the very nature that prompts the honest words I utter.'

She waved her hand, entreating him to be gone, but answered not a word. Nicholas could say no more, and silently withdrew. And thus ended his first interview with Madeline Bray.

CHAPTER 47

Mr Ralph Nickleby has some confidential Intercourse with another old Friend. They concert between them a Project, which promises well for both

'There go the threequarters past!' muttered Newman Noggs, listening to the chimes of some neighbouring church 'and my dinner time's two. He does it on purpose. He makes a point of it. It's just like him.'

It was in his own little den of an office and on the top of his official stool that Newman thus soliloquised; and the soliloquy referred, as Newman's grumbling soliloquies usually did, to Ralph Nickleby.

'I don't believe he ever had an appetite,' said Newman, 'except for pounds, shillings, and pence, and with them he's as greedy as a wolf. I should like to have him compelled to swallow one of every English coin. The penny would be an awkward morselbut the crownha! ha!'

His goodhumour being in some degree restored by the vision of Ralph Nickleby swallowing, perforce, a fiveshilling piece, Newman slowly brought forth from his desk one of those portable bottles, currently known as pocketpistols, and shaking the same close to his ear so as to produce a rippling sound very cool and pleasant to listen to, suffered his features to relax, and took a gurgling drink, which relaxed them still more. Replacing the cork, he smacked his lips twice or thrice with an air of great relish, and, the taste of the liquor having by this time evaporated, recurred to his grievance again.

'Five minutes to three,' growled Newman; 'it can't want more by this time; and I had my breakfast at eight o'clock, and SUCH a breakfast! and my right dinnertime two! And I might have a nice little bit of hot roast meat spoiling at home all this timehow does HE know I haven't? "Don't go till I come back," "Don't go till I come back," day after day. What do you always go out at my dinnertime for theneh? Don't you know it's nothing but aggravationeh?'

These words, though uttered in a very loud key, were addressed to nothing but empty air. The recital of his wrongs, however, seemed to have the effect of making Newman Noggs desperate; for he flattened his old hat upon his head, and drawing on the everlasting gloves, declared with great vehemence, that come what might, he would go to dinner that very minute.

Carrying this resolution into instant effect, he had advanced as far as the passage, when the sound of the latchkey in the street door caused him to make a precipitate retreat into his own office again.

'Here he is,' growled Newman, 'and somebody with him. Now it'll be "Stop till this gentleman's gone." But I won't. That's flat.'

So saying, Newman slipped into a tall empty closet which opened with two half doors, and shut himself up; intending to slip out directly Ralph was safe inside his own room.

'Noggs!' cried Ralph, 'where is that fellow, Noggs?'

But not a word said Newman.

'The dog has gone to his dinner, though I told him not,' muttered Ralph, looking into the office, and pulling out his watch. 'Humph!' You had better come in here, Gride. My man's out, and the sun is hot upon my room. This is cool and in the shade, if you don't mind roughing it.'

'Not at all, Mr Nickleby, oh not at all! All places are alike to me, sir. Ah! very nice indeed. Oh! very nice!'

The parson who made this reply was a little old man, of about seventy or seventyfive years of age, of a very lean figure, much bent and slightly twisted. He wore a grey coat with a very narrow collar, an oldfashioned waistcoat of ribbed black silk, and such scanty trousers as displayed his shrunken spindleshanks in their full ugliness. The only articles of display or ornament in his dress were a steel watchchain to which were attached some large gold seals; and a black ribbon into which, in compliance with an old fashion scarcely ever observed in these days, his grey hair was gathered behind. His nose and chin were sharp and prominent, his jaws had fallen inwards from loss of teeth, his face was shrivelled and yellow, save where the cheeks were streaked with the colour of a dry winter apple; and where his beard had been, there lingered yet a few grey tufts which seemed, like the ragged eyebrows, to denote the badness of the soil from which they sprung. The whole air and attitude of the form was one of stealthy catlike obsequiousness; the whole expression of the face was concentrated in a wrinkled leer, compounded of cunning, lecherousness, slyness, and avarice.

Such was old Arthur Gride, in whose face there was not a wrinkle, in whose dress there was not one spare fold or plait, but expressed the most covetous and griping penury, and sufficiently indicated his belonging to that class of which Ralph Nickleby was a member. Such was old Arthur Gride, as he sat in a low chair looking up into the face of Ralph Nickleby, who, lounging upon the tall office stool, with his arms upon his knees, looked down into his; a match for him on whatever errand he had come.

'And how have you been?' said Gride, feigning great interest in Ralph's state of

health. 'I haven't seen you foroh! not for'

'Not for a long time,' said Ralph, with a peculiar smile, importing that he very well knew it was not on a mere visit of compliment that his friend had come. 'It was a narrow chance that you saw me now, for I had only just come up to the door as you turned the corner.'

'I am very lucky,' observed Gride.

'So men say,' replied Ralph, drily.

The older moneylender wagged his chin and smiled, but he originated no new remark, and they sat for some little time without speaking. Each was looking out to take the other at a disadvantage.

'Come, Gride,' said Ralph, at length; 'what's in the wind today?'

'Aha! you're a bold man, Mr Nickleby,' cried the other, apparently very much relieved by Ralph's leading the way to business. 'Oh dear, dear, what a bold man you are!'

'Why, you have a sleek and slinking way with you that makes me seem so by contrast,' returned Ralph. 'I don't know but that yours may answer better, but I want the patience for it.'

'You were born a genius, Mr Nickleby,' said old Arthur. 'Deep, deep, deep. Ah!'

'Deep enough,' retorted Ralph, 'to know that I shall need all the depth I have, when men like you begin to compliment. You know I have stood by when you fawned and flattered other people, and I remember pretty well what THAT always led to.'

'Ha, ha, ha!' rejoined Arthur, rubbing his hands. 'So you do, so you do, no doubt. Not a man knows it better. Well, it's a pleasant thing now to think that you remember old times. Oh dear!'

'Now then,' said Ralph, composedly; 'what's in the wind, I ask again? What is it?'

'See that now!' cried the other. 'He can't even keep from business while we're chatting over bygones. Oh dear, dear, what a man it is!'

'WHICH of the bygones do you want to revive?' said Ralph. 'One of them, I know, or you wouldn't talk about them.'

'He suspects even me!' cried old Arthur, holding up his hands. 'Even me! Oh

dear, even me. What a man it is! Ha, ha, ha! What a man it is! Mr Nickleby against all the world. There's nobody like him. A giant among pigmies, a giant, a giant!'

Ralph looked at the old dog with a quiet smile as he chuckled on in this strain, and Newman Noggs in the closet felt his heart sink within him as the prospect of dinner grew fainter and fainter.

'I must humour him though,' cried old Arthur; 'he must have his waya wilful man, as the Scotch saywell, well, they're a wise people, the Scotch. He will talk about business, and won't give away his time for nothing. He's very right. Time is money, time is money.'

'He was one of us who made that saying, I should think,' said Ralph. 'Time is money, and very good money too, to those who reckon interest by it. Time IS money! Yes, and time costs money; it's rather an expensive article to some people we could name, or I forget my trade.'

In rejoinder to this sally, old Arthur again raised his hands, again chuckled, and again ejaculated 'What a man it is!' which done, he dragged the low chair a little nearer to Ralph's high stool, and looking upwards into his immovable face, said,

'What would you say to me, if I was to tell you that I wasthat I wasgoing to be married?'

'I should tell you,' replied Ralph, looking coldly down upon him, 'that for some purpose of your own you told a lie, and that it wasn't the first time and wouldn't be the last; that I wasn't surprised and wasn't to be taken in.'

'Then I tell you seriously that I am,' said old Arthur.

'And I tell you seriously,' rejoined Ralph, 'what I told you this minute. Stay. Let me look at you. There's a liquorish devilry in your face. What is this?'

'I wouldn't deceive YOU, you know,' whined Arthur Gride; 'I couldn't do it, I should be mad to try. I, I, to deceive Mr Nickleby! The pigmy to impose upon the giant. I ask againhe, he, he!what should you say to me if I was to tell you that I was going to be married?'

'To some old hag?' said Ralph.

'No, No,' cried Arthur, interrupting him, and rubbing his hands in an ecstasy. 'Wrong, wrong again. Mr Nickleby for once at fault; out, quite out! To a young and beautiful girl; fresh, lovely, bewitching, and not nineteen. Dark eyes, long eyelashes, ripe and ruddy lips that to look at is to long to kiss, beautiful

clustering hair that one's fingers itch to play with, such a waist as might make a man clasp the air involuntarily, thinking of twining his arm about it, little feet that tread so lightly they hardly seem to walk upon the groundto marry all this, sir, thishey, hey!'

'This is something more than common drivelling,' said Ralph, after listening with a curled lip to the old sinner's raptures. 'The girl's name?'

'Oh deep, deep! See now how deep that is!' exclaimed old Arthur. 'He knows I want his help, he knows he can give it me, he knows it must all turn to his advantage, he sees the thing already. Her nameis there nobody within hearing?'

'Why, who the devil should there be?' retorted Ralph, testily.

'I didn't know but that perhaps somebody might be passing up or down the stairs,' said Arthur Gride, after looking out at the door and carefully reclosing it; 'or but that your man might have come back and might have been listening outside. Clerks and servants have a trick of listening, and I should have been very uncomfortable if Mr Noggs'

'Curse Mr Noggs,' said Ralph, sharply, 'and go on with what you have to say.'

'Curse Mr Noggs, by all means,' rejoined old Arthur; 'I am sure I have not the least objection to that. Her name is'

'Well,' said Ralph, rendered very irritable by old Arthur's pausing again 'what is it?'

'Madeline Bray.'

Whatever reasons there might have beenand Arthur Gride appeared to have anticipated somefor the mention of this name producing an effect upon Ralph, or whatever effect it really did produce upon him, he permitted none to manifest itself, but calmly repeated the name several times, as if reflecting when and where he had heard it before.

'Bray,' said Ralph. 'Braythere was young Bray ofno, he never had a daughter.'

'You remember Bray?' rejoined Arthur Gride.

'No,' said Ralph, looking vacantly at him.

'Not Walter Bray! The dashing man, who used his handsome wife so ill?'

'If you seek to recall any particular dashing man to my recollection by such a trait as that,' said Ralph, shrugging his shoulders, 'I shall confound him with ninetenths of the dashing men I have ever known.'

'Tut, tut. That Bray who is now in the Rules of the Bench,' said old Arthur. 'You can't have forgotten Bray. Both of us did business with him. Why, he owes you money!'

'Oh HIM!' rejoined Ralph. 'Ay, ay. Now you speak. Oh! It's HIS daughter, is it?'

Naturally as this was said, it was not said so naturally but that a kindred spirit like old Arthur Gride might have discerned a design upon the part of Ralph to lead him on to much more explicit statements and explanations than he would have volunteered, or that Ralph could in all likelihood have obtained by any other means. Old Arthur, however, was so intent upon his own designs, that he suffered himself to be overreached, and had no suspicion but that his good friend was in earnest.

'I knew you couldn't forget him, when you came to think for a moment,' he said.

'You were right,' answered Ralph. 'But old Arthur Gride and matrimony is a most anomalous conjunction of words; old Arthur Gride and dark eyes and eyelashes, and lips that to look at is to long to kiss, and clustering hair that he wants to play with, and waists that he wants to span, and little feet that don't tread upon anythingold Arthur Gride and such things as these is more monstrous still; but old Arthur Gride marrying the daughter of a ruined "dashing man" in the Rules of the Bench, is the most monstrous and incredible of all. Plainly, friend Arthur Gride, if you want any help from me in this business (which of course you do, or you would not be here), speak out, and to the purpose. And, above all, don't talk to me of its turning to my advantage, for I know it must turn to yours also, and to a good round tune too, or you would have no finger in such a pie as this.'

There was enough acerbity and sarcasm not only in the matter of Ralph's speech, but in the tone of voice in which he uttered it, and the looks with which he eked it out, to have fired even the ancient usurer's cold blood and flushed even his withered cheek. But he gave vent to no demonstration of anger, contenting himself with exclaiming as before, 'What a man it is!' and rolling his head from side to side, as if in unrestrained enjoyment of his freedom and drollery. Clearly observing, however, from the expression in Ralph's features, that he had best come to the point as speedily as might be, he composed himself for more serious business, and entered upon the pith and marrow of his negotiation.

First, he dwelt upon the fact that Madeline Bray was devoted to the support and maintenance, and was a slave to every wish, of her only parent, who had

no other friend on earth; to which Ralph rejoined that he had heard something of the kind before, and that if she had known a little more of the world, she wouldn't have been such a fool.

Secondly, he enlarged upon the character of her father, arguing, that even taking it for granted that he loved her in return with the utmost affection of which he was capable, yet he loved himself a great deal better; which Ralph said it was quite unnecessary to say anything more about, as that was very natural, and probable enough.

And, thirdly, old Arthur premised that the girl was a delicate and beautiful creature, and that he had really a hankering to have her for his wife. To this Ralph deigned no other rejoinder than a harsh smile, and a glance at the shrivelled old creature before him, which were, however, sufficiently expressive.

'Now,' said Gride, 'for the little plan I have in my mind to bring this about; because, I haven't offered myself even to the father yet, I should have told you. But that you have gathered already? Ah! oh dear, oh dear, what an edged tool you are!'

'Don't play with me then,' said Ralph impatiently. 'You know the proverb.'

'A reply always on the tip of his tongue!' cried old Arthur, raising his hands and eyes in admiration. 'He is always prepared! Oh dear, what a blessing to have such a ready wit, and so much ready money to back it!' Then, suddenly changing his tone, he went on: 'I have been backwards and forwards to Bray's lodgings several times within the last six months. It is just half a year since I first saw this delicate morsel, and, oh dear, what a delicate morsel it is! But that is neither here nor there. I am his detaining creditor for seventeen hundred pounds!'

'You talk as if you were the only detaining creditor,' said Ralph, pulling out his pocketbook. 'I am another for nine hundred and seventyfive pounds four and threepence.'

'The only other, Mr Nickleby,' said old Arthur, eagerly. 'The only other. Nobody else went to the expense of lodging a detainer, trusting to our holding him fast enough, I warrant you. We both fell into the same snare; oh dear, what a pitfall it was; it almost ruined me! And lent him our money upon bills, with only one name besides his own, which to be sure everybody supposed to be a good one, and was as negotiable as money, but which turned out you know how. Just as we should have come upon him, he died insolvent. Ah! it went very nigh to ruin me, that loss did!'

'Go on with your scheme,' said Ralph. 'It's of no use raising the cry of our trade just now; there's nobody to hear us!'

'It's always as well to talk that way,' returned old Arthur, with a chuckle, 'whether there's anybody to hear us or not. Practice makes perfect, you know. Now, if I offer myself to Bray as his soninlaw, upon one simple condition that the moment I am fast married he shall be quietly released, and have an allowance to live just t'other side the water like a gentleman (he can't live long, for I have asked his doctor, and he declares that his complaint is one of the Heart and it is impossible), and if all the advantages of this condition are properly stated and dwelt upon to him, do you think he could resist me? And if he could not resist ME, do you think his daughter could resist HIM? Shouldn't I have her Mrs Arthur Gridepretty Mrs Arthur Gridea titbita dainty chickshouldn't I have her Mrs Arthur Gride in a week, a month, a dayany time I chose to name?'

'Go on,' said Ralph, nodding his head deliberately, and speaking in a tone whose studied coldness presented a strange contrast to the rapturous squeak to which his friend had gradually mounted. 'Go on. You didn't come here to ask me that.'

'Oh dear, how you talk!' cried old Arthur, edging himself closer still to Ralph. 'Of course I didn't, I don't pretend I did! I came to ask what you would take from me, if I prospered with the father, for this debt of yours. Five shillings in the pound, six andeightpence, ten shillings? I WOULD go as far as ten for such a friend as you, we have always been on such good terms, but you won't be so hard upon me as that, I know. Now, will you?'

'There's something more to be told,' said Ralph, as stony and immovable as ever.

'Yes, yes, there is, but you won't give me time,' returned Arthur Gride. 'I want a backer in this matter; one who can talk, and urge, and press a point, which you can do as no man can. I can't do that, for I am a poor, timid, nervous creature. Now, if you get a good composition for this debt, which you long ago gave up for lost, you'll stand my friend, and help me. Won't you?'

'There's something more,' said Ralph.

'No, no, indeed,' cried Arthur Gride.

'Yes, yes, indeed. I tell you yes,' said Ralph.

'Oh!' returned old Arthur feigning to be suddenly enlightened. 'You mean something more, as concerns myself and my intention. Ay, surely, surely. Shall

I mention that?'

'I think you had better,' rejoined Ralph, drily.

'I didn't like to trouble you with that, because I supposed your interest would cease with your own concern in the affair,' said Arthur Gride. 'That's kind of you to ask. Oh dear, how very kind of you! Why, supposing I had a knowledge of some propertysome little propertyvery littleto which this pretty chick was entitled; which nobody does or can know of at this time, but which her husband could sweep into his pouch, if he knew as much as I do, would that account for'

'For the whole proceeding,' rejoined Ralph, abruptly. 'Now, let me turn this matter over, and consider what I ought to have if I should help you to success.'

'But don't be hard,' cried old Arthur, raising his hands with an imploring gesture, and speaking, in a tremulous voice. 'Don't be too hard upon me. It's a very small property, it is indeed. Say the ten shillings, and we'll close the bargain. It's more than I ought to give, but you're so kindshall we say the ten? Do now, do.'

Ralph took no notice of these supplications, but sat for three or four minutes in a brown study, looking thoughtfully at the person from whom they proceeded. After sufficient cogitation he broke silence, and it certainly could not be objected that he used any needless circumlocution, or failed to speak directly to the purpose.

'If you married this girl without me,' said Ralph, 'you must pay my debt in full, because you couldn't set her father free otherwise. It's plain, then, that I must have the whole amount, clear of all deduction or incumbrance, or I should lose from being honoured with your confidence, instead of gaining by it. That's the first article of the treaty. For the second, I shall stipulate that for my trouble in negotiation and persuasion, and helping you to this fortune, I have five hundred pounds. That's very little, because you have the ripe lips, and the clustering hair, and what not, all to yourself. For the third and last article, I require that you execute a bond to me, this day, binding yourself in the payment of these two sums, before noon of the day of your marriage with Madeline Bray. You have told me I can urge and press a point. I press this one, and will take nothing less than these terms. Accept them if you like. If not, marry her without me if you can. I shall still get my debt.'

To all entreaties, protestations, and offers of compromise between his own proposals and those which Arthur Gride had first suggested, Ralph was deaf as an adder. He would enter into no further discussion of the subject, and while old Arthur dilated upon the enormity of his demands and proposed

modifications of them, approaching by degrees nearer and nearer to the terms he resisted, sat perfectly mute, looking with an air of quiet abstraction over the entries and papers in his pocketbook. Finding that it was impossible to make any impression upon his staunch friend, Arthur Gride, who had prepared himself for some such result before he came, consented with a heavy heart to the proposed treaty, and upon the spot filled up the bond required (Ralph kept such instruments handy), after exacting the condition that Mr Nickleby should accompany him to Bray's lodgings that very hour, and open the negotiation at once, should circumstances appear auspicious and favourable to their designs.

In pursuance of this last understanding the worthy gentlemen went out together shortly afterwards, and Newman Noggs emerged, bottle in hand, from the cupboard, out of the upper door of which, at the imminent risk of detection, he had more than once thrust his red nose when such parts of the subject were under discussion as interested him most.

'I have no appetite now,' said Newman, putting the flask in his pocket. 'I've had MY dinner.'

Having delivered this observation in a very grievous and doleful tone, Newman reached the door in one long limp, and came back again in another.

'I don't know who she may be, or what she may be,' he said: 'but I pity her with all my heart and soul; and I can't help her, nor can I any of the people against whom a hundred tricks, but none so vile as this, are plotted every day! Well, that adds to my pain, but not to theirs. The thing is no worse because I know it, and it tortures me as well as them. Gride and Nickleby! Good pair for a curricle. Oh roguery! roguery! roguery!'

With these reflections, and a very hard knock on the crown of his unfortunate hat at each repetition of the last word, Newman Noggs, whose brain was a little muddled by so much of the contents of the pocketpistol as had found their way there during his recent concealment, went forth to seek such consolation as might be derivable from the beef and greens of some cheap eatinghouse.

Meanwhile the two plotters had betaken themselves to the same house whither Nicholas had repaired for the first time but a few mornings before, and having obtained access to Mr Bray, and found his daughter from home, had by a train of the most masterly approaches that Ralph's utmost skill could frame, at length laid open the real object of their visit.

'There he sits, Mr Bray,' said Ralph, as the invalid, not yet recovered from his surprise, reclined in his chair, looking alternately at him and Arthur Gride. 'What if he has had the illfortune to be one cause of your detention in this

place? I have been another; men must live; you are too much a man of the world not to see that in its true light. We offer the best reparation in our power. Reparation! Here is an offer of marriage, that many a titled father would leap at, for his child. Mr Arthur Gride, with the fortune of a prince. Think what a haul it is!'

'My daughter, sir,' returned Bray, haughtily, 'as I have brought her up, would be a rich recompense for the largest fortune that a man could bestow in exchange for her hand.'

'Precisely what I told you,' said the artful Ralph, turning to his friend, old Arthur. 'Precisely what made me consider the thing so fair and easy. There is no obligation on either side. You have money, and Miss Madeline has beauty and worth. She has youth, you have money. She has not money, you have not youth. Tit for tat, quits, a match of Heaven's own making!'

'Matches are made in Heaven, they say,' added Arthur Gride, leering hideously at the fatherinlaw he wanted. 'If we are married, it will be destiny, according to that.'

'Then think, Mr Bray,' said Ralph, hastily substituting for this argument considerations more nearly allied to earth, 'think what a stake is involved in the acceptance or rejection of these proposals of my friend.'

'How can I accept or reject,' interrupted Mr Bray, with an irritable consciousness that it really rested with him to decide. 'It is for my daughter to accept or reject; it is for my daughter. You know that.'

'True,' said Ralph, emphatically; 'but you have still the power to advise; to state the reasons for and against; to hint a wish.'

'To hint a wish, sir!' returned the debtor, proud and mean by turns, and selfish at all times. 'I am her father, am I not? Why should I hint, and beat about the bush? Do you suppose, like her mother's friends and my enemiesa curse upon them all!that there is anything in what she has done for me but duty, sir, but duty? Or do you think that my having been unfortunate is a sufficient reason why our relative positions should be changed, and that she should command and I should obey? Hint a wish, too! Perhaps you think, because you see me in this place and scarcely able to leave this chair without assistance, that I am some brokenspirited dependent creature, without the courage or power to do what I may think best for my own child. Still the power to hint a wish! I hope so!'

'Pardon me,' returned Ralph, who thoroughly knew his man, and had taken his ground accordingly; 'you do not hear me out. I was about to say that your

hinting a wish, even hinting a wish, would surely be equivalent to commanding.'

'Why, of course it would,' retorted Mr Bray, in an exasperated tone. 'If you don't happen to have heard of the time, sir, I tell you that there was a time, when I carried every point in triumph against her mother's whole family, although they had power and wealth on their side, by my will alone.'

'Still,' rejoined Ralph, as mildly as his nature would allow him, 'you have not heard me out. You are a man yet qualified to shine in society, with many years of life before you; that is, if you lived in freer air, and under brighter skies, and chose your own companions. Gaiety is your element, you have shone in it before. Fashion and freedom for you. France, and an annuity that would support you there in luxury, would give you a new lease of life, would transfer you to a new existence. The town rang with your expensive pleasures once, and you could blaze up on a new scene again, profiting by experience, and living a little at others' cost, instead of letting others live at yours. What is there on the reverse side of the picture? What is there? I don't know which is the nearest churchyard, but a gravestone there, wherever it is, and a date, perhaps two years hence, perhaps twenty. That's all.'

Mr Bray rested his elbow on the arm of his chair, and shaded his face with his hand.

'I speak plainly,' said Ralph, sitting down beside him, 'because I feel strongly. It's my interest that you should marry your daughter to my friend Gride, because then he sees me paidin part, that is. I don't disguise it. I acknowledge it openly. But what interest have you in recommending her to such a step? Keep that in view. She might object, remonstrate, shed tears, talk of his being too old, and plead that her life would be rendered miserable. But what is it now?'

Several slight gestures on the part of the invalid showed that these arguments were no more lost upon him, than the smallest iota of his demeanour was upon Ralph.

'What is it now, I say,' pursued the wily usurer, 'or what has it a chance of being? If you died, indeed, the people you hate would make her happy. But can you bear the thought of that?'

'No!' returned Bray, urged by a vindictive impulse he could not repress.

'I should imagine not, indeed!' said Ralph, quietly. 'If she profits by anybody's death,' this was said in a lower tone, 'let it be by her husband's. Don't let her have to look back to yours, as the event from which to date a happier life.

Where is the objection? Let me hear it stated. What is it? That her suitor is an old man? Why, how often do men of family and fortune, who haven't your excuse, but have all the means and superfluities of life within their reach, how often do they marry their daughters to old men, or (worse still) to young men without heads or hearts, to tickle some idle vanity, strengthen some family interest, or secure some seat in Parliament! Judge for her, sir, judge for her. You must know best, and she will live to thank you.'

'Hush! hush!' cried Mr Bray, suddenly starting up, and covering Ralph's mouth with his trembling hand. 'I hear her at the door!'

There was a gleam of conscience in the shame and terror of this hasty action, which, in one short moment, tore the thin covering of sophistry from the cruel design, and laid it bare in all its meanness and heartless deformity. The father fell into his chair pale and trembling; Arthur Gride plucked and fumbled at his hat, and durst not raise his eyes from the floor; even Ralph crouched for the moment like a beaten hound, cowed by the presence of one young innocent girl!

The effect was almost as brief as sudden. Ralph was the first to recover himself, and observing Madeline's looks of alarm, entreated the poor girl to be composed, assuring her that there was no cause for fear.

'A sudden spasm,' said Ralph, glancing at Mr Bray. 'He is quite well now.'

It might have moved a very hard and worldly heart to see the young and beautiful creature, whose certain misery they had been contriving but a minute before, throw her arms about her father's neck, and pour forth words of tender sympathy and love, the sweetest a father's ear can know, or child's lips form. But Ralph looked coldly on; and Arthur Gride, whose bleared eyes gloated only over the outward beauties, and were blind to the spirit which reigned within, evinceda fantastic kind of warmth certainly, but not exactly that kind of warmth of feeling which the contemplation of virtue usually inspires.

'Madeline,' said her father, gently disengaging himself, 'it was nothing.'

'But you had that spasm yesterday, and it is terrible to see you in such pain. Can I do nothing for you?'

'Nothing just now. Here are two gentlemen, Madeline, one of whom you have seen before. She used to say,' added Mr Bray, addressing Arthur Gride, 'that the sight of you always made me worse. That was natural, knowing what she did, and only what she did, of our connection and its results. Well, well. Perhaps she may change her mind on that point; girls have leave to change their minds, you know. You are very tired, my dear.'

'I am not, indeed.'

'Indeed you are. You do too much.'

'I wish I could do more.'

'I know you do, but you overtask your strength. This wretched life, my love, of daily labour and fatigue, is more than you can bear, I am sure it is. Poor Madeline!'

With these and many more kind words, Mr Bray drew his daughter to him and kissed her cheek affectionately. Ralph, watching him sharply and closely in the meantime, made his way towards the door, and signed to Gride to follow him.

'You will communicate with us again?' said Ralph.

'Yes, yes,' returned Mr Bray, hastily thrusting his daughter aside. 'In a week. Give me a week.'

'One week,' said Ralph, turning to his companion, 'from today. Goodmorning. Miss Madeline, I kiss your hand.'

'We will shake hands, Gride,' said Mr Bray, extending his, as old Arthur bowed. 'You mean well, no doubt. I an bound to say so now. If I owed you money, that was not your fault. Madeline, my love, your hand here.'

'Oh dear! If the young lady would condescent! Only the tips of her fingers,' said Arthur, hesitating and half retreating.

Madeline shrunk involuntarily from the goblin figure, but she placed the tips of her fingers in his hand and instantly withdrew them. After an ineffectual clutch, intended to detain and carry them to his lips, old Arthur gave his own fingers a mumbling kiss, and with many amorous distortions of visage went in pursuit of his friend, who was by this time in the street.

'What does he say, what does he say? What does the giant say to the pigmy?' inquired Arthur Gride, hobbling up to Ralph.

'What does the pigmy say to the giant?' rejoined Ralph, elevating his eyebrows and looking down upon his questioner.

'He doesn't know what to say,' replied Arthur Gride. 'He hopes and fears. But is she not a dainty morsel?'

'I have no great taste for beauty,' growled Ralph.

'But I have,' rejoined Arthur, rubbing his hands. 'Oh dear! How handsome her

eyes looked when she was stooping over him! Such long lashes, such delicate fringe! Sheshelooked at me so soft.'

'Not overlovingly, I think,' said Ralph. 'Did she?'

'No, you think not?' replied old Arthur. 'But don't you think it can be brought about? Don't you think it can?'

Ralph looked at him with a contemptuous frown, and replied with a sneer, and between his teeth:

'Did you mark his telling her she was tired and did too much, and overtasked her strength?'

'Ay, ay. What of it?'

'When do you think he ever told her that before? The life is more than she can bear. Yes, yes. He'll change it for her.'

'D'ye think it's done?' inquired old Arthur, peering into his companion's face with halfclosed eyes.

'I am sure it's done,' said Ralph. 'He is trying to deceive himself, even before our eyes, already. He is making believe that he thinks of her good and not his own. He is acting a virtuous part, and so considerate and affectionate, sir, that the daughter scarcely knew him. I saw a tear of surprise in her eye. There'll be a few more tears of surprise there before long, though of a different kind. Oh! we may wait with confidence for this day week.'

CHAPTER 48

Being for the Benefit of Mr Vincent Crummles, and positively his last Appearance on this Stage

It was with a very sad and heavy heart, oppressed by many painful ideas, that Nicholas retraced his steps eastward and betook himself to the countinghouse of Cheeryble Brothers. Whatever the idle hopes he had suffered himself to entertain, whatever the pleasant visions which had sprung up in his mind and grouped themselves round the fair image of Madeline Bray, they were now dispelled, and not a vestige of their gaiety and brightness remained.

It would be a poor compliment to Nicholas's better nature, and one which he

was very far from deserving, to insinuate that the solution, and such a solution, of the mystery which had seemed to surround Madeline Bray, when he was ignorant even of her name, had damped his ardour or cooled the fervour of his admiration. If he had regarded her before, with such a passion as young men attracted by mere beauty and elegance may entertain, he was now conscious of much deeper and stronger feelings. But, reverence for the truth and purity of her heart, respect for the helplessness and loneliness of her situation, sympathy with the trials of one so young and fair and admiration of her great and noble spirit, all seemed to raise her far above his reach, and, while they imparted new depth and dignity to his love, to whisper that it was hopeless.

'I will keep my word, as I have pledged it to her,' said Nicholas, manfully. 'This is no common trust that I have to discharge, and I will perform the double duty that is imposed upon me most scrupulously and strictly. My secret feelings deserve no consideration in such a case as this, and they shall have none.'

Still, there were the secret feelings in existence just the same, and in secret Nicholas rather encouraged them than otherwise; reasoning (if he reasoned at all) that there they could do no harm to anybody but himself, and that if he kept them to himself from a sense of duty, he had an additional right to entertain himself with them as a reward for his heroism.

All these thoughts, coupled with what he had seen that morning and the anticipation of his next visit, rendered him a very dull and abstracted companion; so much so, indeed, that Tim Linkinwater suspected he must have made the mistake of a figure somewhere, which was preying upon his mind, and seriously conjured him, if such were the case, to make a clean breast and scratch it out, rather than have his whole life embittered by the tortures of remorse.

But in reply to these considerate representations, and many others both from Tim and Mr Frank, Nicholas could only be brought to state that he was never merrier in his life; and so went on all day, and so went towards home at night, still turning over and over again the same subjects, thinking over and over again the same things, and arriving over and over again at the same conclusions.

In this pensive, wayward, and uncertain state, people are apt to lounge and loiter without knowing why, to read placards on the walls with great attention and without the smallest idea of one word of their contents, and to stare most earnestly through shopwindows at things which they don't see. It was thus that Nicholas found himself poring with the utmost interest over a large playbill hanging outside a Minor Theatre which he had to pass on his way home, and

reading a list of the actors and actresses who had promised to do honour to some approaching benefit, with as much gravity as if it had been a catalogue of the names of those ladies and gentlemen who stood highest upon the Book of Fate, and he had been looking anxiously for his own. He glanced at the top of the bill, with a smile at his own dulness, as he prepared to resume his walk, and there saw announced, in large letters with a large space between each of them, 'Positively the last appearance of Mr Vincent Crummles of Provincial Celebrity!!!'

'Nonsense!' said Nicholas, turning back again. 'It can't be.'

But there it was. In one line by itself was an announcement of the first night of a new melodrama; in another line by itself was an announcement of the last six nights of an old one; a third line was devoted to the reengagement of the unrivalled African Knifeswallower, who had kindly suffered himself to be prevailed upon to forego his country engagements for one week longer; a fourth line announced that Mr Snittle Timberry, having recovered from his late severe indisposition, would have the honour of appearing that evening; a fifth line said that there were 'Cheers, Tears, and Laughter!' every night; a sixth, that that was positively the last appearance of Mr Vincent Crummles of Provincial Celebrity.

'Surely it must be the same man,' thought Nicholas. 'There can't be two Vincent Crummleses.'

The better to settle this question he referred to the bill again, and finding that there was a Baron in the first piece, and that Roberto (his son) was enacted by one Master Crummles, and Spaletro (his nephew) by one Master Percy CrummlesTHEIR last appearancesand that, incidental to the piece, was a characteristic dance by the characters, and a castanet pas seul by the Infant PhenomenonHER last appearancehe no longer entertained any doubt; and presenting himself at the stagedoor, and sending in a scrap of paper with 'Mr Johnson' written thereon in pencil, was presently conducted by a Robber, with a very large belt and buckle round his waist, and very large leather gauntlets on his hands, into the presence of his former manager.

Mr Crummles was unfeignedly glad to see him, and starting up from before a small dressingglass, with one very bushy eyebrow stuck on crooked over his left eye, and the fellow eyebrow and the calf of one of his legs in his hand, embraced him cordially; at the same time observing, that it would do Mrs Crummles's heart good to bid him goodbye before they went.

'You were always a favourite of hers, Johnson,' said Crummles, 'always were from the first. I was quite easy in my mind about you from that first day you

dined with us. One that Mrs Crummles took a fancy to, was sure to turn out right. Ah! Johnson, what a woman that is!'

'I am sincerely obliged to her for her kindness in this and all other respects,' said Nicholas. 'But where are you going, that you talk about bidding goodbye?'

'Haven't you seen it in the papers?' said Crummles, with some dignity.

'No,' replied Nicholas.

'I wonder at that,' said the manager. 'It was among the varieties. I had the paragraph here somewherebut I don't knowoh, yes, here it is.'

So saying, Mr Crummles, after pretending that he thought he must have lost it, produced a square inch of newspaper from the pocket of the pantaloons he wore in private life (which, together with the plain clothes of several other gentlemen, lay scattered about on a kind of dresser in the room), and gave it to Nicholas to read:

'The talented Vincent Crummles, long favourably known to fame as a country manager and actor of no ordinary pretensions, is about to cross the Atlantic on a histrionic expedition. Crummles is to be accompanied, we hear, by his lady and gifted family. We know no man superior to Crummles in his particular line of character, or one who, whether as a public or private individual, could carry with him the best wishes of a larger circle of friends. Crummles is certain to succeed.'

'Here's another bit,' said Mr Crummles, handing over a still smaller scrap. 'This is from the notices to correspondents, this one.'

Nicholas read it aloud. '"PhiloDramaticus. Crummles, the country manager and actor, cannot be more than fortythree, or fortyfour years of age. Crummles is NOT a Prussian, having been born at Chelsea." Humph!' said Nicholas, 'that's an odd paragraph.'

'Very,' returned Crummles, scratching the side of his nose, and looking at Nicholas with an assumption of great unconcern. 'I can't think who puts these things in. I didn't.'

Still keeping his eye on Nicholas, Mr Crummles shook his head twice or thrice with profound gravity, and remarking, that he could not for the life of him imagine how the newspapers found out the things they did, folded up the extracts and put them in his pocket again.

'I am astonished to hear this news,' said Nicholas. 'Going to America! You had no such thing in contemplation when I was with you.'

'No,' replied Crummles, 'I hadn't then. The fact is that Mrs Crummlesmost extraordinary woman, Johnson.' Here he broke off and whispered something in his ear.

'Oh!' said Nicholas, smiling. 'The prospect of an addition to your family?'

'The seventh addition, Johnson,' returned Mr Crummles, solemnly. 'I thought such a child as the Phenomenon must have been a closer; but it seems we are to have another. She is a very remarkable woman.'

'I congratulate you,' said Nicholas, 'and I hope this may prove a phenomenon too.'

'Why, it's pretty sure to be something uncommon, I suppose,' rejoined Mr Crummles. 'The talent of the other three is principally in combat and serious pantomime. I should like this one to have a turn for juvenile tragedy; I understand they want something of that sort in America very much. However, we must take it as it comes. Perhaps it may have a genius for the tightrope. It may have any sort of genius, in short, if it takes after its mother, Johnson, for she is an universal genius; but, whatever its genius is, that genius shall be developed.'

Expressing himself after these terms, Mr Crummles put on his other eyebrow, and the calves of his legs, and then put on his legs, which were of a yellowish fleshcolour, and rather soiled about the knees, from frequent going down upon those joints, in curses, prayers, last struggles, and other strong passages.

While the exmanager completed his toilet, he informed Nicholas that as he should have a fair start in America from the proceeds of a tolerably good engagement which he had been fortunate enough to obtain, and as he and Mrs Crummles could scarcely hope to act for ever (not being immortal, except in the breath of Fame and in a figurative sense) he had made up his mind to settle there permanently, in the hope of acquiring some land of his own which would support them in their old age, and which they could afterwards bequeath to their children. Nicholas, having highly commended the resolution, Mr Crummles went on to impart such further intelligence relative to their mutual friends as he thought might prove interesting; informing Nicholas, among other things, that Miss Snevellicci was happily married to an affluent young waxchandler who had supplied the theatre with candles, and that Mr Lillyvick didn't dare to say his soul was his own, such was the tyrannical sway of Mrs Lillyvick, who reigned paramount and supreme.

Nicholas responded to this confidence on the part of Mr Crummles, by confiding to him his own name, situation, and prospects, and informing him, in as few general words as he could, of the circumstances which had led to

their first acquaintance. After congratulating him with great heartiness on the improved state of his fortunes, Mr Crummles gave him to understand that next morning he and his were to start for Liverpool, where the vessel lay which was to carry them from the shores of England, and that if Nicholas wished to take a last adieu of Mrs Crummles, he must repair with him that night to a farewell supper, given in honour of the family at a neighbouring tavern; at which Mr Snittle Timberry would preside, while the honours of the vicechair would be sustained by the African Swallower.

The room being by this time very warm and somewhat crowded, in consequence of the influx of four gentlemen, who had just killed each other in the piece under representation, Nicholas accepted the invitation, and promised to return at the conclusion of the performances; preferring the cool air and twilight out of doors to the mingled perfume of gas, orangepeel, and gunpowder, which pervaded the hot and glaring theatre.

He availed himself of this interval to buy a silver snuffboxthe best his funds would affordas a token of remembrance for Mr Crummles, and having purchased besides a pair of earrings for Mrs Crummles, a necklace for the Phenomenon, and a flaming shirtpin for each of the young gentlemen, he refreshed himself with a walk, and returning a little after the appointed time, found the lights out, the theatre empty, the curtain raised for the night, and Mr Crummles walking up and down the stage expecting his arrival.

'Timberry won't be long,' said Mr Crummles. 'He played the audience out tonight. He does a faithful black in the last piece, and it takes him a little longer to wash himself.'

'A very unpleasant line of character, I should think?' said Nicholas.

'No, I don't know,' replied Mr Crummles; 'it comes off easily enough, and there's only the face and neck. We had a firsttragedy man in our company once, who, when he played Othello, used to black himself all over. But that's feeling a part and going into it as if you meant it; it isn't usual; more's the pity.'

Mr Snittle Timberry now appeared, arminarm with the African Swallower, and, being introduced to Nicholas, raised his hat half a foot, and said he was proud to know him. The Swallower said the same, and looked and spoke remarkably like an Irishman.

'I see by the bills that you have been ill, sir,' said Nicholas to Mr Timberry. 'I hope you are none the worse for your exertions tonight?'

Mr Timberry, in reply, shook his head with a gloomy air, tapped his chest several times with great significancy, and drawing his cloak more closely

about him, said, 'But no matter, no matter. Come!'

It is observable that when people upon the stage are in any strait involving the very last extremity of weakness and exhaustion, they invariably perform feats of strength requiring great ingenuity and muscular power. Thus, a wounded prince or bandit chief, who is bleeding to death and too faint to move, except to the softest music (and then only upon his hands and knees), shall be seen to approach a cottage door for aid in such a series of writhings and twistings, and with such curlings up of the legs, and such rollings over and over, and such gettings up and tumblings down again, as could never be achieved save by a very strong man skilled in posturemaking. And so natural did this sort of performance come to Mr Snittle Timberry, that on their way out of the theatre and towards the tavern where the supper was to be holden, he testified the severity of his recent indisposition and its wasting effects upon the nervous system, by a series of gymnastic performances which were the admiration of all witnesses.

'Why this is indeed a joy I had not looked for!' said Mrs Crummles, when Nicholas was presented.

'Nor I,' replied Nicholas. 'It is by a mere chance that I have this opportunity of seeing you, although I would have made a great exertion to have availed myself of it.'

'Here is one whom you know,' said Mrs Crummles, thrusting forward the Phenomenon in a blue gauze frock, extensively flounced, and trousers of the same; 'and here anotherand another,' presenting the Master Crummleses. 'And how is your friend, the faithful Digby?'

'Digby!' said Nicholas, forgetting at the instant that this had been Smike's theatrical name. 'Oh yes. He's quitewhat am I saying?he is very far from well.'

'How!' exclaimed Mrs Crummles, with a tragic recoil.

'I fear,' said Nicholas, shaking his head, and making an attempt to smile, 'that your betterhalf would be more struck with him now than ever.'

'What mean you?' rejoined Mrs Crummles, in her most popular manner. 'Whence comes this altered tone?'

'I mean that a dastardly enemy of mine has struck at me through him, and that while he thinks to torture me, he inflicts on him such agonies of terror and suspense asYou will excuse me, I am sure,' said Nicholas, checking himself. 'I should never speak of this, and never do, except to those who know the facts, but for a moment I forgot myself.'

With this hasty apology Nicholas stooped down to salute the Phenomenon, and changed the subject; inwardly cursing his precipitation, and very much wondering what Mrs Crummles must think of so sudden an explosion.

That lady seemed to think very little about it, for the supper being by this time on table, she gave her hand to Nicholas and repaired with a stately step to the left hand of Mr Snittle Timberry. Nicholas had the honour to support her, and Mr Crummles was placed upon the chairman's right; the Phenomenon and the Master Crummleses sustained the vice.

The company amounted in number to some twentyfive or thirty, being composed of such members of the theatrical profession, then engaged or disengaged in London, as were numbered among the most intimate friends of Mr and Mrs Crummles. The ladies and gentlemen were pretty equally balanced; the expenses of the entertainment being defrayed by the latter, each of whom had the privilege of inviting one of the former as his guest.

It was upon the whole a very distinguished party, for independently of the lesser theatrical lights who clustered on this occasion round Mr Snittle Timberry, there was a literary gentleman present who had dramatised in his time two hundred and fortyseven novels as fast as they had come outsome of them faster than they had come outand who WAS a literary gentleman in consequence.

This gentleman sat on the left hand of Nicholas, to whom he was introduced by his friend the African Swallower, from the bottom of the table, with a high eulogium upon his fame and reputation.

'I am happy to know a gentleman of such great distinction,' said Nicholas, politely.

'Sir,' replied the wit, 'you're very welcome, I'm sure. The honour is reciprocal, sir, as I usually say when I dramatise a book. Did you ever hear a definition of fame, sir?'

'I have heard several,' replied Nicholas, with a smile. 'What is yours?'

'When I dramatise a book, sir,' said the literary gentleman, 'THAT'S fame. For its author.'

'Oh, indeed!' rejoined Nicholas.

'That's fame, sir,' said the literary gentleman.

'So Richard Turpin, Tom King, and Jerry Abershaw have handed down to fame the names of those on whom they committed their most impudent

robberies?' said Nicholas.

'I don't know anything about that, sir,' answered the literary gentleman.

'Shakespeare dramatised stories which had previously appeared in print, it is true,' observed Nicholas.

'Meaning Bill, sir?' said the literary gentleman. 'So he did. Bill was an adapter, certainly, so he wasand very well he adapted tooconsidering.'

'I was about to say,' rejoined Nicholas, 'that Shakespeare derived some of his plots from old tales and legends in general circulation; but it seems to me, that some of the gentlemen of your craft, at the present day, have shot very far beyond him'

'You're quite right, sir,' interrupted the literary gentleman, leaning back in his chair and exercising his toothpick. 'Human intellect, sir, has progressed since his time, is progressing, will progress.'

'Shot beyond him, I mean,' resumed Nicholas, 'in quite another respect, for, whereas he brought within the magic circle of his genius, traditions peculiarly adapted for his purpose, and turned familiar things into constellations which should enlighten the world for ages, you drag within the magic circle of your dulness, subjects not at all adapted to the purposes of the stage, and debase as he exalted. For instance, you take the uncompleted books of living authors, fresh from their hands, wet from the press, cut, hack, and carve them to the powers and capacities of your actors, and the capability of your theatres, finish unfinished works, hastily and crudely vamp up ideas not yet worked out by their original projector, but which have doubtless cost him many thoughtful days and sleepless nights; by a comparison of incidents and dialogue, down to the very last word he may have written a fortnight before, do your utmost to anticipate his plotall this without his permission, and against his will; and then, to crown the whole proceeding, publish in some mean pamphlet, an unmeaning farrago of garbled extracts from his work, to which your name as author, with the honourable distinction annexed, of having perpetrated a hundred other outrages of the same description. Now, show me the distinction between such pilfering as this, and picking a man's pocket in the street: unless, indeed, it be, that the legislature has a regard for pockethandkerchiefs, and leaves men's brains, except when they are knocked out by violence, to take care of themselves.'

'Men must live, sir,' said the literary gentleman, shrugging his shoulders.

'That would be an equally fair plea in both cases,' replied Nicholas; 'but if you put it upon that ground, I have nothing more to say, than, that if I were a writer

of books, and you a thirsty dramatist, I would rather pay your tavern score for six months, large as it might be, than have a niche in the Temple of Fame with you for the humblest corner of my pedestal, through six hundred generations.'

The conversation threatened to take a somewhat angry tone when it had arrived thus far, but Mrs Crummles opportunely interposed to prevent its leading to any violent outbreak, by making some inquiries of the literary gentleman relative to the plots of the six new pieces which he had written by contract to introduce the African Knifeswallower in his various unrivalled performances. This speedily engaged him in an animated conversation with that lady, in the interest of which, all recollection of his recent discussion with Nicholas very quickly evaporated.

The board being now clear of the more substantial articles of food, and punch, wine, and spirits being placed upon it and handed about, the guests, who had been previously conversing in little groups of three or four, gradually fell off into a dead silence, while the majority of those present glanced from time to time at Mr Snittle Timberry, and the bolder spirits did not even hesitate to strike the table with their knuckles, and plainly intimate their expectations, by uttering such encouragements as 'Now, Tim,' 'Wake up, Mr Chairman,' 'All charged, sir, and waiting for a toast,' and so forth.

To these remonstrances Mr Timberry deigned no other rejoinder than striking his chest and gasping for breath, and giving many other indications of being still the victim of indispositionfor a man must not make himself too cheap either on the stage or offwhile Mr Crummles, who knew full well that he would be the subject of the forthcoming toast, sat gracefully in his chair with his arm thrown carelessly over the back, and now and then lifted his glass to his mouth and drank a little punch, with the same air with which he was accustomed to take long draughts of nothing, out of the pasteboard goblets in banquet scenes.

At length Mr Snittle Timberry rose in the most approved attitude, with one hand in the breast of his waistcoat and the other on the nearest snuffbox, and having been received with great enthusiasm, proposed, with abundance of quotations, his friend Mr Vincent Crummles: ending a pretty long speech by extending his right hand on one side and his left on the other, and severally calling upon Mr and Mrs Crummles to grasp the same. This done, Mr Vincent Crummles returned thanks, and that done, the African Swallower proposed Mrs Vincent Crummles, in affecting terms. Then were heard loud moans and sobs from Mrs Crummles and the ladies, despite of which that heroic woman insisted upon returning thanks herself, which she did, in a manner and in a speech which has never been surpassed and seldom equalled. It then became the duty of Mr Snittle Timberry to give the young Crummleses, which he did;

after which Mr Vincent Crummles, as their father, addressed the company in a supplementary speech, enlarging on their virtues, amiabilities, and excellences, and wishing that they were the sons and daughter of every lady and gentleman present. These solemnities having been succeeded by a decent interval, enlivened by musical and other entertainments, Mr Crummles proposed that ornament of the profession, the African Swallower, his very dear friend, if he would allow him to call him so; which liberty (there being no particular reason why he should not allow it) the African Swallower graciously permitted. The literary gentleman was then about to be drunk, but it being discovered that he had been drunk for some time in another acceptation of the term, and was then asleep on the stairs, the intention was abandoned, and the honour transferred to the ladies. Finally, after a very long sitting, Mr Snittle Timberry vacated the chair, and the company with many adieux and embraces dispersed.

Nicholas waited to the last to give his little presents. When he had said goodbye all round and came to Mr Crummles, he could not but mark the difference between their present separation and their parting at Portsmouth. Not a jot of his theatrical manner remained; he put out his hand with an air which, if he could have summoned it at will, would have made him the best actor of his day in homely parts, and when Nicholas shook it with the warmth he honestly felt, appeared thoroughly melted.

'We were a very happy little company, Johnson,' said poor Crummles. 'You and I never had a word. I shall be very glad tomorrow morning to think that I saw you again, but now I almost wish you hadn't come.'

Nicholas was about to return a cheerful reply, when he was greatly disconcerted by the sudden apparition of Mrs Grudden, who it seemed had declined to attend the supper in order that she might rise earlier in the morning, and who now burst out of an adjoining bedroom, habited in very extraordinary white robes; and throwing her arms about his neck, hugged him with great affection.

'What! Are you going too?' said Nicholas, submitting with as good a grace as if she had been the finest young creature in the world.

'Going?' returned Mrs Grudden. 'Lord ha' mercy, what do you think they'd do without me?'

Nicholas submitted to another hug with even a better grace than before, if that were possible, and waving his hat as cheerfully as he could, took farewell of the Vincent Crummleses.

CHAPTER 49

Chronicles the further Proceedings of the Nickleby Family, and the Sequel of the Adventure of the Gentleman in the Smallclothes

While Nicholas, absorbed in the one engrossing subject of interest which had recently opened upon him, occupied his leisure hours with thoughts of Madeline Bray, and in execution of the commissions which the anxiety of brother Charles in her behalf imposed upon him, saw her again and again, and each time with greater danger to his peace of mind and a more weakening effect upon the lofty resolutions he had formed, Mrs Nickleby and Kate continued to live in peace and quiet, agitated by no other cares than those which were connected with certain harassing proceedings taken by Mr Snawley for the recovery of his son, and their anxiety for Smike himself, whose health, long upon the wane, began to be so much affected by apprehension and uncertainty as sometimes to occasion both them and Nicholas considerable uneasiness, and even alarm.

It was no complaint or murmur on the part of the poor fellow himself that thus disturbed them. Ever eager to be employed in such slight services as he could render, and always anxious to repay his benefactors with cheerful and happy looks, less friendly eyes might have seen in him no cause for any misgiving. But there were times, and often too, when the sunken eye was too bright, the hollow cheek too flushed, the breath too thick and heavy in its course, the frame too feeble and exhausted, to escape their regard and notice.

There is a dread disease which so prepares its victim, as it were, for death; which so refines it of its grosser aspect, and throws around familiar looks unearthly indications of the coming change; a dread disease, in which the struggle between soul and body is so gradual, quiet, and solemn, and the result so sure, that day by day, and grain by grain, the mortal part wastes and withers away, so that the spirit grows light and sanguine with its lightening load, and, feeling immortality at hand, deems it but a new term of mortal life; a disease in which death and life are so strangely blended, that death takes the glow and hue of life, and life the gaunt and grisly form of death; a disease which medicine never cured, wealth never warded off, or poverty could boast exemption from; which sometimes moves in giant strides, and sometimes at a tardy sluggish pace, but, slow or quick, is ever sure and certain.

It was with some faint reference in his own mind to this disorder, though he would by no means admit it, even to himself, that Nicholas had already carried

his faithful companion to a physician of great repute. There was no cause for immediate alarm, he said. There were no present symptoms which could be deemed conclusive. The constitution had been greatly tried and injured in childhood, but still it MIGHT not beand that was all.

But he seemed to grow no worse, and, as it was not difficult to find a reason for these symptoms of illness in the shock and agitation he had recently undergone, Nicholas comforted himself with the hope that his poor friend would soon recover. This hope his mother and sister shared with him; and as the object of their joint solicitude seemed to have no uneasiness or despondency for himself, but each day answered with a quiet smile that he felt better than he had upon the day before, their fears abated, and the general happiness was by degrees restored.

Many and many a time in after years did Nicholas look back to this period of his life, and tread again the humble quiet homely scenes that rose up as of old before him. Many and many a time, in the twilight of a summer evening, or beside the flickering winter's firebut not so often or so sadly thenwould his thoughts wander back to these old days, and dwell with a pleasant sorrow upon every slight remembrance which they brought crowding home. The little room in which they had so often sat long after it was dark, figuring such happy futures; Kate's cheerful voice and merry laugh; how, if she were from home, they used to sit and watch for her return scarcely breaking silence but to say how dull it seemed without her; the glee with which poor Smike would start from the darkened corner where he used to sit, and hurry to admit her, and the tears they often saw upon his face, half wondering to see them too, and he so pleased and happy; every little incident, and even slight words and looks of those old days little heeded then, but well remembered when busy cares and trials were quite forgotten, came fresh and thick before him many and many a time, and, rustling above the dusty growth of years, came back green boughs of yesterday.

But there were other persons associated with these recollections, and many changes came about before they had being. A necessary reflection for the purposes of these adventures, which at once subside into their accustomed train, and shunning all flighty anticipations or wayward wanderings, pursue their steady and decorous course.

If the brothers Cheeryble, as they found Nicholas worthy of trust and confidence, bestowed upon him every day some new and substantial mark of kindness, they were not less mindful of those who depended on him. Various little presents to Mrs Nickleby, always of the very things they most required, tended in no slight degree to the improvement and embellishment of the cottage. Kate's little store of trinkets became quite dazzling; and for company!

If brother Charles and brother Ned failed to look in for at least a few minutes every Sunday, or one evening in the week, there was Mr Tim Linkinwater (who had never made halfadozen other acquaintances in all his life, and who took such delight in his new friends as no words can express) constantly coming and going in his evening walks, and stopping to rest; while Mr Frank Cheeryble happened, by some strange conjunction of circumstances, to be passing the door on some business or other at least three nights in the week.

'He is the most attentive young man I ever saw, Kate,' said Mrs Nickleby to her daughter one evening, when this lastnamed gentleman had been the subject of the worthy lady's eulogium for some time, and Kate had sat perfectly silent.

'Attentive, mama!' rejoined Kate.

'Bless my heart, Kate!' cried Mrs Nickleby, with her wonted suddenness, 'what a colour you have got; why, you're quite flushed!'

'Oh, mama! what strange things you fancy!'

'It wasn't fancy, Kate, my dear, I'm certain of that,' returned her mother. 'However, it's gone now at any rate, so it don't much matter whether it was or not. What was it we were talking about? Oh! Mr Frank. I never saw such attention in MY life, never.'

'Surely you are not serious,' returned Kate, colouring again; and this time beyond all dispute.

'Not serious!' returned Mrs Nickleby; 'why shouldn't I be serious? I'm sure I never was more serious. I will say that his politeness and attention to me is one of the most becoming, gratifying, pleasant things I have seen for a very long time. You don't often meet with such behaviour in young men, and it strikes one more when one does meet with it.'

'Oh! attention to YOU, mama,' rejoined Kate quickly'oh yes.'

'Dear me, Kate,' retorted Mrs Nickleby, 'what an extraordinary girl you are! Was it likely I should be talking of his attention to anybody else? I declare I'm quite sorry to think he should be in love with a German lady, that I am.'

'He said very positively that it was no such thing, mama,' returned Kate. 'Don't you remember his saying so that very first night he came here? Besides,' she added, in a more gentle tone, 'why should WE be sorry if it is the case? What is it to us, mama?'

'Nothing to US, Kate, perhaps,' said Mrs Nickleby, emphatically; 'but something to ME, I confess. I like English people to be thorough English people, and not half English and half I don't know what. I shall tell him pointblank next time he comes, that I wish he would marry one of his own countrywomen; and see what he says to that.'

'Pray don't think of such a thing, mama,' returned Kate, hastily; 'not for the world. Consider. How very'

'Well, my dear, how very what?' said Mrs Nickleby, opening her eyes in great astonishment.

Before Kate had returned any reply, a queer little double knock announced that Miss La Creevy had called to see them; and when Miss La Creevy presented herself, Mrs Nickleby, though strongly disposed to be argumentative on the previous question, forgot all about it in a gush of supposes about the coach she had come by; supposing that the man who drove must have been either the man in the shirtsleeves or the man with the black eye; that whoever he was, he hadn't found that parasol she left inside last week; that no doubt they had stopped a long while at the Halfway House, coming down; or that perhaps being full, they had come straight on; and, lastly, that they, surely, must have passed Nicholas on the road.

'I saw nothing of him,' answered Miss La Creevy; 'but I saw that dear old soul Mr Linkinwater.'

'Taking his evening walk, and coming on to rest here, before he turns back to the city, I'll be bound!' said Mrs Nickleby.

'I should think he was,' returned Miss La Creevy; 'especially as young Mr Cheeryble was with him.'

'Surely that is no reason why Mr Linkinwater should be coming here,' said Kate.

'Why I think it is, my dear,' said Miss La Creevy. 'For a young man, Mr Frank is not a very great walker; and I observe that he generally falls tired, and requires a good long rest, when he has come as far as this. But where is my friend?' said the little woman, looking about, after having glanced slyly at Kate. 'He has not been run away with again, has he?'

'Ah! where is Mr Smike?' said Mrs Nickleby; 'he was here this instant.'

Upon further inquiry, it turned out, to the good lady's unbounded astonishment, that Smike had, that moment, gone upstairs to bed.

'Well now,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'he is the strangest creature! Last Tuesdaywas it Tuesday? Yes, to be sure it was; you recollect, Kate, my dear, the very last time young Mr Cheeryble was herelast Tuesday night he went off in just the same strange way, at the very moment the knock came to the door. It cannot be that he don't like company, because he is always fond of people who are fond of Nicholas, and I am sure young Mr Cheeryble is. And the strangest thing is, that he does not go to bed; therefore it cannot be because he is tired. I know he doesn't go to bed, because my room is the next one, and when I went upstairs last Tuesday, hours after him, I found that he had not even taken his shoes off; and he had no candle, so he must have sat moping in the dark all the time. Now, upon my word,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'when I come to think of it, that's very extraordinary!'

As the hearers did not echo this sentiment, but remained profoundly silent, either as not knowing what to say, or as being unwilling to interrupt, Mrs Nickleby pursued the thread of her discourse after her own fashion.

'I hope,' said that lady, 'that this unaccountable conduct may not be the beginning of his taking to his bed and living there all his life, like the Thirsty Woman of Tutbury, or the Cocklane Ghost, or some of those extraordinary creatures. One of them had some connection with our family. I forget, without looking back to some old letters I have upstairs, whether it was my greatgrandfather who went to school with the Cocklane Ghost, or the Thirsty Woman of Tutbury who went to school with my grandmother. Miss La Creevy, you know, of course. Which was it that didn't mind what the clergyman said? The Cocklane Ghost or the Thirsty Woman of Tutbury?'

'The Cocklane Ghost, I believe.'

'Then I have no doubt,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'that it was with him my greatgrandfather went to school; for I know the master of his school was a dissenter, and that would, in a great measure, account for the Cocklane Ghost's behaving in such an improper manner to the clergyman when he grew up. Ah! Train up a Ghostchild, I mean'

Any further reflections on this fruitful theme were abruptly cut short by the arrival of Tim Linkinwater and Mr Frank Cheeryble; in the hurry of receiving whom, Mrs Nickleby speedily lost sight of everything else.

'I am so sorry Nicholas is not at home,' said Mrs Nickleby. 'Kate, my dear, you must be both Nicholas and yourself.'

'Miss Nickleby need be but herself,' said Frank. 'Iif I may venture to say sooppose all change in her.'

'Then at all events she shall press you to stay,' returned Mrs Nickleby. 'Mr Linkinwater says ten minutes, but I cannot let you go so soon; Nicholas would be very much vexed, I am sure. Kate, my dear!'

In obedience to a great number of nods, and winks, and frowns of extra significance, Kate added her entreaties that the visitors would remain; but it was observable that she addressed them exclusively to Tim Linkinwater; and there was, besides, a certain embarrassment in her manner, which, although it was as far from impairing its graceful character as the tinge it communicated to her cheek was from diminishing her beauty, was obvious at a glance even to Mrs Nickleby. Not being of a very speculative character, however, save under circumstances when her speculations could be put into words and uttered aloud, that discreet matron attributed the emotion to the circumstance of her daughter's not happening to have her best frock on: 'though I never saw her look better, certainly,' she reflected at the same time. Having settled the question in this way, and being most complacently satisfied that in this, and in all other instances, her conjecture could not fail to be the right one, Mrs Nickleby dismissed it from her thoughts, and inwardly congratulated herself on being so shrewd and knowing.

Nicholas did not come home nor did Smike reappear; but neither circumstance, to say the truth, had any great effect upon the little party, who were all in the best humour possible. Indeed, there sprung up quite a flirtation between Miss La Creevy and Tim Linkinwater, who said a thousand jocose and facetious things, and became, by degrees, quite gallant, not to say tender. Little Miss La Creevy, on her part, was in high spirits, and rallied Tim on having remained a bachelor all his life with so much success, that Tim was actually induced to declare, that if he could get anybody to have him, he didn't know but what he might change his condition even yet. Miss La Creevy earnestly recommended a lady she knew, who would exactly suit Mr Linkinwater, and had a very comfortable property of her own; but this latter qualification had very little effect upon Tim, who manfully protested that fortune would be no object with him, but that true worth and cheerfulness of disposition were what a man should look for in a wife, and that if he had these, he could find money enough for the moderate wants of both. This avowal was considered so honourable to Tim, that neither Mrs Nickleby nor Miss La Creevy could sufficiently extol it; and stimulated by their praises, Tim launched out into several other declarations also manifesting the disinterestedness of his heart, and a great devotion to the fair sex: which were received with no less approbation. This was done and said with a comical mixture of jest and earnest, and, leading to a great amount of laughter, made them very merry indeed.

Kate was commonly the life and soul of the conversation at home; but she was more silent than usual upon this occasion (perhaps because Tim and Miss La Creevy engrossed so much of it), and, keeping aloof from the talkers, sat at the window watching the shadows as the evening closed in, and enjoying the quiet beauty of the night, which seemed to have scarcely less attractions to Frank, who first lingered near, and then sat down beside, her. No doubt, there are a great many things to be said appropriate to a summer evening, and no doubt they are best said in a low voice, as being most suitable to the peace and serenity of the hour; long pauses, too, at times, and then an earnest word or so, and then another interval of silence which, somehow, does not seem like silence either, and perhaps now and then a hasty turning away of the head, or drooping of the eyes towards the ground, all these minor circumstances, with a disinclination to have candles introduced and a tendency to confuse hours with minutes, are doubtless mere influences of the time, as many lovely lips can clearly testify. Neither is there the slightest reason why Mrs Nickleby should have expressed surprise when, candles being at length brought in, Kate's bright eyes were unable to bear the light which obliged her to avert her face, and even to leave the room for some short time; because, when one has sat in the dark so long, candles ARE dazzling, and nothing can be more strictly natural than that such results should be produced, as all wellinformed young people know. For that matter, old people know it too, or did know it once, but they forget these things sometimes, and more's the pity.

The good lady's surprise, however, did not end here. It was greatly increased when it was discovered that Kate had not the least appetite for supper: a discovery so alarming that there is no knowing in what unaccountable efforts of oratory Mrs Nickleby's apprehensions might have been vented, if the general attention had not been attracted, at the moment, by a very strange and uncommon noise, proceeding, as the pale and trembling servant girl affirmed, and as everybody's sense of hearing seemed to affirm also, 'right down' the chimney of the adjoining room.

It being quite plain to the comprehension of all present that, however extraordinary and improbable it might appear, the noise did nevertheless proceed from the chimney in question; and the noise (which was a strange compound of various shuffling, sliding, rumbling, and struggling sounds, all muffled by the chimney) still continuing, Frank Cheeryble caught up a candle, and Tim Linkinwater the tongs, and they would have very quickly ascertained the cause of this disturbance if Mrs Nickleby had not been taken very faint, and declined being left behind, on any account. This produced a short remonstrance, which terminated in their all proceeding to the troubled chamber in a body, excepting only Miss La Creevy, who, as the servant girl volunteered a confession of having been subject to fits in her infancy,

remained with her to give the alarm and apply restoratives, in case of extremity.

Advancing to the door of the mysterious apartment, they were not a little surprised to hear a human voice, chanting with a highly elaborated expression of melancholy, and in tones of suffocation which a human voice might have produced from under five or six featherbeds of the best quality, the once popular air of 'Has she then failed in her truth, the beautiful maid I adore?' Nor, on bursting into the room without demanding a parley, was their astonishment lessened by the discovery that these romantic sounds certainly proceeded from the throat of some man up the chimney, of whom nothing was visible but a pair of legs, which were dangling above the grate; apparently feeling, with extreme anxiety, for the top bar whereon to effect a landing.

A sight so unusual and unbusinesslike as this, completely paralysed Tim Linkinwater, who, after one or two gentle pinches at the stranger's ankles, which were productive of no effect, stood clapping the tongs together, as if he were sharpening them for another assault, and did nothing else.

'This must be some drunken fellow,' said Frank. 'No thief would announce his presence thus.'

As he said this, with great indignation, he raised the candle to obtain a better view of the legs, and was darting forward to pull them down with very little ceremony, when Mrs Nickleby, clasping her hands, uttered a sharp sound, something between a scream and an exclamation, and demanded to know whether the mysterious limbs were not clad in smallclothes and grey worsted stockings, or whether her eyes had deceived her.

'Yes,' cried Frank, looking a little closer. 'Smallclothes certainly, andandrough grey stockings, too. Do you know him, ma'am?'

'Kate, my dear,' said Mrs Nickleby, deliberately sitting herself down in a chair with that sort of desperate resignation which seemed to imply that now matters had come to a crisis, and all disguise was useless, 'you will have the goodness, my love, to explain precisely how this matter stands. I have given him no encouragementnone whatevernot the least in the world. You know that, my dear, perfectly well. He was very respectful, exceedingly respectful, when he declared, as you were a witness to; still at the same time, if I am to be persecuted in this way, if vegetable what'shisnames and all kinds of gardenstuff are to strew my path out of doors, and gentlemen are to come choking up our chimneys at home, I really don't knowupon my word I do NOT knowwhat is to become of me. It's a very hard caseharder than anything I was ever exposed to, before I married your poor dear papa, though I suffered a

good deal of annoyance thenbut that, of course, I expected, and made up my mind for. When I was not nearly so old as you, my dear, there was a young gentleman who sat next us at church, who used, almost every Sunday, to cut my name in large letters in the front of his pew while the sermon was going on. It was gratifying, of course, naturally so, but still it was an annoyance, because the pew was in a very conspicuous place, and he was several times publicly taken out by the beadle for doing it. But that was nothing to this. This is a great deal worse, and a great deal more embarrassing. I would rather, Kate, my dear,' said Mrs Nickleby, with great solemnity, and an effusion of tears: 'I would rather, I declare, have been a pigfaced lady, than be exposed to such a life as this!'

Frank Cheeryble and Tim Linkinwater looked, in irrepressible astonishment, first at each other and then at Kate, who felt that some explanation was necessary, but who, between her terror at the apparition of the legs, her fear lest their owner should be smothered, and her anxiety to give the least ridiculous solution of the mystery that it was capable of bearing, was quite unable to utter a single word.

'He gives me great pain,' continued Mrs Nickleby, drying her eyes, 'great pain; but don't hurt a hair of his head, I beg. On no account hurt a hair of his head.'

It would not, under existing circumstances, have been quite so easy to hurt a hair of the gentleman's head as Mrs Nickleby seemed to imagine, inasmuch as that part of his person was some feet up the chimney, which was by no means a wide one. But, as all this time he had never left off singing about the bankruptcy of the beautiful maid in respect of truth, and now began not only to croak very feebly, but to kick with great violence as if respiration became a task of difficulty, Frank Cheeryble, without further hesitation, pulled at the shorts and worsteds with such heartiness as to bring him floundering into the room with greater precipitation than he had quite calculated upon.

'Oh! yes, yes,' said Kate, directly the whole figure of this singular visitor appeared in this abrupt manner. 'I know who it is. Pray don't be rough with him. Is he hurt? I hope not. Oh, pray see if he is hurt.'

'He is not, I assure you,' replied Frank, handling the object of his surprise, after this appeal, with sudden tenderness and respect. 'He is not hurt in the least.'

'Don't let him come any nearer,' said Kate, retiring as far as she could.

'Oh, no, he shall not,' rejoined Frank. 'You see I have him secure here. But may I ask you what this means, and whether you expected this old gentleman?'

'Oh, no,' said Kate, 'of course not; but hemama does not think so, I believebut

he is a mad gentleman who has escaped from the next house, and must have found an opportunity of secreting himself here.'

'Kate,' interposed Mrs Nickleby with severe dignity, 'I am surprised at you.'

'Dear mama,' Kate gently remonstrated.

'I am surprised at you,' repeated Mrs Nickleby; 'upon my word, Kate, I am quite astonished that you should join the persecutors of this unfortunate gentleman, when you know very well that they have the basest designs upon his property, and that that is the whole secret of it. It would be much kinder of you, Kate, to ask Mr Linkinwater or Mr Cheeryble to interfere in his behalf, and see him righted. You ought not to allow your feelings to influence you; it's not right, very far from it. What should my feelings be, do you suppose? If anybody ought to be indignant, who is it? I, of course, and very properly so. Still, at the same time, I wouldn't commit such an injustice for the world. No,' continued Mrs Nickleby, drawing herself up, and looking another way with a kind of bashful stateliness; 'this gentleman will understand me when I tell him that I repeat the answer I gave him the other day; that I always will repeat it, though I do believe him to be sincere when I find him placing himself in such dreadful situations on my account; and that I request him to have the goodness to go away directly, or it will be impossible to keep his behaviour a secret from my son Nicholas. I am obliged to him, very much obliged to him, but I cannot listen to his addresses for a moment. It's quite impossible.'

While this address was in course of delivery, the old gentleman, with his nose and cheeks embellished with large patches of soot, sat upon the ground with his arms folded, eyeing the spectators in profound silence, and with a very majestic demeanour. He did not appear to take the smallest notice of what Mrs Nickleby said, but when she ceased to speak he honoured her with a long stare, and inquired if she had quite finished.

'I have nothing more to say,' replied that lady modestly. 'I really cannot say anything more.'

'Very good,' said the old gentleman, raising his voice, 'then bring in the bottled lightning, a clean tumbler, and a corkscrew.'

Nobody executing this order, the old gentleman, after a short pause, raised his voice again and demanded a thunder sandwich. This article not being forthcoming either, he requested to be served with a fricassee of boottops and goldfish sauce, and then laughing heartily, gratified his hearers with a very long, very loud, and most melodious bellow.

But still Mrs Nickleby, in reply to the significant looks of all about her, shook

her head as though to assure them that she saw nothing whatever in all this, unless, indeed, it were a slight degree of eccentricity. She might have remained impressed with these opinions down to the latest moment of her life, but for a slight train of circumstances, which, trivial as they were, altered the whole complexion of the case.

It happened that Miss La Creevy, finding her patient in no very threatening condition, and being strongly impelled by curiosity to see what was going forward, bustled into the room while the old gentleman was in the very act of bellowing. It happened, too, that the instant the old gentleman saw her, he stopped short, skipped suddenly on his feet, and fell to kissing his hand violently: a change of demeanour which almost terrified the little portrait painter out of her senses, and caused her to retreat behind Tim Linkinwater with the utmost expedition.

'Aha!' cried the old gentleman, folding his hands, and squeezing them with great force against each other. 'I see her now; I see her now! My love, my life, my bride, my peerless beauty. She is come at lastat lastand all is gas and gaiters!'

Mrs Nickleby looked rather disconcerted for a moment, but immediately recovering, nodded to Miss La Creevy and the other spectators several times, and frowned, and smiled gravely, giving them to understand that she saw where the mistake was, and would set it all to rights in a minute or two.

'She is come!' said the old gentleman, laying his hand upon his heart. 'Cormoran and Blunderbore! She is come! All the wealth I have is hers if she will take me for her slave. Where are grace, beauty, and blandishments, like those? In the Empress of Madagascar? No. In the Queen of Diamonds? No. In Mrs Rowland, who every morning bathes in Kalydor for nothing? No. Melt all these down into one, with the three Graces, the nine Muses, and fourteen biscuitbakers' daughters from Oxford Street, and make a woman half as lovely. Pho! I defy you.'

After uttering this rhapsody, the old gentleman snapped his fingers twenty or thirty times, and then subsided into an ecstatic contemplation of Miss La Creevy's charms. This affording Mrs Nickleby a favourable opportunity of explanation, she went about it straight.

'I am sure,' said the worthy lady, with a prefatory cough, 'that it's a great relief, under such trying circumstances as these, to have anybody else mistaken for mea very great relief; and it's a circumstance that never occurred before, although I have several times been mistaken for my daughter Kate. I have no doubt the people were very foolish, and perhaps ought to have known better,

but still they did take me for her, and of course that was no fault of mine, and it would be very hard indeed if I was to be made responsible for it. However, in this instance, of course, I must feel that I should do exceedingly wrong if I suffered anybodyespecially anybody that I am under great obligations toto be made uncomfortable on my account. And therefore I think it my duty to tell that gentleman that he is mistaken, that I am the lady who he was told by some impertinent person was niece to the Council of Pavingstones, and that I do beg and entreat of him to go quietly away, if it's only for,' here Mrs Nickleby simpered and hesitated, 'for MY sake.'

It might have been expected that the old gentleman would have been penetrated to the heart by the delicacy and condescension of this appeal, and that he would at least have returned a courteous and suitable reply. What, then, was the shock which Mrs Nickleby received, when, accosting HER in the most unmistakable manner, he replied in a loud and sonourous voice: 'Avaunt! Cat!'

'Sir!' cried Mrs Nickleby, in a faint tone.

'Cat!' repeated the old gentleman. 'Puss, Kit, Tit, Grimalkin, Tabby, Brindle! Whoosh!' with which last sound, uttered in a hissing manner between his teeth, the old gentleman swung his arms violently round and round, and at the same time alternately advanced on Mrs Nickleby, and retreated from her, in that species of savage dance with which boys on marketdays may be seen to frighten pigs, sheep, and other animals, when they give out obstinate indications of turning down a wrong street.

Mrs Nickleby wasted no words, but uttered an exclamation of horror and surprise, and immediately fainted away.

'I'll attend to mama,' said Kate, hastily; 'I am not at all frightened. But pray take him away: pray take him away!'

Frank was not at all confident of his power of complying with this request, until he bethought himself of the stratagem of sending Miss La Creevy on a few paces in advance, and urging the old gentleman to follow her. It succeeded to a miracle; and he went away in a rapture of admiration, strongly guarded by Tim Linkinwater on one side, and Frank himself on the other.

'Kate,' murmured Mrs Nickleby, reviving when the coast was clear, 'is he gone?'

She was assured that he was.

'I shall never forgive myself, Kate,' said Mrs Nickleby. 'Never! That gentleman has lost his senses, and I am the unhappy cause.'

'YOU the cause!' said Kate, greatly astonished.

'I, my love,' replied Mrs Nickleby, with a desperate calmness. 'You saw what he was the other day; you see what he is now. I told your brother, weeks and weeks ago, Kate, that I hoped a disappointment might not be too much for him. You see what a wreck he is. Making allowance for his being a little flighty, you know how rationally, and sensibly, and honourably he talked, when we saw him in the garden. You have heard the dreadful nonsense he has been guilty of this night, and the manner in which he has gone on with that poor unfortunate little old maid. Can anybody doubt how all this has been brought about?'

'I should scarcely think they could,' said Kate mildly.

'I should scarcely think so, either,' rejoined her mother. 'Well! if I am the unfortunate cause of this, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I am not to blame. I told Nicholas, I said to him, "Nicholas, my dear, we should be very careful how we proceed." He would scarcely hear me. If the matter had only been properly taken up at first, as I wished it to be! But you are both of you so like your poor papa. However, I have MY consolation, and that should be enough for me!'

Washing her hands, thus, of all responsibility under this head, past, present, or to come, Mrs Nickleby kindly added that she hoped her children might never have greater cause to reproach themselves than she had, and prepared herself to receive the escort, who soon returned with the intelligence that the old gentleman was safely housed, and that they found his custodians, who had been making merry with some friends, wholly ignorant of his absence.

Quiet being again restored, a delicious halfhourso Frank called it, in the course of subsequent conversation with Tim Linkinwater as they were walking homewas spent in conversation, and Tim's watch at length apprising him that it was high time to depart, the ladies were left alone, though not without many offers on the part of Frank to remain until Nicholas arrived, no matter what hour of the night it might be, if, after the late neighbourly irruption, they entertained the least fear of being left to themselves. As their freedom from all further apprehension, however, left no pretext for his insisting on mounting guard, he was obliged to abandon the citadel, and to retire with the trusty Tim.

Nearly three hours of silence passed away. Kate blushed to find, when Nicholas returned, how long she had been sitting alone, occupied with her own thoughts.

'I really thought it had not been half an hour,' she said.

'They must have been pleasant thoughts, Kate,' rejoined Nicholas gaily, 'to make time pass away like that. What were they now?'

Kate was confused; she toyed with some trifle on the table, looked up and smiled, looked down and dropped a tear.

'Why, Kate,' said Nicholas, drawing his sister towards him and kissing her, 'let me see your face. No? Ah! that was but a glimpse; that's scarcely fair. A longer look than that, Kate. Comeand I'll read your thoughts for you.'

There was something in this proposition, albeit it was said without the slightest consciousness or application, which so alarmed his sister, that Nicholas laughingly changed the subject to domestic matters, and thus gathered, by degrees, as they left the room and went upstairs together, how lonely Smike had been all nightand by very slow degrees, too; for on this subject also, Kate seemed to speak with some reluctance.

'Poor fellow,' said Nicholas, tapping gently at his door, 'what can be the cause of all this?'

Kate was hanging on her brother's arm. The door being quickly opened, she had not time to disengage herself, before Smike, very pale and haggard, and completely dressed, confronted them.

'And have you not been to bed?' said Nicholas.

'Nnno,' was the reply.

Nicholas gently detained his sister, who made an effort to retire; and asked, 'Why not?'

'I could not sleep,' said Smike, grasping the hand which his friend extended to him.

'You are not well?' rejoined Nicholas.

'I am better, indeed. A great deal better,' said Smike quickly.

'Then why do you give way to these fits of melancholy?' inquired Nicholas, in his kindest manner; 'or why not tell us the cause? You grow a different creature, Smike.'

'I do; I know I do,' he replied. 'I will tell you the reason one day, but not now. I hate myself for this; you are all so good and kind. But I cannot help it. My heart is very full; you do not know how full it is.'

He wrung Nicholas's hand before he released it; and glancing, for a moment,

at the brother and sister as they stood together, as if there were something in their strong affection which touched him very deeply, withdrew into his chamber, and was soon the only watcher under that quiet roof.

CHAPTER 50

Involves a serious Catastrophe

The little racecourse at Hampton was in the full tide and height of its gaiety; the day as dazzling as day could be; the sun high in the cloudless sky, and shining in its fullest splendour. Every gaudy colour that fluttered in the air from carriage seat and garish tent top, shone out in its gaudiest hues. Old dingy flags grew new again, faded gilding was reburnished, stained rotten canvas looked a snowy white, the very beggars' rags were freshened up, and sentiment quite forgot its charity in its fervent admiration of poverty so picturesque.

It was one of those scenes of life and animation, caught in its very brightest and freshest moments, which can scarcely fail to please; for if the eye be tired of show and glare, or the ear be weary with a ceaseless round of noise, the one may repose, turn almost where it will, on eager, happy, and expectant faces, and the other deaden all consciousness of more annoying sounds in those of mirth and exhilaration. Even the sunburnt faces of gypsy children, half naked though they be, suggest a drop of comfort. It is a pleasant thing to see that the sun has been there; to know that the air and light are on them every day; to feel that they ARE children, and lead children's lives; that if their pillows be damp, it is with the dews of Heaven, and not with tears; that the limbs of their girls are free, and that they are not crippled by distortions, imposing an unnatural and horrible penance upon their sex; that their lives are spent, from day to day, at least among the waving trees, and not in the midst of dreadful engines which make young children old before they know what childhood is, and give them the exhaustion and infirmity of age, without, like age, the privilege to die. God send that old nursery tales were true, and that gypsies stole such children by the score!

The great race of the day had just been run; and the close lines of people, on either side of the course, suddenly breaking up and pouring into it, imparted a new liveliness to the scene, which was again all busy movement. Some hurried eagerly to catch a glimpse of the winning horse; others darted to and fro, searching, no less eagerly, for the carriages they had left in quest of better

stations. Here, a little knot gathered round a pea and thimble table to watch the plucking of some unhappy greenhorn; and there, another proprietor with his confederates in various disguisesone man in spectacles; another, with an eyeglass and a stylish hat; a third, dressed as a farmer well to do in the world, with his topcoat over his arm and his flash notes in a large leathern pocketbook; and all with heavyhandled whips to represent most innocent country fellows who had trotted there on horsebacksought, by loud and noisy talk and pretended play, to entrap some unwary customer, while the gentlemen confederates (of more villainous aspect still, in clean linen and good clothes), betrayed their close interest in the concern by the anxious furtive glance they cast on all new comers. These would be hanging on the outskirts of a wide circle of people assembled round some itinerant juggler, opposed, in his turn, by a noisy band of music, or the classic game of 'Ring the Bull,' while ventriloquists holding dialogues with wooden dolls, and fortunetelling women smothering the cries of real babies, divided with them, and many more, the general attention of the company. Drinkingtents were full, glasses began to clink in carriages, hampers to be unpacked, tempting provisions to be set forth, knives and forks to rattle, champagne corks to fly, eyes to brighten that were not dull before, and pickpockets to count their gains during the last heat. The attention so recently strained on one object of interest, was now divided among a hundred; and look where you would, there was a motley assemblage of feasting, laughing, talking, begging, gambling, and mummery.

Of the gamblingbooths there was a plentiful show, flourishing in all the splendour of carpeted ground, striped hangings, crimson cloth, pinnacled roofs, geranium pots, and livery servants. There were the Stranger's clubhouse, the Athenaeum clubhouse, the Hampton clubhouse, the St James's clubhouse, and half a mile of clubhouses to play IN; and there were ROUGEETNOIR, French hazard, and other games to play AT. It is into one of these booths that our story takes its way.

Fitted up with three tables for the purposes of play, and crowded with players and lookers on, it was, although the largest place of the kind upon the course, intensely hot, notwithstanding that a portion of the canvas roof was rolled back to admit more air, and there were two doors for a free passage in and out. Excepting one or two men who, each with a long roll of halfcrowns, chequered with a few stray sovereigns, in his left hand, staked their money at every roll of the ball with a businesslike sedateness which showed that they were used to it, and had been playing all day, and most probably all the day before, there was no very distinctive character about the players, who were chiefly young men, apparently attracted by curiosity, or staking small sums as part of the amusement of the day, with no very great interest in winning or losing. There were two persons present, however, who, as peculiarly good

specimens of a class, deserve a passing notice.

Of these, one was a man of six or eight and fifty, who sat on a chair near one of the entrances of the booth, with his hands folded on the top of his stick, and his chin appearing above them. He was a tall, fat, longbodied man, buttoned up to the throat in a light green coat, which made his body look still longer than it was. He wore, besides, drab breeches and gaiters, a white neckerchief, and a broadbrimmed white hat. Amid all the buzzing noise of the games, and the perpetual passing in and out of the people, he seemed perfectly calm and abstracted, without the smallest particle of excitement in his composition. He exhibited no indication of weariness, nor, to a casual observer, of interest either. There he sat, quite still and collected. Sometimes, but very rarely, he nodded to some passing face, or beckoned to a waiter to obey a call from one of the tables. The next instant he subsided into his old state. He might have been some profoundly deaf old gentleman, who had come in to take a rest, or he might have been patiently waiting for a friend, without the least consciousness of anybody's presence, or fixed in a trance, or under the influence of opium. People turned round and looked at him; he made no gesture, caught nobody's eye, let them pass away, and others come on and be succeeded by others, and took no notice. When he did move, it seemed wonderful how he could have seen anything to occasion it. And so, in truth, it was. But there was not a face that passed in or out, which this man failed to see; not a gesture at any one of the three tables that was lost upon him; not a word, spoken by the bankers, but reached his ear; not a winner or loser he could not have marked. And he was the proprietor of the place.

The other presided over the ROUGEETNOIR table. He was probably some ten years younger, and was a plump, paunchy, sturdylooking fellow, with his underlip a little pursed, from a habit of counting money inwardly as he paid it, but with no decidedly bad expression in his face, which was rather an honest and jolly one than otherwise. He wore no coat, the weather being hot, and stood behind the table with a huge mound of crowns and halfcrowns before him, and a cashbox for notes. This game was constantly playing. Perhaps twenty people would be staking at the same time. This man had to roll the ball, to watch the stakes as they were laid down, to gather them off the colour which lost, to pay those who won, to do it all with the utmost dispatch, to roll the ball again, and to keep this game perpetually alive. He did it all with a rapidity absolutely marvellous; never hesitating, never making a mistake, never stopping, and never ceasing to repeat such unconnected phrases as the following, which, partly from habit, and partly to have something appropriate and businesslike to say, he constantly poured out with the same monotonous emphasis, and in nearly the same order, all day long:

'Roogeanore from Paris! Gentlemen, make your game and back your own opinionsany time while the ball rollsroogeanore from Paris, gentlemen, it's a French game, gentlemen, I brought it over myself, I did indeed!Roogeanore from Parisblack winsblackstop a minute, sir, and I'll pay you, directlytwo there, half a pound there, three thereand one theregentlemen, the ball's a rollingany time, sir, while the ball rolls!The beauty of this game is, that you can double your stakes or put down your money, gentlemen, any time while the ball rollsblack againblack winsI never saw such a thingI never did, in all my life, upon my word I never did; if any gentleman had been backing the black in the last five minutes he must have won fiveandforty pound in four rolls of the ball, he must indeed. Gentlemen, we've port, sherry, cigars, and most excellent champagne. Here, waiter, bring a bottle of champagne, and let's have a dozen or fifteen cigars hereand let's be comfortable, gentlemenand bring some clean glassesany time while the ball rolls!I lost one hundred and thirtyseven pound yesterday, gentlemen, at one roll of the ball, I did indeed!how do you do, sir?' (recognising some knowing gentleman without any halt or change of voice, and giving a wink so slight that it seems an accident), 'will you take a glass of sherry, sir?here, waiter! bring a clean glass, and hand the sherry to this gentlemanand hand it round, will you, waiter?this is the roogeanore from Paris, gentlemenany time while the ball rolls!gentlemen, make your game, and back your own opinionsit's the roogeanore from Parisquite a new game, I brought it over myself, I did indeedgentlemen, the ball's arolling!'

This officer was busily plying his vocation when halfadozen persons sauntered through the booth, to whom, but without stopping either in his speech or work, he bowed respectfully; at the same time directing, by a look, the attention of a man beside him to the tallest figure in the group, in recognition of whom the proprietor pulled off his hat. This was Sir Mulberry Hawk, with whom were his friend and pupil, and a small train of gentlemanlydressed men, of characters more doubtful than obscure.

The proprietor, in a low voice, bade Sir Mulberry goodday. Sir Mulberry, in the same tone, bade the proprietor go to the devil, and turned to speak with his friends.

There was evidently an irritable consciousness about him that he was an object of curiosity, on this first occasion of showing himself in public after the accident that had befallen him; and it was easy to perceive that he appeared on the racecourse, that day, more in the hope of meeting with a great many people who knew him, and so getting over as much as possible of the annoyance at once, than with any purpose of enjoying the sport. There yet remained a slight scar upon his face, and whenever he was recognised, as he was almost every

minute by people sauntering in and out, he made a restless effort to conceal it with his glove; showing how keenly he felt the disgrace he had undergone.

'Ah! Hawk,' said one very sprucelydressed personage in a Newmarket coat, a choice neckerchief, and all other accessories of the most unexceptionable kind. 'How d'ye do, old fellow?'

This was a rival trainer of young noblemen and gentlemen, and the person of all others whom Sir Mulberry most hated and dreaded to meet. They shook hands with excessive cordiality.

'And how are you now, old fellow, hey?'

'Quite well, quite well,' said Sir Mulberry.

'That's right,' said the other. 'How d'ye do, Verisopht? He's a little pulled down, our friend here. Rather out of condition still, hey?'

It should be observed that the gentleman had very white teeth, and that when there was no excuse for laughing, he generally finished with the same monosyllable, which he uttered so as to display them.

'He's in very good condition; there's nothing the matter with him,' said the young man carelessly.

'Upon my soul I'm glad to hear it,' rejoined the other. 'Have you just returned from Brussels?'

'We only reached town late last night,' said Lord Frederick. Sir Mulberry turned away to speak to one of his own party, and feigned not to hear.

'Now, upon my life,' said the friend, affecting to speak in a whisper, 'it's an uncommonly bold and game thing in Hawk to show himself so soon. I say it advisedly; there's a vast deal of courage in it. You see he has just rusticated long enough to excite curiosity, and not long enough for men to have forgotten that deuced unpleasantbythebyeyou know the rights of the affair, of course? Why did you never give those confounded papers the lie? I seldom read the papers, but I looked in the papers for that, and may I be'

'Look in the papers,' interrupted Sir Mulberry, turning suddenly round, 'tomorrowno, next day, will you?'

'Upon my life, my dear fellow, I seldom or never read the papers,' said the other, shrugging his shoulders, 'but I will, at your recommendation. What shall I look for?'

'Good day,' said Sir Mulberry, turning abruptly on his heel, and drawing his

pupil with him. Falling, again, into the loitering, careless pace at which they had entered, they lounged out, arm in arm.

'I won't give him a case of murder to read,' muttered Sir Mulberry with an oath; 'but it shall be something very near it if whipcord cuts and bludgeons bruise.'

His companion said nothing, but there was something in his manner which galled Sir Mulberry to add, with nearly as much ferocity as if his friend had been Nicholas himself:

'I sent Jenkins to old Nickleby before eight o'clock this morning. He's a staunch one; he was back with me before the messenger. I had it all from him in the first five minutes. I know where this hound is to be met with; time and place both. But there's no need to talk; tomorrow will soon be here.'

'And whaat's to be done tomorrow?' inquired Lord Frederick.

Sir Mulberry Hawk honoured him with an angry glance, but condescended to return no verbal answer to this inquiry. Both walked sullenly on, as though their thoughts were busily occupied, until they were quite clear of the crowd, and almost alone, when Sir Mulberry wheeled round to return.

'Stop,' said his companion, 'I want to speak to you in earnest. Don't turn back. Let us walk here, a few minutes.'

'What have you to say to me, that you could not say yonder as well as here?' returned his Mentor, disengaging his arm.

'Hawk,' rejoined the other, 'tell me; I must know.'

'MUST know,' interrupted the other disdainfully. 'Whew! Go on. If you must know, of course there's no escape for me. Must know!'

'Must ask then,' returned Lord Frederick, 'and must press you for a plain and straightforward answer. Is what you have just said only a mere whim of the moment, occasioned by your being out of humour and irritated, or is it your serious intention, and one that you have actually contemplated?'

'Why, don't you remember what passed on the subject one night, when I was laid up with a broken limb?' said Sir Mulberry, with a sneer.

'Perfectly well.'

'Then take that for an answer, in the devil's name,' replied Sir Mulberry, 'and ask me for no other.'

Such was the ascendancy he had acquired over his dupe, and such the latter's general habit of submission, that, for the moment, the young man seemed half afraid to pursue the subject. He soon overcame this feeling, however, if it had restrained him at all, and retorted angrily:

'If I remember what passed at the time you speak of, I expressed a strong opinion on this subject, and said that, with my knowledge or consent, you never should do what you threaten now.'

'Will you prevent me?' asked Sir Mulberry, with a laugh.

'Yees, if I can,' returned the other, promptly.

'A very proper saving clause, that last,' said Sir Mulberry; 'and one you stand in need of. Oh! look to your own business, and leave me to look to mine.'

'This IS mine,' retorted Lord Frederick. 'I make it mine; I will make it mine. It's mine already. I am more compromised than I should be, as it is.'

'Do as you please, and what you please, for yourself,' said Sir Mulberry, affecting an easy goodhumour. 'Surely that must content you! Do nothing for me; that's all. I advise no man to interfere in proceedings that I choose to take. I am sure you know me better than to do so. The fact is, I see, you mean to offer me advice. It is well meant, I have no doubt, but I reject it. Now, if you please, we will return to the carriage. I find no entertainment here, but quite the reverse. If we prolong this conversation, we might quarrel, which would be no proof of wisdom in either you or me.'

With this rejoinder, and waiting for no further discussion, Sir Mulberry Hawk yawned, and very leisurely turned back.

There was not a little tact and knowledge of the young lord's disposition in this mode of treating him. Sir Mulberry clearly saw that if his dominion were to last, it must be established now. He knew that the moment he became violent, the young man would become violent too. He had, many times, been enabled to strengthen his influence, when any circumstance had occurred to weaken it, by adopting this cool and laconic style; and he trusted to it now, with very little doubt of its entire success.

But while he did this, and wore the most careless and indifferent deportment that his practised arts enabled him to assume, he inwardly resolved, not only to visit all the mortification of being compelled to suppress his feelings, with additional severity upon Nicholas, but also to make the young lord pay dearly for it, one day, in some shape or other. So long as he had been a passive instrument in his hands, Sir Mulberry had regarded him with no other feeling

than contempt; but, now that he presumed to avow opinions in opposition to his, and even to turn upon him with a lofty tone and an air of superiority, he began to hate him. Conscious that, in the vilest and most worthless sense of the term, he was dependent upon the weak young lord, Sir Mulberry could the less brook humiliation at his hands; and when he began to dislike him he measured his dislikeas men often doby the extent of the injuries he had inflicted upon its object. When it is remembered that Sir Mulberry Hawk had plundered, duped, deceived, and fooled his pupil in every possible way, it will not be wondered at, that, beginning to hate him, he began to hate him cordially.

On the other hand, the young lord having thoughtwhich he very seldom did about anythingand seriously too, upon the affair with Nicholas, and the circumstances which led to it, had arrived at a manly and honest conclusion. Sir Mulberry's coarse and insulting behaviour on the occasion in question had produced a deep impression on his mind; a strong suspicion of his having led him on to pursue Miss Nickleby for purposes of his own, had been lurking there for some time; he was really ashamed of his share in the transaction, and deeply mortified by the misgiving that he had been gulled. He had had sufficient leisure to reflect upon these things, during their late retirement; and, at times, when his careless and indolent nature would permit, had availed himself of the opportunity. Slight circumstances, too, had occurred to increase his suspicion. It wanted but a very slight circumstance to kindle his wrath against Sir Mulberry. This his disdainful and insolent tone in their recent conversation (the only one they had held upon the subject since the period to which Sir Mulberry referred), effected.

Thus they rejoined their friends: each with causes of dislike against the other rankling in his breast: and the young man haunted, besides, with thoughts of the vindictive retaliation which was threatened against Nicholas, and the determination to prevent it by some strong step, if possible. But this was not all. Sir Mulberry, conceiving that he had silenced him effectually, could not suppress his triumph, or forbear from following up what he conceived to be his advantage. Mr Pyke was there, and Mr Pluck was there, and Colonel Chowser, and other gentlemen of the same caste, and it was a great point for Sir Mulberry to show them that he had not lost his influence. At first, the young lord contented himself with a silent determination to take measures for withdrawing himself from the connection immediately. By degrees, he grew more angry, and was exasperated by jests and familiarities which, a few hours before, would have been a source of amusement to him. This did not serve him; for, at such bantering or retort as suited the company, he was no match for Sir Mulberry. Still, no violent rupture took place. They returned to town; Messrs Pyke and Pluck and other gentlemen frequently protesting, on the way

thither, that Sir Mulberry had never been in such tiptop spirits in all his life.

They dined together, sumptuously. The wine flowed freely, as indeed it had done all day. Sir Mulberry drank to recompense himself for his recent abstinence; the young lord, to drown his indignation; and the remainder of the party, because the wine was of the best and they had nothing to pay. It was nearly midnight when they rushed out, wild, burning with wine, their blood boiling, and their brains on fire, to the gamingtable.

Here, they encountered another party, mad like themselves. The excitement of play, hot rooms, and glaring lights was not calculated to allay the fever of the time. In that giddy whirl of noise and confusion, the men were delirious. Who thought of money, ruin, or the morrow, in the savage intoxication of the moment? More wine was called for, glass after glass was drained, their parched and scalding mouths were cracked with thirst. Down poured the wine like oil on blazing fire. And still the riot went on. The debauchery gained its height; glasses were dashed upon the floor by hands that could not carry them to lips; oaths were shouted out by lips which could scarcely form the words to vent them in; drunken losers cursed and roared; some mounted on the tables, waving bottles above their heads and bidding defiance to the rest; some danced, some sang, some tore the cards and raved. Tumult and frenzy reigned supreme; when a noise arose that drowned all others, and two men, seizing each other by the throat, struggled into the middle of the room.

A dozen voices, until now unheard, called aloud to part them. Those who had kept themselves cool, to win, and who earned their living in such scenes, threw themselves upon the combatants, and, forcing them asunder, dragged them some space apart.

'Let me go!' cried Sir Mulberry, in a thick hoarse voice; 'he struck me! Do you hear? I say, he struck me. Have I a friend here? Who is this? Westwood. Do you hear me say he struck me?'

'I hear, I hear,' replied one of those who held him. 'Come away for tonight!'

'I will not, by G,' he replied. 'A dozen men about us saw the blow.'

'Tomorrow will be ample time,' said the friend.

'It will not be ample time!' cried Sir Mulberry. 'Tonight, at once, here!' His passion was so great, that he could not articulate, but stood clenching his fist, tearing his hair, and stamping upon the ground.

'What is this, my lord?' said one of those who surrounded him. 'Have blows passed?'

'ONE blow has,' was the panting reply. 'I struck him. I proclaim it to all here! I struck him, and he knows why. I say, with him, let this quarrel be adjusted now. Captain Adams,' said the young lord, looking hurriedly about him, and addressing one of those who had interposed, 'let me speak with you, I beg.'

The person addressed stepped forward, and taking the young man's arm, they retired together, followed shortly afterwards by Sir Mulberry and his friend.

It was a profligate haunt of the worst repute, and not a place in which such an affair was likely to awaken any sympathy for either party, or to call forth any further remonstrance or interposition. Elsewhere, its further progress would have been instantly prevented, and time allowed for sober and cool reflection; but not there. Disturbed in their orgies, the party broke up; some reeled away with looks of tipsy gravity; others withdrew noisily discussing what had just occurred; the gentlemen of honour who lived upon their winnings remarked to each other, as they went out, that Hawk was a good shot; and those who had been most noisy, fell fast asleep upon the sofas, and thought no more about it.

Meanwhile, the two seconds, as they may be called now, after a long conference, each with his principal, met together in another room. Both utterly heartless, both men upon town, both thoroughly initiated in its worst vices, both deeply in debt, both fallen from some higher estate, both addicted to every depravity for which society can find some genteel name and plead its most depraving conventionalities as an excuse, they were naturally gentlemen of most unblemished honour themselves, and of great nicety concerning the honour of other people.

These two gentlemen were unusually cheerful just now; for the affair was pretty certain to make some noise, and could scarcely fail to enhance their reputations.

'This is an awkward affair, Adams,' said Mr Westwood, drawing himself up.

'Very,' returned the captain; 'a blow has been struck, and there is but one course, OF course.'

'No apology, I suppose?' said Mr Westwood.

'Not a syllable, sir, from my man, if we talk till doomsday,' returned the captain. 'The original cause of dispute, I understand, was some girl or other, to whom your principal applied certain terms, which Lord Frederick, defending the girl, repelled. But this led to a long recrimination upon a great many sore subjects, charges, and countercharges. Sir Mulberry was sarcastic; Lord Frederick was excited, and struck him in the heat of provocation, and under circumstances of great aggravation. That blow, unless there is a full retraction

on the part of Sir Mulberry, Lord Frederick is ready to justify.'

'There is no more to be said,' returned the other, 'but to settle the hour and the place of meeting. It's a responsibility; but there is a strong feeling to have it over. Do you object to say at sunrise?'

'Sharp work,' replied the captain, referring to his watch; 'however, as this seems to have been a long time breeding, and negotiation is only a waste of words, no.'

'Something may possibly be said, out of doors, after what passed in the other room, which renders it desirable that we should be off without delay, and quite clear of town,' said Mr Westwood. 'What do you say to one of the meadows opposite Twickenham, by the riverside?'

The captain saw no objection.

'Shall we join company in the avenue of trees which leads from Petersham to Ham House, and settle the exact spot when we arrive there?' said Mr Westwood.

To this the captain also assented. After a few other preliminaries, equally brief, and having settled the road each party should take to avoid suspicion, they separated.

'We shall just have comfortable time, my lord,' said the captain, when he had communicated the arrangements, 'to call at my rooms for a case of pistols, and then jog coolly down. If you will allow me to dismiss your servant, we'll take my cab; for yours, perhaps, might be recognised.'

What a contrast, when they reached the street, to the scene they had just left! It was already daybreak. For the flaring yellow light within, was substituted the clear, bright, glorious morning; for a hot, close atmosphere, tainted with the smell of expiring lamps, and reeking with the steams of riot and dissipation, the free, fresh, wholesome air. But to the fevered head on which that cool air blew, it seemed to come laden with remorse for time misspent and countless opportunities neglected. With throbbing veins and burning skin, eyes wild and heavy, thoughts hurried and disordered, he felt as though the light were a reproach, and shrunk involuntarily from the day as if he were some foul and hideous thing.

'Shivering?' said the captain. 'You are cold.'

'Rather.'

'It does strike cool, coming out of those hot rooms. Wrap that cloak about you.

So, so; now we're off.'

They rattled through the quiet streets, made their call at the captain's lodgings, cleared the town, and emerged upon the open road, without hindrance or molestation.

Fields, trees, gardens, hedges, everything looked very beautiful; the young man scarcely seemed to have noticed them before, though he had passed the same objects a thousand times. There was a peace and serenity upon them all, strangely at variance with the bewilderment and confusion of his own halfsobered thoughts, and yet impressive and welcome. He had no fear upon his mind; but, as he looked about him, he had less anger; and though all old delusions, relative to his worthless late companion, were now cleared away, he rather wished he had never known him than thought of its having come to this.

The past night, the day before, and many other days and nights beside, all mingled themselves up in one unintelligible and senseless whirl; he could not separate the transactions of one time from those of another. Now, the noise of the wheels resolved itself into some wild tune in which he could recognise scraps of airs he knew; now, there was nothing in his ears but a stunning and bewildering sound, like rushing water. But his companion rallied him on being so silent, and they talked and laughed boisterously. When they stopped, he was a little surprised to find himself in the act of smoking; but, on reflection, he remembered when and where he had taken the cigar.

They stopped at the avenue gate and alighted, leaving the carriage to the care of the servant, who was a smart fellow, and nearly as well accustomed to such proceedings as his master. Sir Mulberry and his friend were already there. All four walked in profound silence up the aisle of stately elm trees, which, meeting far above their heads, formed a long green perspective of Gothic arches, terminating, like some old ruin, in the open sky.

After a pause, and a brief conference between the seconds, they, at length, turned to the right, and taking a track across a little meadow, passed Ham House and came into some fields beyond. In one of these, they stopped. The ground was measured, some usual forms gone through, the two principals were placed front to front at the distance agreed upon, and Sir Mulberry turned his face towards his young adversary for the first time. He was very pale, his eyes were bloodshot, his dress disordered, and his hair dishevelled. For the face, it expressed nothing but violent and evil passions. He shaded his eyes with his hand; grazed at his opponent, steadfastly, for a few moments; and, then taking the weapon which was tendered to him, bent his eyes upon that, and looked up no more until the word was given, when he instantly fired.

The two shots were fired, as nearly as possible, at the same instant. In that instant, the young lord turned his head sharply round, fixed upon his adversary a ghastly stare, and without a groan or stagger, fell down dead.

'He's gone!' cried Westwood, who, with the other second, had run up to the body, and fallen on one knee beside it.

'His blood on his own head,' said Sir Mulberry. 'He brought this upon himself, and forced it upon me.'

'Captain Adams,' cried Westwood, hastily, 'I call you to witness that this was fairly done. Hawk, we have not a moment to lose. We must leave this place immediately, push for Brighton, and cross to France with all speed. This has been a bad business, and may be worse, if we delay a moment. Adams, consult your own safety, and don't remain here; the living before the dead; goodbye!'

With these words, he seized Sir Mulberry by the arm, and hurried him away. Captain Adamsonly pausing to convince himself, beyond all question, of the fatal resultsped off in the same direction, to concert measures with his servant for removing the body, and securing his own safety likewise.

So died Lord Frederick Verisopht, by the hand which he had loaded with gifts, and clasped a thousand times; by the act of him, but for whom, and others like him, he might have lived a happy man, and died with children's faces round his bed.

The sun came proudly up in all his majesty, the noble river ran its winding course, the leaves quivered and rustled in the air, the birds poured their cheerful songs from every tree, the shortlived butterfly fluttered its little wings; all the light and life of day came on; and, amidst it all, and pressing down the grass whose every blade bore twenty tiny lives, lay the dead man, with his stark and rigid face turned upwards to the sky.

CHAPTER 51

The Project of Mr Ralph Nickleby and his Friend approaching a successful Issue, becomes unexpectedly known to another Party, not admitted into their Confidence

In an old house, dismal dark and dusty, which seemed to have withered, like himself, and to have grown yellow and shrivelled in hoarding him from the

light of day, as he had in hoarding his money, lived Arthur Gride. Meagre old chairs and tables, of spare and bony make, and hard and cold as misers' hearts, were ranged, in grim array, against the gloomy walls; attenuated presses, grown lank and lanternjawed in guarding the treasures they enclosed, and tottering, as though from constant fear and dread of thieves, shrunk up in dark corners, whence they cast no shadows on the ground, and seemed to hide and cower from observation. A tall grim clock upon the stairs, with long lean hands and famished face, ticked in cautious whispers; and when it struck the time, in thin and piping sounds, like an old man's voice, rattled, as if it were pinched with hunger.

No fireside couch was there, to invite repose and comfort. Elbowchairs there were, but they looked uneasy in their minds, cocked their arms suspiciously and timidly, and kept upon their guard. Others, were fantastically grim and gaunt, as having drawn themselves up to their utmost height, and put on their fiercest looks to stare all comers out of countenance. Others, again, knocked up against their neighbours, or leant for support against the wallsomewhat ostentatiously, as if to call all men to witness that they were not worth the taking. The dark square lumbering bedsteads seemed built for restless dreams; the musty hangings seemed to creep in scanty folds together, whispering among themselves, when rustled by the wind, their trembling knowledge of the tempting wares that lurked within the dark and tightlocked closets.

From out the most spare and hungry room in all this spare and hungry house there came, one morning, the tremulous tones of old Gride's voice, as it feebly chirruped forth the fag end of some forgotten song, of which the burden ran:

Tarantantoo,

Throw the old shoe,

And may the wedding be lucky!

which he repeated, in the same shrill quavering notes, again and again, until a violent fit of coughing obliged him to desist, and to pursue in silence, the occupation upon which he was engaged.

This occupation was, to take down from the shelves of a wormeaten wardrobe a quantity of frouzy garments, one by one; to subject each to a careful and minute inspection by holding it up against the light, and after folding it with great exactness, to lay it on one or other of two little heaps beside him. He never took two articles of clothing out together, but always brought them forth, singly, and never failed to shut the wardrobe door, and turn the key, between each visit to its shelves.

'The snuffcoloured suit,' said Arthur Gride, surveying a threadbare coat. 'Did I look well in snuffcolour? Let me think.'

The result of his cogitations appeared to be unfavourable, for he folded the garment once more, laid it aside, and mounted on a chair to get down another, chirping while he did so:

Young, loving, and fair,

Oh what happiness there!

The wedding is sure to be lucky!

'They always put in "young,"' said old Arthur, 'but songs are only written for the sake of rhyme, and this is a silly one that the poor countrypeople sang, when I was a little boy. Though stopyoung is quite right tooit means the brideyes. He, he, he! It means the bride. Oh dear, that's good. That's very good. And true besides, quite true!'

In the satisfaction of this discovery, he went over the verse again, with increased expression, and a shake or two here and there. He then resumed his employment.

'The bottlegreen,' said old Arthur; 'the bottlegreen was a famous suit to wear, and I bought it very cheap at a pawnbroker's, and there washe, he, he!a tarnished shilling in the waistcoat pocket. To think that the pawnbroker shouldn't have known there was a shilling in it! I knew it! I felt it when I was examining the quality. Oh, what a dull dog of a pawnbroker! It was a lucky suit too, this bottlegreen. The very day I put it on first, old Lord Mallowford was burnt to death in his bed, and all the postobits fell in. I'll be married in the bottlegreen. Peg. Peg SliderskewI'll wear the bottlegreen!'

This call, loudly repeated twice or thrice at the roomdoor, brought into the apartment a short, thin, weasen, bleareyed old woman, palsystricken and hideously ugly, who, wiping her shrivelled face upon her dirty apron, inquired, in that subdued tone in which deaf people commonly speak:

'Was that you a calling, or only the clock a striking? My hearing gets so bad, I never know which is which; but when I hear a noise, I know it must be one of you, because nothing else never stirs in the house.'

'Me, Peg, me,' said Arthur Gride, tapping himself on the breast to render the reply more intelligible.

'You, eh?' returned Peg. 'And what do YOU want?'

'I'll be married in the bottlegreen,' cried Arthur Gride.

'It's a deal too good to be married in, master,' rejoined Peg, after a short inspection of the suit. 'Haven't you got anything worse than this?'

'Nothing that'll do,' replied old Arthur.

'Why not do?' retorted Peg. 'Why don't you wear your everyday clothes, like a maneh?'

'They an't becoming enough, Peg,' returned her master.

'Not what enough?' said Peg.

'Becoming.'

'Becoming what?' said Peg, sharply. 'Not becoming too old to wear?'

Arthur Gride muttered an imprecation on his housekeeper's deafness, as he roared in her ear:

'Not smart enough! I want to look as well as I can.'

'Look?' cried Peg. 'If she's as handsome as you say she is, she won't look much at you, master, take your oath of that; and as to how you look yourselfpepperandsalt, bottlegreen, skyblue, or tartanplaid will make no difference in you.'

With which consolatory assurance, Peg Sliderskew gathered up the chosen suit, and folding her skinny arms upon the bundle, stood, mouthing, and grinning, and blinking her watery eyes, like an uncouth figure in some monstrous piece of carving.

'You're in a funny humour, an't you, Peg?' said Arthur, with not the best possible grace.

'Why, isn't it enough to make me?' rejoined the old woman. 'I shall, soon enough, be put out, though, if anybody tries to domineer it over me: and so I give you notice, master. Nobody shall be put over Peg Sliderskew's head, after so many years; you know that, and so I needn't tell you! That won't do for meno, no, nor for you. Try that once, and come to ruinruinruin!'

'Oh dear, dear, I shall never try it,' said Arthur Gride, appalled by the mention of the word, 'not for the world. It would be very easy to ruin me; we must be very careful; more saving than ever, with another mouth to feed. Only wewe mustn't let her lose her good looks, Peg, because I like to see 'em.'

'Take care you don't find good looks come expensive,' returned Peg, shaking her forefinger.

'But she can earn money herself, Peg,' said Arthur Gride, eagerly watching what effect his communication produced upon the old woman's countenance: 'she can draw, paint, work all manner of pretty things for ornamenting stools and chairs: slippers, Peg, watchguards, hairchains, and a thousand little dainty trifles that I couldn't give you half the names of. Then she can play the piano, (and, what's more, she's got one), and sing like a little bird. She'll be very cheap to dress and keep, Peg; don't you think she will?'

'If you don't let her make a fool of you, she may,' returned Peg.

'A fool of ME!' exclaimed Arthur. 'Trust your old master not to be fooled by pretty faces, Peg; no, no, nonor by ugly ones neither, Mrs Sliderskew,' he softly added by way of soliloquy.

'You're a saying something you don't want me to hear,' said Peg; 'I know you are.'

'Oh dear! the devil's in this woman,' muttered Arthur; adding with an ugly leer, 'I said I trusted everything to you, Peg. That was all.'

'You do that, master, and all your cares are over,' said Peg approvingly.

'WHEN I do that, Peg Sliderskew,' thought Arthur Gride, 'they will be.'

Although he thought this very distinctly, he durst not move his lips lest the old woman should detect him. He even seemed half afraid that she might have read his thoughts; for he leered coaxingly upon her, as he said aloud:

'Take up all loose stitches in the bottlegreen with the best black silk. Have a skein of the best, and some new buttons for the coat, andthis is a good idea, Peg, and one you'll like, I knowas I have never given her anything yet, and girls like such attentions, you shall polish up a sparking necklace that I have got upstairs, and I'll give it her upon the wedding morningclasp it round her charming little neck myselfand take it away again next day. He, he, he! I'll lock it up for her, Peg, and lose it. Who'll be made the fool of there, I wonder, to begin witheh, Peg?'

Mrs Sliderskew appeared to approve highly of this ingenious scheme, and expressed her satisfaction by various rackings and twitchings of her head and body, which by no means enhanced her charms. These she prolonged until she had hobbled to the door, when she exchanged them for a sour malignant look, and twisting her underjaw from side to side, muttered hearty curses upon the future Mrs Gride, as she crept slowly down the stairs, and paused for breath at

nearly every one.

'She's half a witch, I think,' said Arthur Gride, when he found himself again alone. 'But she's very frugal, and she's very deaf. Her living costs me next to nothing; and it's no use her listening at keyholes; for she can't hear. She's a charming womanfor the purpose; a most discreet old housekeeper, and worth her weight incopper.'

Having extolled the merits of his domestic in these high terms, old Arthur went back to the burden of his song. The suit destined to grace his approaching nuptials being now selected, he replaced the others with no less care than he had displayed in drawing them from the musty nooks where they had silently reposed for many years.

Startled by a ring at the door, he hastily concluded this operation, and locked the press; but there was no need for any particular hurry, as the discreet Peg seldom knew the bell was rung unless she happened to cast her dim eyes upwards, and to see it shaking against the kitchen ceiling. After a short delay, however, Peg tottered in, followed by Newman Noggs.

'Ah! Mr Noggs!' cried Arthur Gride, rubbing his hands. 'My good friend, Mr Noggs, what news do you bring for me?'

Newman, with a steadfast and immovable aspect, and his fixed eye very fixed indeed, replied, suiting the action to the word, 'A letter. From Mr Nickleby. Bearer waits.'

'Won't you take aa'

Newman looked up, and smacked his lips.

'A chair?' said Arthur Gride.

'No,' replied Newman. 'Thankee.'

Arthur opened the letter with trembling hands, and devoured its contents with the utmost greediness; chuckling rapturously over it, and reading it several times, before he could take it from before his eyes. So many times did he peruse and reperuse it, that Newman considered it expedient to remind him of his presence.

'Answer,' said Newman. 'Bearer waits.'

'True,' replied old Arthur. 'Yesyes; I almost forgot, I do declare.'

'I thought you were forgetting,' said Newman.

'Quite right to remind me, Mr Noggs. Oh, very right indeed,' said Arthur. 'Yes. I'll write a line. I'mI'mrather flurried, Mr Noggs. The news is'

'Bad?' interrupted Newman.

'No, Mr Noggs, thank you; good, good. The very best of news. Sit down. I'll get the pen and ink, and write a line in answer. I'll not detain you long. I know you're a treasure to your master, Mr Noggs. He speaks of you in such terms, sometimes, that, oh dear! you'd be astonished. I may say that I do too, and always did. I always say the same of you.'

'That's "Curse Mr Noggs with all my heart!" then, if you do,' thought Newman, as Gride hurried out.

The letter had fallen on the ground. Looking carefully about him for an instant, Newman, impelled by curiosity to know the result of the design he had overheard from his office closet, caught it up and rapidly read as follows:

'GRIDE.

'I saw Bray again this morning, and proposed the day after tomorrow (as you suggested) for the marriage. There is no objection on his part, and all days are alike to his daughter. We will go together, and you must be with me by seven in the morning. I need not tell you to be punctual.

'Make no further visits to the girl in the meantime. You have been there, of late, much oftener than you should. She does not languish for you, and it might have been dangerous. Restrain your youthful ardour for eightandforty hours, and leave her to the father. You only undo what he does, and does well.

'Yours,

'RALPH NICKLEBY.'

A footstep was heard without. Newman dropped the letter on the same spot again, pressed it with his foot to prevent its fluttering away, regained his seat in a single stride, and looked as vacant and unconscious as ever mortal looked. Arthur Gride, after peering nervously about him, spied it on the ground, picked it up, and sitting down to write, glanced at Newman Noggs, who was staring at the wall with an intensity so remarkable, that Arthur was quite alarmed.

'Do you see anything particular, Mr Noggs?' said Arthur, trying to follow the direction of Newman's eyeswhich was an impossibility, and a thing no man had ever done.

'Only a cobweb,' replied Newman.

'Oh! is that all?'

'No,' said Newman. 'There's a fly in it.'

'There are a good many cobwebs here,' observed Arthur Gride.

'So there are in our place,' returned Newman; 'and flies too.'

Newman appeared to derive great entertainment from this repartee, and to the great discomposure of Arthur Gride's nerves, produced a series of sharp cracks from his fingerjoints, resembling the noise of a distant discharge of small artillery. Arthur succeeded in finishing his reply to Ralph's note, nevertheless, and at length handed it over to the eccentric messenger for delivery.

'That's it, Mr Noggs,' said Gride.

Newman gave a nod, put it in his hat, and was shuffling away, when Gride, whose doting delight knew no bounds, beckoned him back again, and said, in a shrill whisper, and with a grin which puckered up his whole face, and almost obscured his eyes:

'Will youwill you take a little drop of somethingjust a taste?'

In good fellowship (if Arthur Gride had been capable of it) Newman would not have drunk with him one bubble of the richest wine that was ever made; but to see what he would be at, and to punish him as much as he could, he accepted the offer immediately.

Arthur Gride, therefore, again applied himself to the press, and from a shelf laden with tall Flemish drinkingglasses, and quaint bottles: some with necks like so many storks, and others with square Dutchbuilt bodies and short fat apoplectic throats: took down one dusty bottle of promising appearance, and two glasses of curiously small size.

'You never tasted this,' said Arthur. 'It's EAUD'ORgolden water. I like it on account of its name. It's a delicious name. Water of gold, golden water! O dear me, it seems quite a sin to drink it!'

As his courage appeared to be fast failing him, and he trifled with the stopper in a manner which threatened the dismissal of the bottle to its old place, Newman took up one of the little glasses, and clinked it, twice or thrice, against the bottle, as a gentle reminder that he had not been helped yet. With a deep sigh, Arthur Gride slowly filled itthough not to the brimand then filled his own.

'Stop, stop; don't drink it yet,' he said, laying his hand on Newman's; 'it was given to me, twenty years ago, and when I take a little taste, which is very seldom, I like to think of it beforehand, and tease myself. We'll drink a toast. Shall we drink a toast, Mr Noggs?'

'Ah!' said Newman, eyeing his little glass impatiently. 'Look sharp. Bearer waits.'

'Why, then, I'll tell you what,' tittered Arthur, 'we'll drinkhe, he, he!we'll drink a lady.'

'THE ladies?' said Newman.

'No, no, Mr Noggs,' replied Gride, arresting his hand, 'A lady. You wonder to hear me say A lady. I know you do, I know you do. Here's little Madeline. That's the toast. Mr Noggs. Little Madeline!'

'Madeline!' said Newman; inwardly adding, 'and God help her!'

The rapidity and unconcern with which Newman dismissed his portion of the golden water, had a great effect upon the old man, who sat upright in his chair, and gazed at him, openmouthed, as if the sight had taken away his breath. Quite unmoved, however, Newman left him to sip his own at leisure, or to pour it back again into the bottle, if he chose, and departed; after greatly outraging the dignity of Peg Sliderskew by brushing past her, in the passage, without a word of apology or recognition.

Mr Gride and his housekeeper, immediately on being left alone, resolved themselves into a committee of ways and means, and discussed the arrangements which should be made for the reception of the young bride. As they were, like some other committees, extremely dull and prolix in debate, this history may pursue the footsteps of Newman Noggs; thereby combining advantage with necessity; for it would have been necessary to do so under any circumstances, and necessity has no law, as all the world knows.

'You've been a long time,' said Ralph, when Newman returned.

'HE was a long time,' replied Newman.

'Bah!' cried Ralph impatiently. 'Give me his note, if he gave you one: his message, if he didn't. And don't go away. I want a word with you, sir.'

Newman handed in the note, and looked very virtuous and innocent while his employer broke the seal, and glanced his eye over it.

'He'll be sure to come,' muttered Ralph, as he tore it to pieces; 'why of course,

I know he'll be sure to come. What need to say that? Noggs! Pray, sir, what man was that, with whom I saw you in the street last night?'

'I don't know,' replied Newman.

'You had better refresh your memory, sir,' said Ralph, with a threatening look.

'I tell you,' returned Newman boldly, 'that I don't know. He came here twice, and asked for you. You were out. He came again. You packed him off, yourself. He gave the name of Brooker.'

'I know he did,' said Ralph; 'what then?'

'What then? Why, then he lurked about and dogged me in the street. He follows me, night after night, and urges me to bring him face to face with you; as he says he has been once, and not long ago either. He wants to see you face to face, he says, and you'll soon hear him out, he warrants.'

'And what say you to that?' inquired Ralph, looking keenly at his drudge.

'That it's no business of mine, and I won't. I told him he might catch you in the street, if that was all he wanted, but no! that wouldn't do. You wouldn't hear a word there, he said. He must have you alone in a room with the door locked, where he could speak without fear, and you'd soon change your tone, and hear him patiently.'

'An audacious dog!' Ralph muttered.

'That's all I know,' said Newman. 'I say again, I don't know what man he is. I don't believe he knows himself. You have seen him; perhaps YOU do.'

'I think I do,' replied Ralph.

'Well,' retored Newman, sulkily, 'don't expect me to know him too; that's all. You'll ask me, next, why I never told you this before. What would you say, if I was to tell you all that people say of you? What do you call me when I sometimes do? "Brute, ass!" and snap at me like a dragon.'

This was true enough; though the question which Newman anticipated, was, in fact, upon Ralph's lips at the moment.

'He is an idle ruffian,' said Ralph; 'a vagabond from beyond the sea where he travelled for his crimes; a felon let loose to run his neck into the halter; a swindler, who has the audacity to try his schemes on me who know him well. The next time he tampers with you, hand him over to the police, for attempting to extort money by lies and threats,d'ye hear?and leave the rest to me. He shall cool his heels in jail a little time, and I'll be bound he looks for other folks to

fleece, when he comes out. You mind what I say, do you?'

'I hear,' said Newman.

'Do it then,' returned Ralph, 'and I'll reward you. Now, you may go.'

Newman readily availed himself of the permission, and, shutting himself up in his little office, remained there, in very serious cogitation, all day. When he was released at night, he proceeded, with all the expedition he could use, to the city, and took up his old position behind the pump, to watch for Nicholas. For Newman Noggs was proud in his way, and could not bear to appear as his friend, before the brothers Cheeryble, in the shabby and degraded state to which he was reduced.

He had not occupied this position many minutes, when he was rejoiced to see Nicholas approaching, and darted out from his ambuscade to meet him. Nicholas, on his part, was no less pleased to encounter his friend, whom he had not seen for some time; so, their greeting was a warm one.

'I was thinking of you, at that moment,' said Nicholas.

'That's right,' rejoined Newman, 'and I of you. I couldn't help coming up, tonight. I say, I think I am going to find out something.'

'And what may that be?' returned Nicholas, smiling at this odd communication.

'I don't know what it may be, I don't know what it may not be,' said Newman; 'it's some secret in which your uncle is concerned, but what, I've not yet been able to discover, although I have my strong suspicions. I'll not hint 'em now, in case you should be disappointed.'

'I disappointed!' cried Nicholas; 'am I interested?'

'I think you are,' replied Newman. 'I have a crotchet in my head that it must be so. I have found out a man, who plainly knows more than he cares to tell at once. And he has already dropped such hints to me as puzzle meI say, as puzzle me,' said Newman, scratching his red nose into a state of violent inflammation, and staring at Nicholas with all his might and main meanwhile.

Admiring what could have wound his friend up to such a pitch of mystery, Nicholas endeavoured, by a series of questions, to elucidate the cause; but in vain. Newman could not be drawn into any more explicit statement than a repetition of the perplexities he had already thrown out, and a confused oration, showing, How it was necessary to use the utmost caution; how the lynxeyed Ralph had already seen him in company with his unknown

correspondent; and how he had baffled the said Ralph by extreme guardedness of manner and ingenuity of speech; having prepared himself for such a contingency from the first.

Remembering his companion's propensity,of which his nose, indeed, perpetually warned all beholders like a beacon,Nicholas had drawn him into a sequestered tavern. Here, they fell to reviewing the origin and progress of their acquaintance, as men sometimes do, and tracing out the little events by which it was most strongly marked, came at last to Miss Cecilia Bobster.

'And that reminds me,' said Newman, 'that you never told me the young lady's real name.'

'Madeline!' said Nicholas.

'Madeline!' cried Newman. 'What Madeline? Her other name. Say her other name.'

'Bray,' said Nicholas, in great astonishment.

'It's the same!' cried Newman. 'Sad story! Can you stand idly by, and let that unnatural marriage take place without one attempt to save her?'

'What do you mean?' exclaimed Nicholas, starting up; 'marriage! are you mad?'

'Are you? Is she? Are you blind, deaf, senseless, dead?' said Newman. 'Do you know that within one day, by means of your uncle Ralph, she will be married to a man as bad as he, and worse, if worse there is? Do you know that, within one day, she will be sacrificed, as sure as you stand there alive, to a hoary wretcha devil born and bred, and grey in devils' ways?'

'Be careful what you say,' replied Nicholas. 'For Heaven's sake be careful! I am left here alone, and those who could stretch out a hand to rescue her are far away. What is it that you mean?'

'I never heard her name,' said Newman, choking with his energy. 'Why didn't you tell me? How was I to know? We might, at least, have had some time to think!'

'What is it that you mean?' cried Nicholas.

It was not an easy task to arrive at this information; but, after a great quantity of extraordinary pantomime, which in no way assisted it, Nicholas, who was almost as wild as Newman Noggs himself, forced the latter down upon his seat and held him down until he began his tale.

Rage, astonishment, indignation, and a storm of passions, rushed through the listener's heart, as the plot was laid bare. He no sooner understood it all, than with a face of ashy paleness, and trembling in every limb, he darted from the house.

'Stop him!' cried Newman, bolting out in pursuit. 'He'll be doing something desperate; he'll murder somebody. Hallo! there, stop him. Stop thief! stop thief!'

CHAPTER 52

Nicholas despairs of rescuing Madeline Bray, but plucks up his Spirits again, and determines to attempt it. Domestic Intelligence of the Kenwigses and Lillyvicks

Finding that Newman was determined to arrest his progress at any hazard, and apprehensive that some wellintentioned passenger, attracted by the cry of 'Stop thief,' might lay violent hands upon his person, and place him in a disagreeable predicament from which he might have some difficulty in extricating himself, Nicholas soon slackened his pace, and suffered Newman Noggs to come up with him: which he did, in so breathless a condition, that it seemed impossible he could have held out for a minute longer.

'I will go straight to Bray's,' said Nicholas. 'I will see this man. If there is a feeling of humanity lingering in his breast, a spark of consideration for his own child, motherless and friendless as she is, I will awaken it.'

'You will not,' replied Newman. 'You will not, indeed.'

'Then,' said Nicholas, pressing onward, 'I will act upon my first impulse, and go straight to Ralph Nickleby.'

'By the time you reach his house he will be in bed,' said Newman.

'I'll drag him from it,' cried Nicholas.

'Tut, tut,' said Noggs. 'Be yourself.'

'You are the best of friends to me, Newman,' rejoined Nicholas after a pause, and taking his hand as he spoke. 'I have made head against many trials; but the misery of another, and such misery, is involved in this one, that I declare to you I am rendered desperate, and know not how to act.'

In truth, it did seem a hopeless case. It was impossible to make any use of such intelligence as Newman Noggs had gleaned, when he lay concealed in the closet. The mere circumstance of the compact between Ralph Nickleby and Gride would not invalidate the marriage, or render Bray averse to it, who, if he did not actually know of the existence of some such understanding, doubtless suspected it. What had been hinted with reference to some fraud on Madeline, had been put, with sufficient obscurity by Arthur Gride, but coming from Newman Noggs, and obscured still further by the smoke of his pocketpistol, it became wholly unintelligible, and involved in utter darkness.

'There seems no ray of hope,' said Nicholas.

'The greater necessity for coolness, for reason, for consideration, for thought,' said Newman, pausing at every alternate word, to look anxiously in his friend's face. 'Where are the brothers?'

'Both absent on urgent business, as they will be for a week to come.'

'Is there no way of communicating with them? No way of getting one of them here by tomorrow night?'

'Impossible!' said Nicholas, 'the sea is between us and them. With the fairest winds that ever blew, to go and return would take three days and nights.'

'Their nephew,' said Newman, 'their old clerk.'

'What could either do, that I cannot?' rejoined Nicholas. 'With reference to them, especially, I am enjoined to the strictest silence on this subject. What right have I to betray the confidence reposed in me, when nothing but a miracle can prevent this sacrifice?'

'Think,' urged Newman. 'Is there no way.'

'There is none,' said Nicholas, in utter dejection. 'Not one. The father urges, the daughter consents. These demons have her in their toils; legal right, might, power, money, and every influence are on their side. How can I hope to save her?'

'Hope to the last!' said Newman, clapping him on the back. 'Always hope; that's a dear boy. Never leave off hoping; it don't answer. Do you mind me, Nick? It don't answer. Don't leave a stone unturned. It's always something, to know you've done the most you could. But, don't leave off hoping, or it's of no use doing anything. Hope, hope, to the last!'

Nicholas needed encouragement. The suddenness with which intelligence of the two usurers' plans had come upon him, the little time which remained for

exertion, the probability, almost amounting to certainty itself, that a few hours would place Madeline Bray for ever beyond his reach, consign her to unspeakable misery, and perhaps to an untimely death; all this quite stunned and overwhelmed him. Every hope connected with her that he had suffered himself to form, or had entertained unconsciously, seemed to fall at his feet, withered and dead. Every charm with which his memory or imagination had surrounded her, presented itself before him, only to heighten his anguish and add new bitterness to his despair. Every feeling of sympathy for her forlorn condition, and of admiration for her heroism and fortitude, aggravated the indignation which shook him in every limb, and swelled his heart almost to bursting.

But, if Nicholas's own heart embarrassed him, Newman's came to his relief. There was so much earnestness in his remonstrance, and such sincerity and fervour in his manner, odd and ludicrous as it always was, that it imparted to Nicholas new firmness, and enabled him to say, after he had walked on for some little way in silence:

'You read me a good lesson, Newman, and I will profit by it. One step, at least, I may takeam bound to take indeedand to that I will apply myself tomorrow.'

'What is that?' asked Noggs wistfully. 'Not to threaten Ralph? Not to see the father?'

'To see the daughter, Newman,' replied Nicholas. 'To do what, after all, is the utmost that the brothers could do, if they were here, as Heaven send they were! To reason with her upon this hideous union, to point out to her all the horrors to which she is hastening; rashly, it may be, and without due reflection. To entreat her, at least, to pause. She can have had no counsellor for her good. Perhaps even I may move her so far yet, though it is the eleventh hour, and she upon the very brink of ruin.'

'Bravely spoken!' said Newman. 'Well done, well done! Yes. Very good.'

'And I do declare,' cried Nicholas, with honest enthusiasm, 'that in this effort I am influenced by no selfish or personal considerations, but by pity for her, and detestation and abhorrence of this scheme; and that I would do the same, were there twenty rivals in the field, and I the last and least favoured of them all.'

'You would, I believe,' said Newman. 'But where are you hurrying now?'

'Homewards,' answered Nicholas. 'Do you come with me, or I shall say goodnight?'

'I'll come a little way, if you will but walk: not run,' said Noggs.

'I cannot walk tonight, Newman,' returned Nicholas, hurriedly. 'I must move rapidly, or I could not draw my breath. I'll tell you what I've said and done tomorrow.'

Without waiting for a reply, he darted off at a rapid pace, and, plunging into the crowds which thronged the street, was quickly lost to view.

'He's a violent youth at times,' said Newman, looking after him; 'and yet like him for it. There's cause enough now, or the deuce is in it. Hope! I SAID hope, I think! Ralph Nickleby and Gride with their heads together! And hope for the opposite party! Ho! ho!'

It was with a very melancholy laugh that Newman Noggs concluded this soliloquy; and it was with a very melancholy shake of the head, and a very rueful countenance, that he turned about, and went plodding on his way.

This, under ordinary circumstances, would have been to some small tavern or dramshop; that being his way, in more senses than one. But, Newman was too much interested, and too anxious, to betake himself even to this resource, and so, with many desponding and dismal reflections, went straight home.

It had come to pass, that afternoon, that Miss Morleena Kenwigs had received an invitation to repair next day, per steamer from Westminster Bridge, unto the Eelpie Island at Twickenham: there to make merry upon a cold collation, bottled beer, shrub, and shrimps, and to dance in the open air to the music of a locomotive band, conveyed thither for the purpose: the steamer being specially engaged by a dancingmaster of extensive connection for the accommodation of his numerous pupils, and the pupils displaying their appreciation of the dancingmaster's services, by purchasing themselves, and inducing their friends to do the like, divers lightblue tickets, entitling them to join the expedition. Of these lightblue tickets, one had been presented by an ambitious neighbour to Miss Morleena Kenwigs, with an invitation to join her daughters; and Mrs Kenwigs, rightly deeming that the honour of the family was involved in Miss Morleena's making the most splendid appearance possible on so short a notice, and testifying to the dancingmaster that there were other dancingmasters besides him, and to all fathers and mothers present that other people's children could learn to be genteel besides theirs, had fainted away twice under the magnitude of her preparations, but, upheld by a determination to sustain the family name or perish in the attempt, was still hard at work when Newman Noggs came home.

Now, between the italianironing of frills, the flouncing of trousers, the trimming of frocks, the faintings and the comingsto again, incidental to the occasion, Mrs Kenwigs had been so entirely occupied, that she had not

observed, until within half an hour before, that the flaxen tails of Miss Morleena's hair were, in a manner, run to seed; and that, unless she were put under the hands of a skilful hairdresser, she never could achieve that signal triumph over the daughters of all other people, anything less than which would be tantamount to defeat. This discovery drove Mrs Kenwigs to despair; for the hairdresser lived three streets and eight dangerous crossings off; Morleena could not be trusted to go there alone, even if such a proceeding were strictly proper: of which Mrs Kenwigs had her doubts; Mr Kenwigs had not returned from business; and there was nobody to take her. So, Mrs Kenwigs first slapped Miss Kenwigs for being the cause of her vexation, and then shed tears.

'You ungrateful child!' said Mrs Kenwigs, 'after I have gone through what I have, this night, for your good.'

'I can't help it, ma,' replied Morleena, also in tears; 'my hair WILL grow.'

'Don't talk to me, you naughty thing!' said Mrs Kenwigs, 'don't! Even if I was to trust you by yourself and you were to escape being run over, I know you'd run in to Laura Chopkins,' who was the daughter of the ambitious neighbour, 'and tell her what you're going to wear tomorrow, I know you would. You've no proper pride in yourself, and are not to be trusted out of sight for an instant.'

Deploring the evilmindedness of her eldest daughter in these terms, Mrs Kenwigs distilled fresh drops of vexation from her eyes, and declared that she did believe there never was anybody so tried as she was. Thereupon, Morleena Kenwigs wept afresh, and they bemoaned themselves together.

Matters were at this point, as Newman Noggs was heard to limp past the door on his way upstairs; when Mrs Kenwigs, gaining new hope from the sound of his footsteps, hastily removed from her countenance as many traces of her late emotion as were effaceable on so short a notice: and presenting herself before him, and representing their dilemma, entreated that he would escort Morleena to the hairdresser's shop.

'I wouldn't ask you, Mr Noggs,' said Mrs Kenwigs, 'if I didn't know what a good, kindhearted creature you are; no, not for worlds. I am a weak constitution, Mr Noggs, but my spirit would no more let me ask a favour where I thought there was a chance of its being refused, than it would let me submit to see my children trampled down and trod upon, by envy and lowness!'

Newman was too goodnatured not to have consented, even without this avowal of confidence on the part of Mrs Kenwigs. Accordingly, a very few minutes had elapsed, when he and Miss Morleena were on their way to the

hairdresser's.

It was not exactly a hairdresser's; that is to say, people of a coarse and vulgar turn of mind might have called it a barber's; for they not only cut and curled ladies elegantly, and children carefully, but shaved gentlemen easily. Still, it was a highly genteel establishmentquite firstrate in factand there were displayed in the window, besides other elegancies, waxen busts of a light lady and a dark gentleman which were the admiration of the whole neighbourhood. Indeed, some ladies had gone so far as to assert, that the dark gentleman was actually a portrait of the spirted young proprietor; and the great similarity between their headdressesboth wore very glossy hair, with a narrow walk straight down the middle, and a profusion of flat circular curls on both sidesencouraged the idea. The better informed among the sex, however, made light of this assertion, for however willing they were (and they were very willing) to do full justice to the handsome face and figure of the proprietor, they held the countenance of the dark gentleman in the window to be an exquisite and abstract idea of masculine beauty, realised sometimes, perhaps, among angels and military men, but very rarely embodied to gladden the eyes of mortals.

It was to this establishment that Newman Noggs led Miss Kenwigs in safety. The proprietor, knowing that Miss Kenwigs had three sisters, each with two flaxen tails, and all good for sixpence apiece, once a month at least, promptly deserted an old gentleman whom he had just lathered for shaving, and handing him over to the journeyman, (who was not very popular among the ladies, by reason of his obesity and middle age,) waited on the young lady himself.

Just as this change had been effected, there presented himself for shaving, a big, burly, goodhumoured coalheaver with a pipe in his mouth, who, drawing his hand across his chin, requested to know when a shaver would be disengaged.

The journeyman, to whom this question was put, looked doubtfully at the young proprietor, and the young proprietor looked scornfully at the coalheaver: observing at the same time:

'You won't get shaved here, my man.'

'Why not?' said the coalheaver.

'We don't shave gentlemen in your line,' remarked the young proprietor.

'Why, I see you a shaving of a baker, when I was a looking through the winder, last week,' said the coalheaver.

'It's necessary to draw the line somewheres, my fine feller,' replied the principal. 'We draw the line there. We can't go beyond bakers. If we was to get any lower than bakers, our customers would desert us, and we might shut up shop. You must try some other establishment, sir. We couldn't do it here.'

The applicant stared; grinned at Newman Noggs, who appeared highly entertained; looked slightly round the shop, as if in depreciation of the pomatum pots and other articles of stock; took his pipe out of his mouth and gave a very loud whistle; and then put it in again, and walked out.

The old gentleman who had just been lathered, and who was sitting in a melancholy manner with his face turned towards the wall, appeared quite unconscious of this incident, and to be insensible to everything around him in the depth of a reveriea very mournful one, to judge from the sighs he occasionally ventedin which he was absorbed. Affected by this example, the proprietor began to clip Miss Kenwigs, the journeyman to scrape the old gentleman, and Newman Noggs to read last Sunday's paper, all three in silence: when Miss Kenwigs uttered a shrill little scream, and Newman, raising his eyes, saw that it had been elicited by the circumstance of the old gentleman turning his head, and disclosing the features of Mr Lillyvick the collector.

The features of Mr Lillyvick they were, but strangely altered. If ever an old gentleman had made a point of appearing in public, shaved close and clean, that old gentleman was Mr Lillyvick. If ever a collector had borne himself like a collector, and assumed, before all men, a solemn and portentous dignity as if he had the world on his books and it was all two quarters in arrear, that collector was Mr Lillyvick. And now, there he sat, with the remains of a beard at least a week old encumbering his chin; a soiled and crumpled shirtfrill crouching, as it were, upon his breast, instead of standing boldly out; a demeanour so abashed and drooping, so despondent, and expressive of such humiliation, grief, and shame; that if the souls of forty unsubstantial housekeepers, all of whom had had their water cut off for nonpayment of the rate, could have been concentrated in one body, that one body could hardly have expressed such mortification and defeat as were now expressed in the person of Mr Lillyvick the collector.

Newman Noggs uttered his name, and Mr Lillyvick groaned: then coughed to hide it. But the groan was a fullsized groan, and the cough was but a wheeze.

'Is anything the matter?' said Newman Noggs.

'Matter, sir!' cried Mr Lillyvick. 'The plug of life is dry, sir, and but the mud is left.'

This speechthe style of which Newman attributed to Mr Lillyvick's recent association with theatrical charactersnot being quite explanatory, Newman looked as if he were about to ask another question, when Mr Lillyvick prevented him by shaking his hand mournfully, and then waving his own.

'Let me be shaved!' said Mr Lillyvick. 'It shall be done before Morleena; it IS Morleena, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Newman.

'Kenwigses have got a boy, haven't they?' inquired the collector.

Again Newman said 'Yes.'

'Is it a nice boy?' demanded the collector.

'It ain't a very nasty one,' returned Newman, rather embarrassed by the question.

'Susan Kenwigs used to say,' observed the collector, 'that if ever she had another boy, she hoped it might be like me. Is this one like me, Mr Noggs?'

This was a puzzling inquiry; but Newman evaded it, by replying to Mr Lillyvick, that he thought the baby might possibly come like him in time.

'I should be glad to have somebody like me, somehow,' said Mr Lillyvick, 'before I die.'

'You don't mean to do that, yet awhile?' said Newman.

Unto which Mr Lillyvick replied in a solemn voice, 'Let me be shaved!' and again consigning himself to the hands of the journeyman, said no more.

This was remarkable behaviour. So remarkable did it seem to Miss Morleena, that that young lady, at the imminent hazard of having her ear sliced off, had not been able to forbear looking round, some score of times, during the foregoing colloquy. Of her, however, Mr Lillyvick took no notice: rather striving (so, at least, it seemed to Newman Noggs) to evade her observation, and to shrink into himself whenever he attracted her regards. Newman wondered very much what could have occasioned this altered behaviour on the part of the collector; but, philosophically reflecting that he would most likely know, sooner or later, and that he could perfectly afford to wait, he was very little disturbed by the singularity of the old gentleman's deportment.

The cutting and curling being at last concluded, the old gentleman, who had been some time waiting, rose to go, and, walking out with Newman and his charge, took Newman's arm, and proceeded for some time without making any

observation. Newman, who in power of taciturnity was excelled by few people, made no attempt to break silence; and so they went on, until they had very nearly reached Miss Morleena's home, when Mr Lillyvick said:

'Were the Kenwigses very much overpowered, Mr Noggs, by that news?'

'What news?' returned Newman.

'That aboutmybeing'

'Married?' suggested Newman.

'Ah!' replied Mr Lillyvick, with another groan; this time not even disguised by a wheeze.

'It made ma cry when she knew it,' interposed Miss Morleena, 'but we kept it from her for a long time; and pa was very low in his spirits, but he is better now; and I was very ill, but I am better too.'

'Would you give your greatuncle Lillyvick a kiss if he was to ask you, Morleena?' said the collector, with some hesitation.

'Yes; uncle Lillyvick, I would,' returned Miss Morleena, with the energy of both her parents combined; 'but not aunt Lillyvick. She's not an aunt of mine, and I'll never call her one.'

Immediately upon the utterance of these words, Mr Lillyvick caught Miss Morleena up in his arms, and kissed her; and, being by this time at the door of the house where Mr Kenwigs lodged (which, as has been before mentioned, usually stood wide open), he walked straight up into Mr Kenwigs's sittingroom, and put Miss Morleena down in the midst. Mr and Mrs Kenwigs were at supper. At sight of their perjured relative, Mrs Kenwigs turned faint and pale, and Mr Kenwigs rose majestically.

'Kenwigs,' said the collector, 'shake hands.'

'Sir,' said Mr Kenwigs, 'the time has been, when I was proud to shake hands with such a man as that man as now surweys me. The time has been, sir,' said Mr Kenwigs, 'when a wisit from that man has excited in me and my family's boozums sensations both nateral and awakening. But, now, I look upon that man with emotions totally surpassing everythink, and I ask myself where is his Honour, where is his straightfor'ardness, and where is his human natur?'

'Susan Kenwigs,' said Mr Lillyvick, turning humbly to his niece, 'don't you say anything to me?'

'She is not equal to it, sir,' said Mr Kenwigs, striking the table emphatically.

'What with the nursing of a healthy babby, and the reflections upon your cruel conduct, four pints of malt liquor a day is hardly able to sustain her.'

'I am glad,' said the poor collector meekly, 'that the baby is a healthy one. I am very glad of that.'

This was touching the Kenwigses on their tenderest point. Mrs Kenwigs instantly burst into tears, and Mr Kenwigs evinced great emotion.

'My pleasantest feeling, all the time that child was expected,' said Mr Kenwigs, mournfully, 'was a thinking, "If it's a boy, as I hope it may be; for I have heard its uncle Lillyvick say again and again he would prefer our having a boy next, if it's a boy, what will his uncle Lillyvick say? What will he like him to be called? Will he be Peter, or Alexander, or Pompey, or Diorgeenes, or what will he be?" And now when I look at him; a precious, unconscious, helpless infant, with no use in his little arms but to tear his little cap, and no use in his little legs but to kick his little selfwhen I see him a lying on his mother's lap, cooing and cooing, and, in his innocent state, almost a choking hisself with his little fistwhen I see him such a infant as he is, and think that that uncle Lillyvick, as was once agoing to be so fond of him, has withdrawed himself away, such a feeling of wengeance comes over me as no language can depicter, and I feel as if even that holy babe was a telling me to hate him.'

This affecting picture moved Mrs Kenwigs deeply. After several imperfect words, which vainly attempted to struggle to the surface, but were drowned and washed away by the strong tide of her tears, she spake.

'Uncle,' said Mrs Kenwigs, 'to think that you should have turned your back upon me and my dear children, and upon Kenwigs which is the author of their beingyou who was once so kind and affectionate, and who, if anybody had told us such a thing of, we should have withered with scorn like lightningyou that little Lillyvick, our first and earliest boy, was named after at the very altar! Oh gracious!'

'Was it money that we cared for?' said Mr Kenwigs. 'Was it property that we ever thought of?'

'No,' cried Mrs Kenwigs, 'I scorn it.'

'So do I,' said Mr Kenwigs, 'and always did.'

'My feelings have been lancerated,' said Mrs Kenwigs, 'my heart has been torn asunder with anguish, I have been thrown back in my confinement, my unoffending infant has been rendered uncomfortable and fractious, Morleena has pined herself away to nothing; all this I forget and forgive, and with you,

uncle, I never can quarrel. But never ask me to receive HER, never do it, uncle. For I will not, I will not, I won't, I won't, I won't!'

'Susan, my dear,' said Mr Kenwigs, 'consider your child.'

'Yes,' shrieked Mrs Kenwigs, 'I will consider my child! I will consider my child! My own child, that no uncles can deprive me of; my own hated, despised, deserted, cutoff little child.' And, here, the emotions of Mrs Kenwigs became so violent, that Mr Kenwigs was fain to administer hartshorn internally, and vinegar externally, and to destroy a staylace, four petticoat strings, and several small buttons.

Newman had been a silent spectator of this scene; for Mr Lillyvick had signed to him not to withdraw, and Mr Kenwigs had further solicited his presence by a nod of invitation. When Mrs Kenwigs had been, in some degree, restored, and Newman, as a person possessed of some influence with her, had remonstrated and begged her to compose herself, Mr Lillyvick said in a faltering voice:

'I never shall ask anybody here to receive myI needn't mention the word; you know what I mean. Kenwigs and Susan, yesterday was a week she eloped with a halfpay captain!'

Mr and Mrs Kenwigs started together.

'Eloped with a halfpay captain,' repeated Mr Lillyvick, 'basely and falsely eloped with a halfpay captain. With a bottlenosed captain that any man might have considered himself safe from. It was in this room,' said Mr Lillyvick, looking sternly round, 'that I first see Henrietta Petowker. It is in this room that I turn her off, for ever.'

This declaration completely changed the whole posture of affairs. Mrs Kenwigs threw herself upon the old gentleman's neck, bitterly reproaching herself for her late harshness, and exclaiming, if she had suffered, what must his sufferings have been! Mr Kenwigs grasped his hand, and vowed eternal friendship and remorse. Mrs Kenwigs was horrorstricken to think that she should ever have nourished in her bosom such a snake, adder, viper, serpent, and base crocodile as Henrietta Petowker. Mr Kenwigs argued that she must have been bad indeed not to have improved by so long a contemplation of Mrs Kenwigs's virtue. Mrs Kenwigs remembered that Mr Kenwigs had often said that he was not quite satisfied of the propriety of Miss Petowker's conduct, and wondered how it was that she could have been blinded by such a wretch. Mr Kenwigs remembered that he had had his suspicions, but did not wonder why Mrs Kenwigs had not had hers, as she was all chastity, purity, and truth, and Henrietta all baseness, falsehood, and deceit. And Mr and Mrs Kenwigs both

said, with strong feelings and tears of sympathy, that everything happened for the best; and conjured the good collector not to give way to unavailing grief, but to seek consolation in the society of those affectionate relations whose arms and hearts were ever open to him.

'Out of affection and regard for you, Susan and Kenwigs,' said Mr Lillyvick, 'and not out of revenge and spite against her, for she is below it, I shall, tomorrow morning, settle upon your children, and make payable to the survivors of them when they come of age of marry, that money that I once meant to leave 'em in my will. The deed shall be executed tomorrow, and Mr Noggs shall be one of the witnesses. He hears me promise this, and he shall see it done.'

Overpowered by this noble and generous offer, Mr Kenwigs, Mrs Kenwigs, and Miss Morleena Kenwigs, all began to sob together; and the noise of their sobbing, communicating itself to the next room, where the children lay abed, and causing them to cry too, Mr Kenwigs rushed wildly in, and bringing them out in his arms, by two and two, tumbled them down in their nightcaps and gowns at the feet of Mr Lillyvick, and called upon them to thank and bless him.

'And now,' said Mr Lillyvick, when a heartrending scene had ensued and the children were cleared away again, 'give me some supper. This took place twenty mile from town. I came up this morning, and have being lingering about all day, without being able to make up my mind to come and see you. I humoured her in everything, she had her own way, she did just as she pleased, and now she has done this. There was twelve teaspoons and twentyfour pound in sovereignsI missed them firstit's a trialI feel I shall never be able to knock a double knock again, when I go my roundsdon't say anything more about it, pleasethe spoons were worthnever mindnever mind!'

With such muttered outpourings as these, the old gentleman shed a few tears; but, they got him into the elbowchair, and prevailed upon him, without much pressing, to make a hearty supper, and by the time he had finished his first pipe, and disposed of halfadozen glasses out of a crown bowl of punch, ordered by Mr Kenwigs, in celebration of his return to the bosom of his family, he seemed, though still very humble, quite resigned to his fate, and rather relieved than otherwise by the flight of his wife.

'When I see that man,' said Mr Kenwigs, with one hand round Mrs Kenwigs's waist: his other hand supporting his pipe (which made him wink and cough very much, for he was no smoker): and his eyes on Morleena, who sat upon her uncle's knee, 'when I see that man as mingling, once again, in the spear which he adorns, and see his affections deweloping themselves in legitimate

sitiwations, I feel that his nature is as elewated and expanded, as his standing afore society as a public character is unimpeached, and the woices of my infant children purvided for in life, seem to whisper to me softly, "This is an ewent at which Evins itself looks down!'"

CHAPTER 53

Containing the further Progress of the Plot contrived by Mr Ralph Nickleby and Mr Arthur Gride

With that settled resolution, and steadiness of purpose to which extreme circumstances so often give birth, acting upon far less excitable and more sluggish temperaments than that which was the lot of Madeline Bray's admirer, Nicholas started, at dawn of day, from the restless couch which no sleep had visited on the previous night, and prepared to make that last appeal, by whose slight and fragile thread her only remaining hope of escape depended.

Although, to restless and ardent minds, morning may be the fitting season for exertion and activity, it is not always at that time that hope is strongest or the spirit most sanguine and buoyant. In trying and doubtful positions, youth, custom, a steady contemplation of the difficulties which surround us, and a familiarity with them, imperceptibly diminish our apprehensions and beget comparative indifference, if not a vague and reckless confidence in some relief, the means or nature of which we care not to foresee. But when we come, fresh, upon such things in the morning, with that dark and silent gap between us and yesterday; with every link in the brittle chain of hope, to rivet afresh; our hot enthusiasm subdued, and cool calm reason substituted in its stead; doubt and misgiving revive. As the traveller sees farthest by day, and becomes aware of rugged mountains and trackless plains which the friendly darkness had shrouded from his sight and mind together, so, the wayfarer in the toilsome path of human life sees, with each returning sun, some new obstacle to surmount, some new height to be attained. Distances stretch out before him which, last night, were scarcely taken into account, and the light which gilds all nature with its cheerful beams, seems but to shine upon the weary obstacles that yet lie strewn between him and the grave.

So thought Nicholas, when, with the impatience natural to a situation like his, he softly left the house, and, feeling as though to remain in bed were to lose most precious time, and to be up and stirring were in some way to promote the

end he had in view, wandered into London; perfectly well knowing that for hours to come he could not obtain speech with Madeline, and could do nothing but wish the intervening time away.

And, even now, as he paced the streets, and listlessly looked round on the gradually increasing bustle and preparation for the day, everything appeared to yield him some new occasion for despondency. Last night, the sacrifice of a young, affectionate, and beautiful creature, to such a wretch, and in such a cause, had seemed a thing too monstrous to succeed; and the warmer he grew, the more confident he felt that some interposition must save her from his clutches. But now, when he thought how regularly things went on, from day to day, in the same unvarying round; how youth and beauty died, and ugly griping age lived tottering on; how crafty avarice grew rich, and manly honest hearts were poor and sad; how few they were who tenanted the stately houses, and how many of those who lay in noisome pens, or rose each day and laid them down each night, and lived and died, father and son, mother and child, race upon race, and generation upon generation, without a home to shelter them or the energies of one single man directed to their aid; how, in seeking, not a luxurious and splendid life, but the bare means of a most wretched and inadequate subsistence, there were women and children in that one town, divided into classes, numbered and estimated as regularly as the noble families and folks of great degree, and reared from infancy to drive most criminal and dreadful trades; how ignorance was punished and never taught; how jaildoors gaped, and gallows loomed, for thousands urged towards them by circumstances darkly curtaining their very cradles' heads, and but for which they might have earned their honest bread and lived in peace; how many died in soul, and had no chance of life; how many who could scarcely go astray, be they vicious as they would, turned haughtily from the crushed and stricken wretch who could scarce do otherwise, and who would have been a greater wonder had he or she done well, than even they had they done ill; how much injustice, misery, and wrong, there was, and yet how the world rolled on, from year to year, alike careless and indifferent, and no man seeking to remedy or redress it; when he thought of all this, and selected from the mass the one slight case on which his thoughts were bent, he felt, indeed, that there was little ground for hope, and little reason why it should not form an atom in the huge aggregate of distress and sorrow, and add one small and unimportant unit to swell the great amount.

But youth is not prone to contemplate the darkest side of a picture it can shift at will. By dint of reflecting on what he had to do, and reviving the train of thought which night had interrupted, Nicholas gradually summoned up his utmost energy, and when the morning was sufficiently advanced for his purpose, had no thought but that of using it to the best advantage. A hasty

breakfast taken, and such affairs of business as required prompt attention disposed of, he directed his steps to the residence of Madeline Bray: whither he lost no time in arriving.

It had occurred to him that, very possibly, the young lady might be denied, although to him she never had been; and he was still pondering upon the surest method of obtaining access to her in that case, when, coming to the door of the house, he found it had been left ajarprobably by the last person who had gone out. The occasion was not one upon which to observe the nicest ceremony; therefore, availing himself of this advantage, Nicholas walked gently upstairs and knocked at the door of the room into which he had been accustomed to be shown. Receiving permission to enter, from some person on the other side, he opened the door and walked in.

Bray and his daughter were sitting there alone. It was nearly three weeks since he had seen her last, but there was a change in the lovely girl before him which told Nicholas, in startling terms, how much mental suffering had been compressed into that short time. There are no words which can express, nothing with which can be compared, the perfect pallor, the clear transparent whiteness, of the beautiful face which turned towards him when he entered. Her hair was a rich deep brown, but shading that face, and straying upon a neck that rivalled it in whiteness, it seemed by the strong contrast raven black. Something of wildness and restlessness there was in the dark eye, but there was the same patient look, the same expression of gentle mournfulness which he well remembered, and no trace of a single tear. Most beautifulmore beautiful, perhaps, than everthere was something in her face which quite unmanned him, and appeared far more touching than the wildest agony of grief. It was not merely calm and composed, but fixed and rigid, as though the violent effort which had summoned that composure beneath her father's eye, while it mastered all other thoughts, had prevented even the momentary expression they had communicated to the features from subsiding, and had fastened it there, as an evidence of its triumph.

The father sat opposite to her; not looking directly in her face, but glancing at her, as he talked with a gay air which ill disguised the anxiety of his thoughts. The drawing materials were not on their accustomed table, nor were any of the other tokens of her usual occupations to be seen. The little vases which Nicholas had always seen filled with fresh flowers were empty, or supplied only with a few withered stalks and leaves. The bird was silent. The cloth that covered his cage at night was not removed. His mistress had forgotten him.

There are times when, the mind being painfully alive to receive impressions, a great deal may be noted at a glance. This was one, for Nicholas had but glanced round him when he was recognised by Mr Bray, who said impatiently:

'Now, sir, what do you want? Name your errand here, quickly, if you please, for my daughter and I are busily engaged with other and more important matters than those you come about. Come, sir, address yourself to your business at once.'

Nicholas could very well discern that the irritability and impatience of this speech were assumed, and that Bray, in his heart, was rejoiced at any interruption which promised to engage the attention of his daughter. He bent his eyes involuntarily upon the father as he spoke, and marked his uneasiness; for he coloured and turned his head away.

The device, however, so far as it was a device for causing Madeline to interfere, was successful. She rose, and advancing towards Nicholas paused halfway, and stretched out her hand as expecting a letter.

'Madeline,' said her father impatiently, 'my love, what are you doing?'

'Miss Bray expects an inclosure perhaps,' said Nicholas, speaking very distinctly, and with an emphasis she could scarcely misunderstand. 'My employer is absent from England, or I should have brought a letter with me. I hope she will give me timea little time. I ask a very little time.'

'If that is all you come about, sir,' said Mr Bray, 'you may make yourself easy on that head. Madeline, my dear, I didn't know this person was in your debt?'

'Aa trifle, I believe,' returned Madeline, faintly.

'I suppose you think now,' said Bray, wheeling his chair round and confronting Nicholas, 'that, but for such pitiful sums as you bring here, because my daughter has chosen to employ her time as she has, we should starve?'

'I have not thought about it,' returned Nicholas.

'You have not thought about it!' sneered the invalid. 'You know you HAVE thought about it, and have thought that, and think so every time you come here. Do you suppose, young man, that I don't know what little purseproud tradesmen are, when, through some fortunate circumstances, they get the upper hand for a brief dayor think they get the upper handof a gentleman?'

'My business,' said Nicholas respectfully, 'is with a lady.'

'With a gentleman's daughter, sir,' returned the sick man, 'and the pettifogging spirit is the same. But perhaps you bring ORDERS, eh? Have you any fresh ORDERS for my daughter, sir?'

Nicholas understood the tone of triumph in which this interrogatory was put;

but remembering the necessity of supporting his assumed character, produced a scrap of paper purporting to contain a list of some subjects for drawings which his employer desired to have executed; and with which he had prepared himself in case of any such contingency.

'Oh!' said Mr Bray. 'These are the orders, are they?'

'Since you insist upon the term, sir, yes,' replied Nicholas.

'Then you may tell your master,' said Bray, tossing the paper back again, with an exulting smile, 'that my daughter, Miss Madeline Bray, condescends to employ herself no longer in such labours as these; that she is not at his beck and call, as he supposes her to be; that we don't live upon his money, as he flatters himself we do; that he may give whatever he owes us, to the first beggar that passes his shop, or add it to his own profits next time he calculates them; and that he may go to the devil for me. That's my acknowledgment of his orders, sir!'

'And this is the independence of a man who sells his daughter as he has sold that weeping girl!' thought Nicholas.

The father was too much absorbed with his own exultation to mark the look of scorn which, for an instant, Nicholas could not have suppressed had he been upon the rack. 'There,' he continued, after a short silence, 'you have your message and can retireunless you have any furtherha!any further orders.'

'I have none,' said Nicholas; 'nor, in the consideration of the station you once held, have I used that or any other word which, however harmless in itself, could be supposed to imply authority on my part or dependence on yours. I have no orders, but I have fearsfears that I will express, chafe as you mayfears that you may be consigning that young lady to something worse than supporting you by the labour of her hands, had she worked herself dead. These are my fears, and these fears I found upon your own demeanour. Your conscience will tell you, sir, whether I construe it well or not.'

'For Heaven's sake!' cried Madeline, interposing in alarm between them. 'Remember, sir, he is ill.'

'Ill!' cried the invalid, gasping and catching for breath. 'Ill! Ill! I am bearded and bullied by a shopboy, and she beseeches him to pity me and remember I am ill!'

He fell into a paroxysm of his disorder, so violent that for a few moments Nicholas was alarmed for his life; but finding that he began to recover, he withdrew, after signifying by a gesture to the young lady that he had

something important to communicate, and would wait for her outside the room. He could hear that the sick man came gradually, but slowly, to himself, and that without any reference to what had just occurred, as though he had no distinct recollection of it as yet, he requested to be left alone.

'Oh!' thought Nicholas, 'that this slender chance might not be lost, and that I might prevail, if it were but for one week's time and reconsideration!'

'You are charged with some commission to me, sir,' said Madeline, presenting herself in great agitation. 'Do not press it now, I beg and pray you. The day after tomorrow; come here then.'

'It will be too latetoo late for what I have to say,' rejoined Nicholas, 'and you will not be here. Oh, madam, if you have but one thought of him who sent me here, but one last lingering care for your own peace of mind and heart, I do for God's sake urge you to give me a hearing.'

She attempted to pass him, but Nicholas gently detained her.

'A hearing,' said Nicholas. 'I ask you but to hear me: not me alone, but him for whom I speak, who is far away and does not know your danger. In the name of Heaven hear me!'

The poor attendant, with her eyes swollen and red with weeping, stood by; and to her Nicholas appealed in such passionate terms that she opened a sidedoor, and, supporting her mistress into an adjoining room, beckoned Nicholas to follow them.

'Leave me, sir, pray,' said the young lady.

'I cannot, will not leave you thus,' returned Nicholas. 'I have a duty to discharge; and, either here, or in the room from which we have just now come, at whatever risk or hazard to Mr Bray, I must beseech you to contemplate again the fearful course to which you have been impelled.'

'What course is this you speak of, and impelled by whom, sir?' demanded the young lady, with an effort to speak proudly.

'I speak of this marriage,' returned Nicholas, 'of this marriage, fixed for tomorrow, by one who never faltered in a bad purpose, or lent his aid to any good design; of this marriage, the history of which is known to me, better, far better, than it is to you. I know what web is wound about you. I know what men they are from whom these schemes have come. You are betrayed and sold for money; for gold, whose every coin is rusted with tears, if not red with the blood of ruined men, who have fallen desperately by their own mad hands.'

'You say you have a duty to discharge,' said Madeline, 'and so have I. And with the help of Heaven I will perform it.'

'Say rather with the help of devils,' replied Nicholas, 'with the help of men, one of them your destined husband, who are'

'I must not hear this,' cried the young lady, striving to repress a shudder, occasioned, as it seemed, even by this slight allusion to Arthur Gride. 'This evil, if evil it be, has been of my own seeking. I am impelled to this course by no one, but follow it of my own free will. You see I am not constrained or forced. Report this,' said Madeline, 'to my dear friend and benefactor, and, taking with you my prayers and thanks for him and for yourself, leave me for ever!'

'Not until I have besought you, with all the earnestness and fervour by which I am animated,' cried Nicholas, 'to postpone this marriage for one short week. Not until I have besought you to think more deeply than you can have done, influenced as you are, upon the step you are about to take. Although you cannot be fully conscious of the villainy of this man to whom you are about to give your hand, some of his deeds you know. You have heard him speak, and have looked upon his face. Reflect, reflect, before it is too late, on the mockery of plighting to him at the altar, faith in which your heart can have no shareof uttering solemn words, against which nature and reason must rebelof the degradation of yourself in your own esteem, which must ensue, and must be aggravated every day, as his detested character opens upon you more and more. Shrink from the loathsome companionship of this wretch as you would from corruption and disease. Suffer toil and labour if you will, but shun him, shun him, and be happy. For, believe me, I speak the truth; the most abject poverty, the most wretched condition of human life, with a pure and upright mind, would be happiness to that which you must undergo as the wife of such a man as this!'

Long before Nicholas ceased to speak, the young lady buried her face in her hands, and gave her tears free way. In a voice at first inarticulate with emotion, but gradually recovering strength as she proceeded, she answered him:

'I will not disguise from you, sirthough perhaps I oughtthat I have undergone great pain of mind, and have been nearly brokenhearted since I saw you last. I do NOT love this gentleman. The difference between our ages, tastes, and habits, forbids it. This he knows, and knowing, still offers me his hand. By accepting it, and by that step alone, I can release my father who is dying in this place; prolong his life, perhaps, for many years; restore him to comfortI may almost call it affluence; and relieve a generous man from the burden of assisting one, by whom, I grieve to say, his noble heart is little understood. Do

not think so poorly of me as to believe that I feign a love I do not feel. Do not report so ill of me, for THAT I could not bear. If I cannot, in reason or in nature, love the man who pays this price for my poor hand, I can discharge the duties of a wife: I can be all he seeks in me, and will. He is content to take me as I am. I have passed my word, and should rejoice, not weep, that it is so. I do. The interest you take in one so friendless and forlorn as I, the delicacy with which you have discharged your trust, the faith you have kept with me, have my warmest thanks: and, while I make this last feeble acknowledgment, move me to tears, as you see. But I do not repent, nor am I unhappy. I am happy in the prospect of all I can achieve so easily. I shall be more so when I look back upon it, and all is done, I know.'

'Your tears fall faster as you talk of happiness,' said Nicholas, 'and you shun the contemplation of that dark future which must be laden with so much misery to you. Defer this marriage for a week. For but one week!'

'He was talking, when you came upon us just now, with such smiles as I remember to have seen of old, and have not seen for many and many a day, of the freedom that was to come tomorrow,' said Madeline, with momentary firmness, 'of the welcome change, the fresh air: all the new scenes and objects that would bring fresh life to his exhausted frame. His eye grew bright, and his face lightened at the thought. I will not defer it for an hour.'

'These are but tricks and wiles to urge you on,' cried Nicholas.

'I'll hear no more,' said Madeline, hurriedly; 'I have heard too muchmore than I shouldalready. What I have said to you, sir, I have said as to that dear friend to whom I trust in you honourably to repeat it. Some time hence, when I am more composed and reconciled to my new mode of life, if I should live so long, I will write to him. Meantime, all holy angels shower blessings on his head, and prosper and preserve him.'

She was hurrying past Nicholas, when he threw himself before her, and implored her to think, but once again, upon the fate to which she was precipitately hastening.

'There is no retreat,' said Nicholas, in an agony of supplication; 'no withdrawing! All regret will be unavailing, and deep and bitter it must be. What can I say, that will induce you to pause at this last moment? What can I do to save you?'

'Nothing,' she incoherently replied. 'This is the hardest trial I have had. Have mercy on me, sir, I beseech, and do not pierce my heart with such appeals as these. II hear him calling. IImust not, will not, remain here for another instant.'

'If this were a plot,' said Nicholas, with the same violent rapidity with which she spoke, 'a plot, not yet laid bare by me, but which, with time, I might unravel; if you were (not knowing it) entitled to fortune of your own, which, being recovered, would do all that this marriage can accomplish, would you not retract?'

'No, no, no! It is impossible; it is a child's tale. Time would bring his death. He is calling again!'

'It may be the last time we shall ever meet on earth,' said Nicholas, 'it may be better for me that we should never meet more.'

'For both, for both,' replied Madeline, not heeding what she said. 'The time will come when to recall the memory of this one interview might drive me mad. Be sure to tell them, that you left me calm and happy. And God be with you, sir, and my grateful heart and blessing!'

She was gone. Nicholas, staggering from the house, thought of the hurried scene which had just closed upon him, as if it were the phantom of some wild, unquiet dream. The day wore on; at night, having been enabled in some measure to collect his thoughts, he issued forth again.

That night, being the last of Arthur Gride's bachelorship, found him in tiptop spirits and great glee. The bottlegreen suit had been brushed, ready for the morrow. Peg Sliderskew had rendered the accounts of her past housekeeping; the eighteenpence had been rigidly accounted for (she was never trusted with a larger sum at once, and the accounts were not usually balanced more than twice a day); every preparation had been made for the coming festival; and Arthur might have sat down and contemplated his approaching happiness, but that he preferred sitting down and contemplating the entries in a dirty old vellumbook with rusty clasps.

'Welladay!' he chuckled, as sinking on his knees before a strong chest screwed down to the floor, he thrust in his arm nearly up to the shoulder, and slowly drew forth this greasy volume. 'Welladay now, this is all my library, but it's one of the most entertaining books that were ever written! It's a delightful book, and all true and realthat's the best of ittrue as the Bank of England, and real as its gold and silver. Written by Arthur Gride. He, he, he! None of your storybook writers will ever make as good a book as this, I warrant me. It's composed for private circulation, for my own particular reading, and nobody else's. He, he, he!'

Muttering this soliloquy, Arthur carried his precious volume to the table, and, adjusting it upon a dusty desk, put on his spectacles, and began to pore among the leaves.

'It's a large sum to Mr Nickleby,' he said, in a dolorous voice. 'Debt to be paid in full, nine hundred and seventyfive, four, three. Additional sum as per bond, five hundred pound. One thousand, four hundred and seventyfive pounds, four shillings, and threepence, tomorrow at twelve o'clock. On the other side, though, there's the PER CONTRA, by means of this pretty chick. But, again, there's the question whether I mightn't have brought all this about, myself. "Faint heart never won fair lady." Why was my heart so faint? Why didn't I boldly open it to Bray myself, and save one thousand four hundred and seventyfive, four, three?'

These reflections depressed the old usurer so much, as to wring a feeble groan or two from his breast, and cause him to declare, with uplifted hands, that he would die in a workhouse. Remembering on further cogitation, however, that under any circumstances he must have paid, or handsomely compounded for, Ralph's debt, and being by no means confident that he would have succeeded had he undertaken his enterprise alone, he regained his equanimity, and chattered and mowed over more satisfactory items, until the entrance of Peg Sliderskew interrupted him.

'Aha, Peg!' said Arthur, 'what is it? What is it now, Peg?'

'It's the fowl,' replied Peg, holding up a plate containing a little, a very little one. Quite a phenomenon of a fowl. So very small and skinny.

'A beautiful bird!' said Arthur, after inquiring the price, and finding it proportionate to the size. 'With a rasher of ham, and an egg made into sauce, and potatoes, and greens, and an apple pudding, Peg, and a little bit of cheese, we shall have a dinner for an emperor. There'll only be she and meand you, Peg, when we've done.'

'Don't you complain of the expense afterwards,' said Mrs Sliderskew, sulkily.

'I am afraid we must live expensively for the first week,' returned Arthur, with a groan, 'and then we must make up for it. I won't eat more than I can help, and I know you love your old master too much to eat more than YOU can help, don't you, Peg?'

'Don't I what?' said Peg.

'Love your old master too much'

'No, not a bit too much,' said Peg.

'Oh, dear, I wish the devil had this woman!' cried Arthur: 'love him too much to eat more than you can help at his expense.'

'At his what?' said Peg.

'Oh dear! she can never hear the most important word, and hears all the others!' whined Gride. 'At his expenseyou catamaran!'

The lastmentioned tribute to the charms of Mrs Sliderskew being uttered in a whisper, that lady assented to the general proposition by a harsh growl, which was accompanied by a ring at the streetdoor.

'There's the bell,' said Arthur.

'Ay, ay; I know that,' rejoined Peg.

'Then why don't you go?' bawled Arthur.

'Go where?' retorted Peg. 'I ain't doing any harm here, am I?'

Arthur Gride in reply repeated the word 'bell' as loud as he could roar; and, his meaning being rendered further intelligible to Mrs Sliderskew's dull sense of hearing by pantomime expressive of ringing at a streetdoor, Peg hobbled out, after sharply demanding why he hadn't said there was a ring before, instead of talking about all manner of things that had nothing to do with it, and keeping her halfpint of beer waiting on the steps.

'There's a change come over you, Mrs Peg,' said Arthur, following her out with his eyes. 'What it means I don't quite know; but, if it lasts, we shan't agree together long I see. You are turning crazy, I think. If you are, you must take yourself off, Mrs Pegor be taken off. All's one to me.' Turning over the leaves of his book as he muttered this, he soon lighted upon something which attracted his attention, and forgot Peg Sliderskew and everything else in the engrossing interest of its pages.

The room had no other light than that which it derived from a dim and dirtclogged lamp, whose lazy wick, being still further obscured by a dark shade, cast its feeble rays over a very little space, and left all beyond in heavy shadow. This lamp the moneylender had drawn so close to him, that there was only room between it and himself for the book over which he bent; and as he sat, with his elbows on the desk, and his sharp cheekbones resting on his hands, it only served to bring out his ugly features in strong relief, together with the little table at which he sat, and to shroud all the rest of the chamber in a deep sullen gloom. Raising his eyes, and looking vacantly into this gloom as he made some mental calculation, Arthur Gride suddenly met the fixed gaze of a man.

'Thieves! thieves!' shrieked the usurer, starting up and folding his book to his breast. 'Robbers! Murder!'

'What is the matter?' said the form, advancing.

'Keep off!' cried the trembling wretch. 'Is it a man or aa'

'For what do you take me, if not for a man?' was the inquiry.

'Yes, yes,' cried Arthur Gride, shading his eyes with his hand, 'it is a man, and not a spirit. It is a man. Robbers! robbers!'

'For what are these cries raised? Unless indeed you know me, and have some purpose in your brain?' said the stranger, coming close up to him. 'I am no thief.'

'What then, and how come you here?' cried Gride, somewhat reassured, but still retreating from his visitor: 'what is your name, and what do you want?'

'My name you need not know,' was the reply. 'I came here, because I was shown the way by your servant. I have addressed you twice or thrice, but you were too profoundly engaged with your book to hear me, and I have been silently waiting until you should be less abstracted. What I want I will tell you, when you can summon up courage enough to hear and understand me.'

Arthur Gride, venturing to regard his visitor more attentively, and perceiving that he was a young man of good mien and bearing, returned to his seat, and muttering that there were bad characters about, and that this, with former attempts upon his house, had made him nervous, requested his visitor to sit down. This, however, he declined.

'Good God! I don't stand up to have you at an advantage,' said Nicholas (for Nicholas it was), as he observed a gesture of alarm on the part of Gride. 'Listen to me. You are to be married tomorrow morning.'

'Nnno,' rejoined Gride. 'Who said I was? How do you know that?'

'No matter how,' replied Nicholas, 'I know it. The young lady who is to give you her hand hates and despises you. Her blood runs cold at the mention of your name; the vulture and the lamb, the rat and the dove, could not be worse matched than you and she. You see I know her.'

Gride looked at him as if he were petrified with astonishment, but did not speak; perhaps lacking the power.

'You and another man, Ralph Nickleby by name, have hatched this plot between you,' pursued Nicholas. 'You pay him for his share in bringing about this sale of Madeline Bray. You do. A lie is trembling on your lips, I see.'

He paused; but, Arthur making no reply, resumed again.

'You pay yourself by defrauding her. How or by what meansfor I scorn to sully her cause by falsehood or deceitI do not know; at present I do not know, but I am not alone or singlehanded in this business. If the energy of man can compass the discovery of your fraud and treachery before your death; if wealth, revenge, and just hatred, can hunt and track you through your windings; you will yet be called to a dear account for this. We are on the scent already; judge you, who know what we do not, when we shall have you down!'

He paused again, and still Arthur Gride glared upon him in silence.

'If you were a man to whom I could appeal with any hope of touching his compassion or humanity,' said Nicholas, 'I would urge upon you to remember the helplessness, the innocence, the youth, of this lady; her worth and beauty, her filial excellence, and last, and more than all, as concerning you more nearly, the appeal she has made to your mercy and your manly feeling. But, I take the only ground that can be taken with men like you, and ask what money will buy you off. Remember the danger to which you are exposed. You see I know enough to know much more with very little help. Bate some expected gain for the risk you save, and say what is your price.'

Old Arthur Gride moved his lips, but they only formed an ugly smile and were motionless again.

'You think,' said Nicholas, 'that the price would not be paid. Miss Bray has wealthy friends who would coin their very hearts to save her in such a strait as this. Name your price, defer these nuptials for but a few days, and see whether those I speak of, shrink from the payment. Do you hear me?'

When Nicholas began, Arthur Gride's impression was, that Ralph Nickleby had betrayed him; but, as he proceeded, he felt convinced that however he had come by the knowledge he possessed, the part he acted was a genuine one, and that with Ralph he had no concern. All he seemed to know, for certain, was, that he, Gride, paid Ralph's debt; but that, to anybody who knew the circumstances of Bray's detentioneven to Bray himself, on Ralph's own statementmust be perfectly notorious. As to the fraud on Madeline herself, his visitor knew so little about its nature or extent, that it might be a lucky guess, or a haphazard accusation. Whether or no, he had clearly no key to the mystery, and could not hurt him who kept it close within his own breast. The allusion to friends, and the offer of money, Gride held to be mere empty vapouring, for purposes of delay. 'And even if money were to be had,' thought Arthur Gride, as he glanced at Nicholas, and trembled with passion at his boldness and audacity, 'I'd have that dainty chick for my wife, and cheat YOU of her, young smoothface!'

Long habit of weighing and noting well what clients said, and nicely balancing chances in his mind and calculating odds to their faces, without the least appearance of being so engaged, had rendered Gride quick in forming conclusions, and arriving, from puzzling, intricate, and often contradictory premises, at very cunning deductions. Hence it was that, as Nicholas went on, he followed him closely with his own constructions, and, when he ceased to speak, was as well prepared as if he had deliberated for a fortnight.

'I hear you,' he cried, starting from his seat, casting back the fastenings of the windowshutters, and throwing up the sash. 'Help here! Help! Help!'

'What are you doing?' said Nicholas, seizing him by the arm.

'I'll cry robbers, thieves, murder, alarm the neighbourhood, struggle with you, let loose some blood, and swear you came to rob me, if you don't quit my house,' replied Gride, drawing in his head with a frightful grin, 'I will!'

'Wretch!' cried Nicholas.

'YOU'LL bring your threats here, will you?' said Gride, whom jealousy of Nicholas and a sense of his own triumph had converted into a perfect fiend. 'You, the disappointed lover? Oh dear! He! he! he! But you shan't have her, nor she you. She's my wife, my doting little wife. Do you think she'll miss you? Do you think she'll weep? I shall like to see her weep, I shan't mind it. She looks prettier in tears.'

'Villain!' said Nicholas, choking with his rage.

'One minute more,' cried Arthur Gride, 'and I'll rouse the street with such screams, as, if they were raised by anybody else, should wake me even in the arms of pretty Madeline.'

'You hound!' said Nicholas. 'If you were but a younger man'

'Oh yes!' sneered Arthur Gride, 'If I was but a younger man it wouldn't be so bad; but for me, so old and ugly! To be jilted by little Madeline for me!'

'Hear me,' said Nicholas, 'and be thankful I have enough command over myself not to fling you into the street, which no aid could prevent my doing if I once grappled with you. I have been no lover of this lady's. No contract or engagement, no word of love, has ever passed between us. She does not even know my name.'

'I'll ask it for all that. I'll beg it of her with kisses,' said Arthur Gride. 'Yes, and she'll tell me, and pay them back, and we'll laugh together, and hug ourselves, and be very merry, when we think of the poor youth that wanted to have her,

but couldn't because she was bespoke by me!'

This taunt brought such an expression into the face of Nicholas, that Arthur Gride plainly apprehended it to be the forerunner of his putting his threat of throwing him into the street in immediate execution; for he thrust his head out of the window, and holding tight on with both hands, raised a pretty brisk alarm. Not thinking it necessary to abide the issue of the noise, Nicholas gave vent to an indignant defiance, and stalked from the room and from the house. Arthur Gride watched him across the street, and then, drawing in his head, fastened the window as before, and sat down to take breath.

'If she ever turns pettish or illhumoured, I'll taunt her with that spark,' he said, when he had recovered. 'She'll little think I know about him; and, if I manage it well, I can break her spirit by this means and have her under my thumb. I'm glad nobody came. I didn't call too loud. The audacity to enter my house, and open upon me! But I shall have a very good triumph tomorrow, and he'll be gnawing his fingers off: perhaps drown himself or cut his throat! I shouldn't wonder! That would make it quite complete, that would: quite.'

When he had become restored to his usual condition by these and other comments on his approaching triumph, Arthur Gride put away his book, and, having locked the chest with great caution, descended into the kitchen to warn Peg Sliderskew to bed, and scold her for having afforded such ready admission to a stranger.

The unconscious Peg, however, not being able to comprehend the offence of which she had been guilty, he summoned her to hold the light, while he made a tour of the fastenings, and secured the streetdoor with his own hands.

'Top bolt,' muttered Arthur, fastening as he spoke, 'bottom bolt, chain, bar, double lock, and key out to put under my pillow! So, if any more rejected admirers come, they may come through the keyhole. And now I'll go to sleep till halfpast five, when I must get up to be married, Peg!'

With that, he jocularly tapped Mrs Sliderskew under the chin, and appeared, for the moment, inclined to celebrate the close of his bachelor days by imprinting a kiss on her shrivelled lips. Thinking better of it, however, he gave her chin another tap, in lieu of that warmer familiarity, and stole away to bed.

CHAPTER 54

The Crisis of the Project and its Result

There are not many men who lie abed too late, or oversleep themselves, on their wedding morning. A legend there is of somebody remarkable for absence of mind, who opened his eyes upon the day which was to give him a young wife, and forgetting all about the matter, rated his servants for providing him with such fine clothes as had been prepared for the festival. There is also a legend of a young gentleman, who, not having before his eyes the fear of the canons of the church for such cases made and provided, conceived a passion for his grandmother. Both cases are of a singular and special kind and it is very doubtful whether either can be considered as a precedent likely to be extensively followed by succeeding generations.

Arthur Gride had enrobed himself in his marriage garments of bottlegreen, a full hour before Mrs Sliderskew, shaking off her more heavy slumbers, knocked at his chamber door; and he had hobbled downstairs in full array and smacked his lips over a scanty taste of his favourite cordial, ere that delicate piece of antiquity enlightened the kitchen with her presence.

'Faugh!' said Peg, grubbing, in the discharge of her domestic functions, among a scanty heap of ashes in the rusty grate. 'Wedding indeed! A precious wedding! He wants somebody better than his old Peg to take care of him, does he? And what has he said to me, many and many a time, to keep me content with short food, small wages, and little fire? "My will, Peg! my will!" says he: "I'm a bachelorno friendsno relations, Peg." Lies! And now he's to bring home a new mistress, a babyfaced chit of a girl! If he wanted a wife, the fool, why couldn't he have one suitable to his age, and that knew his ways? She won't come in MY way, he says. No, that she won't, but you little think why, Arthur boy!'

While Mrs Sliderskew, influenced possibly by some lingering feelings of disappointment and personal slight, occasioned by her old master's preference for another, was giving loose to these grumblings below stairs, Arthur Gride was cogitating in the parlour upon what had taken place last night.

'I can't think how he can have picked up what he knows,' said Arthur, 'unless I have committed myselflet something drop at Bray's, for instancewhich has been overheard. Perhaps I may. I shouldn't be surprised if that was it. Mr Nickleby was often angry at my talking to him before we got outside the door. I mustn't tell him that part of the business, or he'll put me out of sorts, and make me nervous for the day.'

Ralph was universally looked up to, and recognised among his fellows as a

superior genius, but upon Arthur Gride his stern unyielding character and consummate art had made so deep an impression, that he was actually afraid of him. Cringing and cowardly to the core by nature, Arthur Gride humbled himself in the dust before Ralph Nickleby, and, even when they had not this stake in common, would have licked his shoes and crawled upon the ground before him rather than venture to return him word for word, or retort upon him in any other spirit than one of the most slavish and abject sycophancy.

To Ralph Nickleby's, Arthur Gride now betook himself according to appointment; and to Ralph Nickleby he related how, last night, some young blustering blade, whom he had never seen, forced his way into his house, and tried to frighten him from the proposed nuptials. Told, in short, what Nicholas had said and done, with the slight reservation upon which he had determined.

'Well, and what then?' said Ralph.

'Oh! nothing more,' rejoined Gride.

'He tried to frighten you,' said Ralph, 'and you WERE frightened I suppose; is that it?'

'I frightened HIM by crying thieves and murder,' replied Gride. 'Once I was in earnest, I tell you that, for I had more than half a mind to swear he uttered threats, and demanded my life or my money.'

'Oho!' said Ralph, eyeing him askew. 'Jealous too!'

'Dear now, see that!' cried Arthur, rubbing his hands and affecting to laugh.

'Why do you make those grimaces, man?' said Ralph; 'you ARE jealousand with good cause I think.'

'No, no, no; not with good cause, hey? You don't think with good cause, do you?' cried Arthur, faltering. 'Do you though, hey?'

'Why, how stands the fact?' returned Ralph. 'Here is an old man about to be forced in marriage upon a girl; and to this old man there comes a handsome young fellowyou said he was handsome, didn't you?'

'No!' snarled Arthur Gride.

'Oh!' rejoined Ralph, 'I thought you did. Well! Handsome or not handsome, to this old man there comes a young fellow who casts all manner of fierce defiances in his teethgums I should rather sayand tells him in plain terms that his mistress hates him. What does he do that for? Philanthropy's sake?'

'Not for love of the lady,' replied Gride, 'for he said that no word of lovehis

very wordshad ever passed between 'em.'

'He said!' repeated Ralph, contemptuously. 'But I like him for one thing, and that is, his giving you this fair warning to keep yourwhat is it?Tittit or dainty chickwhich?under lock and key. Be careful, Gride, be careful. It's a triumph, too, to tear her away from a gallant young rival: a great triumph for an old man! It only remains to keep her safe when you have herthat's all.'

'What a man it is!' cried Arthur Gride, affecting, in the extremity of his torture, to be highly amused. And then he added, anxiously, 'Yes; to keep her safe, that's all. And that isn't much, is it?'

'Much!' said Ralph, with a sneer. 'Why, everybody knows what easy things to understand and to control, women are. But come, it's very nearly time for you to be made happy. You'll pay the bond now, I suppose, to save us trouble afterwards.'

'Oh what a man you are!' croaked Arthur.

'Why not?' said Ralph. 'Nobody will pay you interest for the money, I suppose, between this and twelve o'clock; will they?'

'But nobody would pay you interest for it either, you know,' returned Arthur, leering at Ralph with all the cunning and slyness he could throw into his face.

'Besides which,' said Ralph, suffering his lip to curl into a smile, 'you haven't the money about you, and you weren't prepared for this, or you'd have brought it with you; and there's nobody you'd so much like to accommodate as me. I see. We trust each other in about an equal degree. Are you ready?'

Gride, who had done nothing but grin, and nod, and chatter, during this last speech of Ralph's, answered in the affirmative; and, producing from his hat a couple of large white favours, pinned one on his breast, and with considerable difficulty induced his friend to do the like. Thus accoutred, they got into a hired coach which Ralph had in waiting, and drove to the residence of the fair and most wretched bride.

Gride, whose spirits and courage had gradually failed him more and more as they approached nearer and nearer to the house, was utterly dismayed and cowed by the mournful silence which pervaded it. The face of the poor servant girl, the only person they saw, was disfigured with tears and want of sleep. There was nobody to receive or welcome them; and they stole upstairs into the usual sittingroom, more like two burglars than the bridegroom and his friend.

'One would think,' said Ralph, speaking, in spite of himself, in a low and subdued voice, 'that there was a funeral going on here, and not a wedding.'

'He, he!' tittered his friend, 'you are soso very funny!'

'I need be,' remarked Ralph, drily, 'for this is rather dull and chilling. Look a little brisker, man, and not so hangdog like!'

'Yes, yes, I will,' said Gride. 'Butbutyou don't think she's coming just yet, do you?'

'Why, I suppose she'll not come till she is obliged,' returned Ralph, looking at his watch, 'and she has a good halfhour to spare yet. Curb your impatience.'

'IIam not impatient,' stammered Arthur. 'I wouldn't be hard with her for the world. Oh dear, dear, not on any account. Let her take her timeher own time. Her time shall be ours by all means.'

While Ralph bent upon his trembling friend a keen look, which showed that he perfectly understood the reason of this great consideration and regard, a footstep was heard upon the stairs, and Bray himself came into the room on tiptoe, and holding up his hand with a cautious gesture, as if there were some sick person near, who must not be disturbed.

'Hush!' he said, in a low voice. 'She was very ill last night. I thought she would have broken her heart. She is dressed, and crying bitterly in her own room; but she's better, and quite quiet. That's everything!'

'She is ready, is she?' said Ralph.

'Quite ready,' returned the father.

'And not likely to delay us by any younglady weaknessesfainting, or so forth?' said Ralph.

'She may be safely trusted now,' returned Bray. 'I have been talking to her this morning. Here! Come a little this way.'

He drew Ralph Nickleby to the further end of the room, and pointed towards Gride, who sat huddled together in a corner, fumbling nervously with the buttons of his coat, and exhibiting a face, of which every skulking and base expression was sharpened and aggravated to the utmost by his anxiety and trepidation.

'Look at that man,' whispered Bray, emphatically. 'This seems a cruel thing, after all.'

'What seems a cruel thing?' inquired Ralph, with as much stolidity of face, as if he really were in utter ignorance of the other's meaning.

'This marriage,' answered Bray. 'Don't ask me what. You know as well as I do.'

Ralph shrugged his shoulders, in silent deprecation of Bray's impatience, and elevated his eyebrows, and pursed his lips, as men do when they are prepared with a sufficient answer to some remark, but wait for a more favourable opportunity of advancing it, or think it scarcely worth while to answer their adversary at all.

'Look at him. Does it not seem cruel?' said Bray.

'No!' replied Ralph, boldly.

'I say it does,' retorted Bray, with a show of much irritation. 'It is a cruel thing, by all that's bad and treacherous!'

When men are about to commit, or to sanction the commission of some injustice, it is not uncommon for them to express pity for the object either of that or some parallel proceeding, and to feel themselves, at the time, quite virtuous and moral, and immensely superior to those who express no pity at all. This is a kind of upholding of faith above works, and is very comfortable. To do Ralph Nickleby justice, he seldom practised this sort of dissimulation; but he understood those who did, and therefore suffered Bray to say, again and again, with great vehemence, that they were jointly doing a very cruel thing, before he again offered to interpose a word.

'You see what a dry, shrivelled, withered old chip it is,' returned Ralph, when the other was at length silent. 'If he were younger, it might be cruel, but as it isharkee, Mr Bray, he'll die soon, and leave her a rich young widow! Miss Madeline consults your tastes this time; let her consult her own next.'

'True, true,' said Bray, biting his nails, and plainly very ill at ease. 'I couldn't do anything better for her than advise her to accept these proposals, could I? Now, I ask you, Nickleby, as a man of the world; could I?'

'Surely not,' answered Ralph. 'I tell you what, sir; there are a hundred fathers, within a circuit of five miles from this place; well off; good, rich, substantial men; who would gladly give their daughters, and their own ears with them, to that very man yonder, ape and mummy as he looks.'

'So there are!' exclaimed Bray, eagerly catching at anything which seemed a justification of himself. 'And so I told her, both last night and today.'

'You told her truth,' said Ralph, 'and did well to do so; though I must say, at the same time, that if I had a daughter, and my freedom, pleasure, nay, my very health and life, depended on her taking a husband whom I pointed out, I should hope it would not be necessary to advance any other arguments to

induce her to consent to my wishes.'

Bray looked at Ralph as if to see whether he spoke in earnest, and having nodded twice or thrice in unqualified assent to what had fallen from him, said:

'I must go upstairs for a few minutes, to finish dressing. When I come down, I'll bring Madeline with me. Do you know, I had a very strange dream last night, which I have not remembered till this instant. I dreamt that it was this morning, and you and I had been talking as we have been this minute; that I went upstairs, for the very purpose for which I am going now; and that as I stretched out my hand to take Madeline's, and lead her down, the floor sunk with me, and after falling from such an indescribable and tremendous height as the imagination scarcely conceives, except in dreams, I alighted in a grave.'

'And you awoke, and found you were lying on your back, or with your head hanging over the bedside, or suffering some pain from indigestion?' said Ralph. 'Pshaw, Mr Bray! Do as I do (you will have the opportunity, now that a constant round of pleasure and enjoyment opens upon you), and, occupying yourself a little more by day, have no time to think of what you dream by night.'

Ralph followed him, with a steady look, to the door; and, turning to the bridegroom, when they were again alone, said,

'Mark my words, Gride, you won't have to pay HIS annuity very long. You have the devil's luck in bargains, always. If he is not booked to make the long voyage before many months are past and gone, I wear an orange for a head!'

To this prophecy, so agreeable to his ears, Arthur returned no answer than a cackle of great delight. Ralph, throwing himself into a chair, they both sat waiting in profound silence. Ralph was thinking, with a sneer upon his lips, on the altered manner of Bray that day, and how soon their fellowship in a bad design had lowered his pride and established a familiarity between them, when his attentive ear caught the rustling of a female dress upon the stairs, and the footstep of a man.

'Wake up,' he said, stamping his foot impatiently upon the ground, 'and be something like life, man, will you? They are here. Urge those dry old bones of yours this way. Quick, man, quick!'

Gride shambled forward, and stood, leering and bowing, close by Ralph's side, when the door opened and there entered in hastenot Bray and his daughter, but Nicholas and his sister Kate.

If some tremendous apparition from the world of shadows had suddenly

presented itself before him, Ralph Nickleby could not have been more thunderstricken than he was by this surprise. His hands fell powerless by his side, he reeled back; and with open mouth, and a face of ashy paleness, stood gazing at them in speechless rage: his eyes so prominent, and his face so convulsed and changed by the passions which raged within him, that it would have been difficult to recognise in him the same stern, composed, hardfeatured man he had been not a minute ago.

'The man that came to me last night,' whispered Gride, plucking at his elbow. 'The man that came to me last night!'

'I see,' muttered Ralph, 'I know! I might have guessed as much before. Across my every path, at every turn, go where I will, do what I may, he comes!'

The absence of all colour from the face; the dilated nostril; the quivering of the lips which, though set firmly against each other, would not be still; showed what emotions were struggling for the mastery with Nicholas. But he kept them down, and gently pressing Kate's arm to reassure her, stood erect and undaunted, front to front with his unworthy relative.

As the brother and sister stood side by side, with a gallant bearing which became them well, a close likeness between them was apparent, which many, had they only seen them apart, might have failed to remark. The air, carriage, and very look and expression of the brother were all reflected in the sister, but softened and refined to the nicest limit of feminine delicacy and attraction. More striking still was some indefinable resemblance, in the face of Ralph, to both. While they had never looked more handsome, nor he more ugly; while they had never held themselves more proudly, nor he shrunk half so low; there never had been a time when this resemblance was so perceptible, or when all the worst characteristics of a face rendered coarse and harsh by evil thoughts were half so manifest as now.

'Away!' was the first word he could utter as he literally gnashed his teeth. 'Away! What brings you here? Liar, scoundrel, dastard, thief!'

'I come here,' said Nicholas in a low deep voice, 'to save your victim if I can. Liar and scoundrel you are, in every action of your life; theft is your trade; and double dastard you must be, or you were not here today. Hard words will not move me, nor would hard blows. Here I stand, and will, till I have done my errand.'

'Girl!' said Ralph, 'retire! We can use force to him, but I would not hurt you if I could help it. Retire, you weak and silly wench, and leave this dog to be dealt with as he deserves.'

'I will not retire,' cried Kate, with flashing eyes and the red blood mantling in her cheeks. 'You will do him no hurt that he will not repay. You may use force with me; I think you will, for I AM a girl, and that would well become you. But if I have a girl's weakness, I have a woman's heart, and it is not you who in a cause like this can turn that from its purpose.'

'And what may your purpose be, most lofty lady?' said Ralph.

'To offer to the unhappy subject of your treachery, at this last moment,' replied Nicholas, 'a refuge and a home. If the near prospect of such a husband as you have provided will not prevail upon her, I hope she may be moved by the prayers and entreaties of one of her own sex. At all events they shall be tried. I myself, avowing to her father from whom I come and by whom I am commissioned, will render it an act of greater baseness, meanness, and cruelty in him if he still dares to force this marriage on. Here I wait to see him and his daughter. For this I came and brought my sister even into your presence. Our purpose is not to see or speak with you; therefore to you we stoop to say no more.'

'Indeed!' said Ralph. 'You persist in remaining here, ma'am, do you?'

His niece's bosom heaved with the indignant excitement into which he had lashed her, but she gave him no reply.

'Now, Gride, see here,' said Ralph. 'This fellowI grieve to say my brother's son: a reprobate and profligate, stained with every mean and selfish crimethis fellow, coming here today to disturb a solemn ceremony, and knowing that the consequence of his presenting himself in another man's house at such a time, and persisting in remaining there, must be his being kicked into the streets and dragged through them like the vagabond he isthis fellow, mark you, brings with him his sister as a protection, thinking we would not expose a silly girl to the degradation and indignity which is no novelty to him; and, even after I have warned her of what must ensue, he still keeps her by him, as you see, and clings to her apronstrings like a cowardly boy to his mother's. Is not this a pretty fellow to talk as big as you have heard him now?'

'And as I heard him last night,' said Arthur Gride; 'as I heard him last night when he sneaked into my house, andhe! he! he!very soon sneaked out again, when I nearly frightened him to death. And HE wanting to marry Miss Madeline too! Oh dear! Is there anything else he'd like? Anything else we can do for him, besides giving her up? Would he like his debts paid and his house furnished, and a few bank notes for shaving paper if he shaves at all? He! he! he!'

'You will remain, girl, will you?' said Ralph, turning upon Kate again, 'to be

hauled downstairs like a drunken drab, as I swear you shall if you stop here? No answer! Thank your brother for what follows. Gride, call down Brayand not his daughter. Let them keep her above.'

'If you value your head,' said Nicholas, taking up a position before the door, and speaking in the same low voice in which he had spoken before, and with no more outward passion than he had before displayed; 'stay where you are!'

'Mind me, and not him, and call down Bray,' said Ralph.

'Mind yourself rather than either of us, and stay where you are!' said Nicholas.

'Will you call down Bray?' cried Ralph.

'Remember that you come near me at your peril,' said Nicholas.

Gride hesitated. Ralph being, by this time, as furious as a baffled tiger, made for the door, and, attempting to pass Kate, clasped her arm roughly with his hand. Nicholas, with his eyes darting fire, seized him by the collar. At that moment, a heavy body fell with great violence on the floor above, and, in an instant afterwards, was heard a most appalling and terrific scream.

They all stood still, and gazed upon each other. Scream succeeded scream; a heavy pattering of feet succeeded; and many shrill voices clamouring together were heard to cry, 'He is dead!'

'Stand off!' cried Nicholas, letting loose all the passion he had restrained till now; 'if this is what I scarcely dare to hope it is, you are caught, villains, in your own toils.'

He burst from the room, and, darting upstairs to the quarter from whence the noise proceeded, forced his way through a crowd of persons who quite filled a small bedchamber, and found Bray lying on the floor quite dead; his daughter clinging to the body.

'How did this happen?' he cried, looking wildly about him.

Several voices answered together, that he had been observed, through the halfopened door, reclining in a strange and uneasy position upon a chair; that he had been spoken to several times, and not answering, was supposed to be asleep, until some person going in and shaking him by the arm, he fell heavily to the ground and was discovered to be dead.

'Who is the owner of this house?' said Nicholas, hastily.

An elderly woman was pointed out to him; and to her he said, as he knelt down and gently unwound Madeline's arms from the lifeless mass round

which they were entwined: 'I represent this lady's nearest friends, as her servant here knows, and must remove her from this dreadful scene. This is my sister to whose charge you confide her. My name and address are upon that card, and you shall receive from me all necessary directions for the arrangements that must be made. Stand aside, every one of you, and give me room and air for God's sake!'

The people fell back, scarce wondering more at what had just occurred, than at the excitement and impetuosity of him who spoke. Nicholas, taking the insensible girl in his arms, bore her from the chamber and downstairs into the room he had just quitted, followed by his sister and the faithful servant, whom he charged to procure a coach directly, while he and Kate bent over their beautiful charge and endeavoured, but in vain, to restore her to animation. The girl performed her office with such expedition, that in a very few minutes the coach was ready.

Ralph Nickleby and Gride, stunned and paralysed by the awful event which had so suddenly overthrown their schemes (it would not otherwise, perhaps, have made much impression on them), and carried away by the extraordinary energy and precipitation of Nicholas, which bore down all before him, looked on at these proceedings like men in a dream or trance. It was not until every preparation was made for Madeline's immediate removal that Ralph broke silence by declaring she should not be taken away.

'Who says so?' cried Nicholas, rising from his knee and confronting them, but still retaining Madeline's lifeless hand in his.

'I!' answered Ralph, hoarsely.

'Hush, hush!' cried the terrified Gride, catching him by the arm again. 'Hear what he says.'

'Ay!' said Nicholas, extending his disengaged hand in the air, 'hear what he says. That both your debts are paid in the one great debt of nature. That the bond, due today at twelve, is now waste paper. That your contemplated fraud shall be discovered yet. That your schemes are known to man, and overthrown by Heaven. Wretches, that he defies you both to do your worst.'

'This man,' said Ralph, in a voice scarcely intelligible, 'this man claims his wife, and he shall have her.'

'That man claims what is not his, and he should not have her if he were fifty men, with fifty more to back him,' said Nicholas.

'Who shall prevent him?'

'I will.'

'By what right I should like to know,' said Ralph. 'By what right I ask?'

'By this right. That, knowing what I do, you dare not tempt me further,' said Nicholas, 'and by this better right; that those I serve, and with whom you would have done me base wrong and injury, are her nearest and her dearest friends. In their name I bear her hence. Give way!'

'One word!' cried Ralph, foaming at the mouth.

'Not one,' replied Nicholas, 'I will not hear of onesave this. Look to yourself, and heed this warning that I give you! Your day is past, and night is comin' on.'

'My curse, my bitter, deadly curse, upon you, boy!'

'Whence will curses come at your command? Or what avails a curse or blessing from a man like you? I tell you, that misfortune and discovery are thickening about your head; that the structures you have raised, through all your illspent life, are crumbling into dust; that your path is beset with spies; that this very day, ten thousand pounds of your hoarded wealth have gone in one great crash!'

"Tis false!' cried Ralph, shrinking back.

"Tis true, and you shall find it so. I have no more words to waste. Stand from the door. Kate, do you go first. Lay not a hand on her, or on that woman, or on me, or so much a brush their garments as they pass you by!You let them pass, and he blocks the door again!'

Arthur Gride happened to be in the doorway, but whether intentionally or from confusion was not quite apparent. Nicholas swung him away, with such violence as to cause him to spin round the room until he was caught by a sharp angle of the wall, and there knocked down; and then taking his beautiful burden in his arms rushed out. No one cared to stop him, if any were so disposed. Making his way through a mob of people, whom a report of the circumstances had attracted round the house, and carrying Madeline, in his excitement, as easily as if she were an infant, he reached the coach in which Kate and the girl were already waiting, and, confiding his charge to them, jumped up beside the coachman and bade him drive away.

CHAPTER 55

Of Family Matters, Cares, Hopes, Disappointments, and Sorrows

Although Mrs Nickleby had been made acquainted by her son and daughter with every circumstance of Madeline Bray's history which was known to them; although the responsible situation in which Nicholas stood had been carefully explained to her, and she had been prepared, even for the possible contingency of having to receive the young lady in her own house, improbable as such a result had appeared only a few minutes before it came about, still, Mrs Nickleby, from the moment when this confidence was first reposed in her, late on the previous evening, had remained in an unsatisfactory and profoundly mystified state, from which no explanations or arguments could relieve her, and which every fresh soliloquy and reflection only aggravated more and more.

'Bless my heart, Kate!' so the good lady argued; 'if the Mr Cheerybles don't want this young lady to be married, why don't they file a bill against the Lord Chancellor, make her a Chancery ward, and shut her up in the Fleet prison for safety?I have read of such things in the newspapers a hundred times. Or, if they are so very fond of her as Nicholas says they are, why don't they marry her themselvesone of them I mean? And even supposing they don't want her to be married, and don't want to marry her themselves, why in the name of wonder should Nicholas go about the world, forbidding people's banns?'

'I don't think you quite understand,' said Kate, gently.

'Well I am sure, Kate, my dear, you're very polite!' replied Mrs Nickleby. 'I have been married myself I hope, and I have seen other people married. Not understand, indeed!'

'I know you have had great experience, dear mama,' said Kate; 'I mean that perhaps you don't quite understand all the circumstances in this instance. We have stated them awkwardly, I dare say.'

'That I dare say you have,' retorted her mother, briskly. 'That's very likely. I am not to be held accountable for that; though, at the same time, as the circumstances speak for themselves, I shall take the liberty, my love, of saying that I do understand them, and perfectly well too; whatever you and Nicholas may choose to think to the contrary. Why is such a great fuss made because this Miss Magdalen is going to marry somebody who is older than herself? Your poor papa was older than I was, four years and a half older. Jane Dibabsthe Dibabses lived in the beautiful little thatched white house one story high, covered all over with ivy and creeping plants, with an exquisite little

porch with twining honysuckles and all sorts of things: where the earwigs used to fall into one's tea on a summer evening, and always fell upon their backs and kicked dreadfully, and where the frogs used to get into the rushlight shades when one stopped all night, and sit up and look through the little holes like ChristiansJane Dibabs, SHE married a man who was a great deal older than herself, and WOULD marry him, notwithstanding all that could be said to the contrary, and she was so fond of him that nothing was ever equal to it. There was no fuss made about Jane Dibabs, and her husband was a most honourable and excellent man, and everybody spoke well of him. Then why should there by any fuss about this Magdalen?'

'Her husband is much older; he is not her own choice; his character is the very reverse of that which you have just described. Don't you see a broad destinction between the two cases?' said Kate.

To this, Mrs Nickleby only replied that she durst say she was very stupid, indeed she had no doubt she was, for her own children almost as much as told her so, every day of her life; to be sure she was a little older than they, and perhaps some foolish people might think she ought reasonably to know best. However, no doubt she was wrong; of course she was; she always was, she couldn't be right, she couldn't be expected to be; so she had better not expose herself any more; and to all Kate's conciliations and concessions for an hour ensuing, the good lady gave no other replies than Oh, certainly, why did they ask HER?, HER opinion was of no consequence, it didn't matter what SHE said, with many other rejoinders of the same class.

In this frame of mind (expressed, when she had become too resigned for speech, by nods of the head, upliftings of the eyes, and little beginnings of groans, converted, as they attracted attention, into short coughs), Mrs Nickleby remained until Nicholas and Kate returned with the object of their solicitude; when, having by this time asserted her own importance, and becoming besides interested in the trials of one so young and beautiful, she not only displayed the utmost zeal and solicitude, but took great credit to herself for recommending the course of procedure which her son had adopted: frequently declaring, with an expressive look, that it was very fortunate things were AS they were: and hinting, that but for great encouragement and wisdom on her own part, they never could have been brought to that pass.

Not to strain the question whether Mrs Nickleby had or had not any great hand in bringing matters about, it is unquestionable that she had strong ground for exultation. The brothers, on their return, bestowed such commendations on Nicholas for the part he had taken, and evinced so much joy at the altered state of events and the recovery of their young friend from trials so great and dangers so threatening, that, as she more than once informed her daughter, she

now considered the fortunes of the family 'as good as' made. Mr Charles Cheeryble, indeed, Mrs Nickleby positively asserted, had, in the first transports of his surprise and delight, 'as good as' said so. Without precisely explaining what this qualification meant, she subsided, whenever she mentioned the subject, into such a mysterious and important state, and had such visions of wealth and dignity in perspective, that (vague and clouded though they were) she was, at such times, almost as happy as if she had really been permanently provided for, on a scale of great splendour.

The sudden and terrible shock she had received, combined with the great affliction and anxiety of mind which she had, for a long time, endured, proved too much for Madeline's strength. Recovering from the state of stupefaction into which the sudden death of her father happily plunged her, she only exchanged that condition for one of dangerous and active illness. When the delicate physical powers which have been sustained by an unnatural strain upon the mental energies and a resolute determination not to yield, at last give way, their degree of prostration is usually proportionate to the strength of the effort which has previously upheld them. Thus it was that the illness which fell on Madeline was of no slight or temporary nature, but one which, for a time, threatened her reason, andscarcely worseher life itself.

Who, slowly recovering from a disorder so severe and dangerous, could be insensible to the unremitting attentions of such a nurse as gentle, tender, earnest Kate? On whom could the sweet soft voice, the light step, the delicate hand, the quiet, cheerful, noiseless discharge of those thousand little offices of kindness and relief which we feel so deeply when we are ill, and forget so lightly when we are wellon whom could they make so deep an impression as on a young heart stored with every pure and true affection that women cherish; almost a stranger to the endearments and devotion of its own sex, save as it learnt them from itself; and rendered, by calamity and suffering, keenly susceptible of the sympathy so long unknown and so long sought in vain? What wonder that days became as years in knitting them together! What wonder, if with every hour of returning health, there came some stronger and sweeter recognition of the praises which Kate, when they recalled old scenesthey seemed old now, and to have been acted years agowould lavish on her brother! Where would have been the wonder, even, if those praises had found a quick response in the breast of Madeline, and if, with the image of Nicholas so constantly recurring in the features of his sister that she could scarcely separate the two, she had sometimes found it equally difficult to assign to each the feelings they had first inspired, and had imperceptibly mingled with her gratitude to Nicholas, some of that warmer feeling which she had assigned to Kate?

'My dear,' Mrs Nickleby would say, coming into the room with an elaborate caution, calculated to discompose the nerves of an invalid rather more than the entry of a horsesoldier at full gallop; 'how do you find yourself tonight? I hope you are better.'

'Almost well, mama,' Kate would reply, laying down her work, and taking Madeline's hand in hers.

'Kate!' Mrs Nickleby would say, reprovingly, 'don't talk so loud' (the worthy lady herself talking in a whisper that would have made the blood of the stoutest man run cold in his veins).

Kate would take this reproof very quietly, and Mrs Nickleby, making every board creak and every thread rustle as she moved stealthily about, would add:

'My son Nicholas has just come home, and I have come, according to custom, my dear, to know, from your own lips, exactly how you are; for he won't take my account, and never will.'

'He is later than usual tonight,' perhaps Madeline would reply. 'Nearly half an hour.'

'Well, I never saw such people in all my life as you are, for time, up here!' Mrs Nickleby would exclaim in great astonishment; 'I declare I never did! I had not the least idea that Nicholas was after his time, not the smallest. Mr Nickleby used to sayyour poor papa, I am speaking of, Kate my dearused to say, that appetite was the best clock in the world, but you have no appetite, my dear Miss Bray, I wish you had, and upon my word I really think you ought to take something that would give you one. I am sure I don't know, but I have heard that two or three dozen native lobsters give an appetite, though that comes to the same thing after all, for I suppose you must have an appetite before you can take 'em. If I said lobsters, I meant oysters, but of course it's all the same, though really how you came to know about Nicholas'

'We happened to be just talking about him, mama; that was it.'

'You never seem to me to be talking about anything else, Kate, and upon my word I am quite surprised at your being so very thoughtless. You can find subjects enough to talk about sometimes, and when you know how important it is to keep up Miss Bray's spirits, and interest her, and all that, it really is quite extraordinary to me what can induce you to keep on prose, prose, prose, din, din, din, everlastingly, upon the same theme. You are a very kind nurse, Kate, and a very good one, and I know you mean very well; but I will say thisthat if it wasn't for me, I really don't know what would become of Miss Bray's spirits, and so I tell the doctor every day. He says he wonders how I

sustain my own, and I am sure I very often wonder myself how I can contrive to keep up as I do. Of course it's an exertion, but still, when I know how much depends upon me in this house, I am obliged to make it. There's nothing praiseworthy in that, but it's necessary, and I do it.'

With that, Mrs Nickleby would draw up a chair, and for some threequarters of an hour run through a great variety of distracting topics in the most distracting manner possible; tearing herself away, at length, on the plea that she must now go and amuse Nicholas while he took his supper. After a preliminary raising of his spirits with the information that she considered the patient decidedly worse, she would further cheer him up by relating how dull, listless, and lowspirited Miss Bray was, because Kate foolishly talked about nothing else but him and family matters. When she had made Nicholas thoroughly comfortable with these and other inspiriting remarks, she would discourse at length on the arduous duties she had performed that day; and, sometimes, be moved to tears in wondering how, if anything were to happen to herself, the family would ever get on without her.

At other times, when Nicholas came home at night, he would be accompanied by Mr Frank Cheeryble, who was commissioned by the brothers to inquire how Madeline was that evening. On such occasions (and they were of very frequent occurrence), Mrs Nickleby deemed it of particular importance that she should have her wits about her; for, from certain signs and tokens which had attracted her attention, she shrewdly suspected that Mr Frank, interested as his uncles were in Madeline, came quite as much to see Kate as to inquire after her; the more especially as the brothers were in constant communication with the medical man, came backwards and forwards very frequently themselves, and received a full report from Nicholas every morning. These were proud times for Mrs Nickleby; never was anybody half so discreet and sage as she, or half so mysterious withal; and never were there such cunning generalship, and such unfathomable designs, as she brought to bear upon Mr Frank, with the view of ascertaining whether her suspicions were well founded: and if so, of tantalising him into taking her into his confidence and throwing himself upon her merciful consideration. Extensive was the artillery, heavy and light, which Mrs Nickleby brought into play for the furtherance of these great schemes; various and opposite the means which she employed to bring about the end she had in view. At one time, she was all cordiality and ease; at another, all stiffness and frigidity. Now, she would seem to open her whole heart to her unhappy victim; the next time they met, she would receive him with the most distant and studious reserve, as if a new light had broken in upon her, and, guessing his intentions, she had resolved to check them in the bud; as if she felt it her bounden duty to act with Spartan firmness, and at once and for ever to discourage hopes which never could be realised. At other

times, when Nicholas was not there to overhear, and Kate was upstairs busily tending her sick friend, the worthy lady would throw out dark hints of an intention to send her daughter to France for three or four years, or to Scotland for the improvement of her health impaired by her late fatigues, or to America on a visit, or anywhere that threatened a long and tedious separation. Nay, she even went so far as to hint, obscurely, at an attachment entertained for her daughter by the son of an old neighbour of theirs, one Horatio Peltirogus (a young gentleman who might have been, at that time, four years old, or thereabouts), and to represent it, indeed, as almost a settled thing between the familiesonly waiting for her daughter's final decision, to come off with the sanction of the church, and to the unspeakable happiness and content of all parties.

It was in the full pride and glory of having sprung this last mine one night with extraordinary success, that Mrs Nickleby took the opportunity of being left alone with her son before retiring to rest, to sound him on the subject which so occupied her thoughts: not doubting that they could have but one opinion respecting it. To this end, she approached the question with divers laudatory and appropriate remarks touching the general amiability of Mr Frank Cheeryble.

'You are quite right, mother,' said Nicholas, 'quite right. He is a fine fellow.'

'Goodlooking, too,' said Mrs Nickleby.

'Decidedly goodlooking,' answered Nicholas.

'What may you call his nose, now, my dear?' pursued Mrs Nickleby, wishing to interest Nicholas in the subject to the utmost.

'Call it?' repeated Nicholas.

'Ah!' returned his mother, 'what style of nose? What order of architecture, if one may say so. I am not very learned in noses. Do you call it a Roman or a Grecian?'

'Upon my word, mother,' said Nicholas, laughing, 'as well as I remember, I should call it a kind of Composite, or mixed nose. But I have no very strong recollection on the subject. If it will afford you any gratification, I'll observe it more closely, and let you know.'

'I wish you would, my dear,' said Mrs Nickleby, with an earnest look.

'Very well,' returned Nicholas. 'I will.'

Nicholas returned to the perusal of the book he had been reading, when the

dialogue had gone thus far. Mrs Nickleby, after stopping a little for consideration, resumed.

'He is very much attached to you, Nicholas, my dear.'

Nicholas laughingly said, as he closed his book, that he was glad to hear it, and observed that his mother seemed deep in their new friend's confidence already.

'Hem!' said Mrs Nickleby. 'I don't know about that, my dear, but I think it is very necessary that somebody should be in his confidence; highly necessary.'

Elated by a look of curiosity from her son, and the consciousness of possessing a great secret, all to herself, Mrs Nickleby went on with great animation:

'I am sure, my dear Nicholas, how you can have failed to notice it, is, to me, quite extraordinary; though I don't know why I should say that, either, because, of course, as far as it goes, and to a certain extent, there is a great deal in this sort of thing, especially in this early stage, which, however clear it may be to females, can scarcely be expected to be so evident to men. I don't say that I have any particular penetration in such matters. I may have; those about me should know best about that, and perhaps do know. Upon that point I shall express no opinion, it wouldn't become me to do so, it's quite out of the question, quite.'

Nicholas snuffed the candles, put his hands in his pockets, and, leaning back in his chair, assumed a look of patient suffering and melancholy resignation.

'I think it my duty, Nicholas, my dear,' resumed his mother, 'to tell you what I know: not only because you have a right to know it too, and to know everything that happens in this family, but because you have it in your power to promote and assist the thing very much; and there is no doubt that the sooner one can come to a clear understanding on such subjects, it is always better, every way. There are a great many things you might do; such as taking a walk in the garden sometimes, or sitting upstairs in your own room for a little while, or making believe to fall asleep occasionally, or pretending that you recollected some business, and going out for an hour or so, and taking Mr Smike with you. These seem very slight things, and I dare say you will be amused at my making them of so much importance; at the same time, my dear, I can assure you (and you'll find this out, Nicholas, for yourself one of these days, if you ever fall in love with anybody; as I trust and hope you will, provided she is respectable and well conducted, and of course you'd never dream of falling in love with anybody who was not), I say, I can assure you that a great deal more depends upon these little things than you would suppose

possible. If your poor papa was alive, he would tell you how much depended on the parties being left alone. Of course, you are not to go out of the room as if you meant it and did it on purpose, but as if it was quite an accident, and to come back again in the same way. If you cough in the passage before you open the door, or whistle carelessly, or hum a tune, or something of that sort, to let them know you're coming, it's always better; because, of course, though it's not only natural but perfectly correct and proper under the circumstances, still it is very confusing if you interrupt young people when they arewhen they are sitting on the sofa, andand all that sort of thing: which is very nonsensical, perhaps, but still they will do it.'

The profound astonishment with which her son regarded her during this long address, gradually increasing as it approached its climax in no way discomposed Mrs Nickleby, but rather exalted her opinion of her own cleverness; therefore, merely stopping to remark, with much complacency, that she had fully expected him to be surprised, she entered on a vast quantity of circumstantial evidence of a particularly incoherent and perplexing kind; the upshot of which was, to establish, beyond the possibility of doubt, that Mr Frank Cheeryble had fallen desperately in love with Kate.

'With whom?' cried Nicholas.

Mrs Nickleby repeated, with Kate.

'What! OUR Kate! My sister!'

'Lord, Nicholas!' returned Mrs Nickleby, 'whose Kate should it be, if not ours; or what should I care about it, or take any interest in it for, if it was anybody but your sister?'

'Dear mother,' said Nicholas, 'surely it can't be!'

'Very good, my dear,' replied Mrs Nickleby, with great confidence. 'Wait and see.'

Nicholas had never, until that moment, bestowed a thought upon the remote possibility of such an occurrence as that which was now communicated to him; for, besides that he had been much from home of late and closely occupied with other matters, his own jealous fears had prompted the suspicion that some secret interest in Madeline, akin to that which he felt himself, occasioned those visits of Frank Cheeryble which had recently become so frequent. Even now, although he knew that the observation of an anxious mother was much more likely to be correct in such a case than his own, and although she reminded him of many little circumstances which, taken together, were certainly susceptible of the construction she triumphantly put upon them,

he was not quite convinced but that they arose from mere goodnatured thoughtless gallantry, which would have dictated the same conduct towards any other girl who was young and pleasing. At all events, he hoped so, and therefore tried to believe it.

'I am very much disturbed by what you tell me,' said Nicholas, after a little reflection, 'though I yet hope you may be mistaken.'

'I don't understand why you should hope so,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'I confess; but you may depend upon it I am not.'

'What of Kate?' inquired Nicholas.

'Why that, my dear,' returned Mrs Nickleby, 'is just the point upon which I am not yet satisfied. During this sickness, she has been constantly at Madeline's bedsidenever were two people so fond of each other as they have grownand to tell you the truth, Nicholas, I have rather kept her away now and then, because I think it's a good plan, and urges a young man on. He doesn't get too sure, you know.'

She said this with such a mingling of high delight and selfcongratulation, that it was inexpressibly painful to Nicholas to dash her hopes; but he felt that there was only one honourable course before him, and that he was bound to take it.

'Dear mother,' he said kindly, 'don't you see that if there were really any serious inclination on the part of Mr Frank towards Kate, and we suffered ourselves for a moment to encourage it, we should be acting a most dishonourable and ungrateful part? I ask you if you don't see it, but I need not say that I know you don't, or you would have been more strictly on your guard. Let me explain my meaning to you. Remember how poor we are.'

Mrs Nickleby shook her head, and said, through her tears, that poverty was not a crime.

'No,' said Nicholas, 'and for that reason poverty should engender an honest pride, that it may not lead and tempt us to unworthy actions, and that we may preserve the selfrespect which a hewer of wood and drawer of water may maintain, and does better in maintaining than a monarch in preserving his. Think what we owe to these two brothers: remember what they have done, and what they do every day for us with a generosity and delicacy for which the devotion of our whole lives would be a most imperfect and inadequate return. What kind of return would that be which would be comprised in our permitting their nephew, their only relative, whom they regard as a son, and for whom it would be mere childishness to suppose they have not formed

plans suitably adapted to the education he has had, and the fortune he will inheritin our permitting him to marry a portionless girl: so closely connected with us, that the irresistible inference must be, that he was entrapped by a plot; that it was a deliberate scheme, and a speculation amongst us three? Bring the matter clearly before yourself, mother. Now, how would you feel, if they were married, and the brothers, coming here on one of those kind errands which bring them here so often, you had to break out to them the truth? Would you be at ease, and feel that you had played an open part?'

Poor Mrs Nickleby, crying more and more, murmured that of course Mr Frank would ask the consent of his uncles first.

'Why, to be sure, that would place HIM in a better situation with them,' said Nicholas, 'but we should still be open to the same suspicions; the distance between us would still be as great; the advantages to be gained would still be as manifest as now. We may be reckoning without our host in all this,' he added more cheerfully, 'and I trust, and almost believe we are. If it be otherwise, I have that confidence in Kate that I know she will feel as I doand in you, dear mother, to be assured that after a little consideration you will do the same.'

After many more representations and entreaties, Nicholas obtained a promise from Mrs Nickleby that she would try all she could to think as he did; and that if Mr Frank persevered in his attentions she would endeavour to discourage them, or, at the least, would render him no countenance or assistance. He determined to forbear mentioning the subject to Kate until he was quite convinced that there existed a real necessity for his doing so; and resolved to assure himself, as well as he could by close personal observation, of the exact position of affairs. This was a very wise resolution, but he was prevented from putting it in practice by a new source of anxiety and uneasiness.

Smike became alarmingly ill; so reduced and exhausted that he could scarcely move from room to room without assistance; and so worn and emaciated, that it was painful to look upon him. Nicholas was warned, by the same medical authority to whom he had at first appealed, that the last chance and hope of his life depended on his being instantly removed from London. That part of Devonshire in which Nicholas had been himself bred was named as the most favourable spot; but this advice was cautiously coupled with the information, that whoever accompanied him thither must be prepared for the worst; for every token of rapid consumption had appeared, and he might never return alive.

The kind brothers, who were acquainted with the poor creature's sad history, dispatched old Tim to be present at this consultation. That same morning,

Nicholas was summoned by brother Charles into his private room, and thus addressed:

'My dear sir, no time must be lost. This lad shall not die, if such human means as we can use can save his life; neither shall he die alone, and in a strange place. Remove him tomorrow morning, see that he has every comfort that his situation requires, and don't leave him; don't leave him, my dear sir, until you know that there is no longer any immediate danger. It would be hard, indeed, to part you now. No, no, no! Tim shall wait upon you tonight, sir; Tim shall wait upon you tonight with a parting word or two. Brother Ned, my dear fellow, Mr Nickleby waits to shake hands and say goodbye; Mr Nickleby won't be long gone; this poor chap will soon get better, very soon get better; and then he'll find out some nice homely countrypeople to leave him with, and will go backwards and forwards sometimesbackwards and forwards you know, Ned. And there's no cause to be downhearted, for he'll very soon get better, very soon. Won't he, won't he, Ned?'

What Tim Linkinwater said, or what he brought with him that night, needs not to be told. Next morning Nicholas and his feeble companion began their journey.

And who but oneand that one he who, but for those who crowded round him then, had never met a look of kindness, or known a word of pitycould tell what agony of mind, what blighted thoughts, what unavailing sorrow, were involved in that sad parting?

'See,' cried Nicholas eagerly, as he looked from the coach window, 'they are at the corner of the lane still! And now there's Kate, poor Kate, whom you said you couldn't bear to say goodbye to, waving her handkerchief. Don't go without one gesture of farewell to Kate!'

'I cannot make it!' cried his trembling companion, falling back in his seat and covering his eyes. 'Do you see her now? Is she there still?'

'Yes, yes!' said Nicholas earnestly. 'There! She waves her hand again! I have answered it for youand now they are out of sight. Do not give way so bitterly, dear friend, don't. You will meet them all again.'

He whom he thus encouraged, raised his withered hands and clasped them fervently together.

'In heaven. I humbly pray to God in heaven.'

It sounded like the prayer of a broken heart.

CHAPTER 56

Ralph Nickleby, baffled by his Nephew in his late Design, hatches a Scheme of Retaliation which Accident suggests to him, and takes into his Counsels a tried Auxiliary

The course which these adventures shape out for themselves, and imperatively call upon the historian to observe, now demands that they should revert to the point they attained previously to the commencement of the last chapter, when Ralph Nickleby and Arthur Gride were left together in the house where death had so suddenly reared his dark and heavy banner.

With clenched hands, and teeth ground together so firm and tight that no locking of the jaws could have fixed and riveted them more securely, Ralph stood, for some minutes, in the attitude in which he had last addressed his nephew: breathing heavily, but as rigid and motionless in other respects as if he had been a brazen statue. After a time, he began, by slow degrees, as a man rousing himself from heavy slumber, to relax. For a moment he shook his clasped fist towards the door by which Nicholas had disappeared; and then thrusting it into his breast, as if to repress by force even this show of passion, turned round and confronted the less hardy usurer, who had not yet risen from the ground.

The cowering wretch, who still shook in every limb, and whose few grey hairs trembled and quivered on his head with abject dismay, tottered to his feet as he met Ralph's eye, and, shielding his face with both hands, protested, while he crept towards the door, that it was no fault of his.

'Who said it was, man?' returned Ralph, in a suppressed voice. 'Who said it was?'

'You looked as if you thought I was to blame,' said Gride, timidly.

'Pshaw!' Ralph muttered, forcing a laugh. 'I blame him for not living an hour longer. One hour longer would have been long enough. I blame no one else.'

'Nnno one else?' said Gride.

'Not for this mischance,' replied Ralph. 'I have an old score to clear with that young fellow who has carried off your mistress; but that has nothing to do with his blustering just now, for we should soon have been quit of him, but for this cursed accident.'

There was something so unnatural in the calmness with which Ralph Nickleby spoke, when coupled with his face, the expression of the features, to which every nerve and muscle, as it twitched and throbbed with a spasm whose workings no effort could conceal, gave, every instant, some new and frightful aspectthere was something so unnatural and ghastly in the contrast between his harsh, slow, steady voice (only altered by a certain halting of the breath which made him pause between almost every word like a drunken man bent upon speaking plainly), and these evidences of the most intense and violent passion, and the struggle he made to keep them under; that if the dead body which lay above had stood, instead of him, before the cowering Gride, it could scarcely have presented a spectacle which would have terrified him more.

'The coach,' said Ralph after a time, during which he had struggled like some strong man against a fit. 'We came in a coach. Is it waiting?'

Gride gladly availed himself of the pretext for going to the window to see. Ralph, keeping his face steadily the other way, tore at his shirt with the hand which he had thrust into his breast, and muttered in a hoarse whisper:

'Ten thousand pounds! He said ten thousand! The precise sum paid in but yesterday for the two mortgages, and which would have gone out again, at heavy interest, tomorrow. If that house has failed, and he the first to bring the news!Is the coach there?'

'Yes, yes,' said Gride, startled by the fierce tone of the inquiry. 'It's here. Dear, dear, what a fiery man you are!'

'Come here,' said Ralph, beckoning to him. 'We mustn't make a show of being disturbed. We'll go down arm in arm.'

'But you pinch me black and blue,' urged Gride.

Ralph let him go impatiently, and descending the stairs with his usual firm and heavy tread, got into the coach. Arthur Gride followed. After looking doubtfully at Ralph when the man asked where he was to drive, and finding that he remained silent, and expressed no wish upon the subject, Arthur mentioned his own house, and thither they proceeded.

On their way, Ralph sat in the furthest corner with folded arms, and uttered not a word. With his chin sunk upon his breast, and his downcast eyes quite hidden by the contraction of his knotted brows, he might have been asleep for any sign of consciousness he gave until the coach stopped, when he raised his head, and glancing through the window, inquired what place that was.

'My house,' answered the disconsolate Gride, affected perhaps by its

loneliness. 'Oh dear! my house.'

'True,' said Ralph 'I have not observed the way we came. I should like a glass of water. You have that in the house, I suppose?'

'You shall have a glass ofof anything you like,' answered Gride, with a groan. 'It's no use knocking, coachman. Ring the bell!'

The man rang, and rang, and rang again; then, knocked until the street reechoed with the sounds; then, listened at the keyhole of the door. Nobody came. The house was silent as the grave.

'How's this?' said Ralph impatiently.

'Peg is so very deaf,' answered Gride with a look of anxiety and alarm. 'Oh dear! Ring again, coachman. She SEES the bell.'

Again the man rang and knocked, and knocked and rang again. Some of the neighbours threw up their windows, and called across the street to each other that old Gride's housekeeper must have dropped down dead. Others collected round the coach, and gave vent to various surmises; some held that she had fallen asleep; some, that she had burnt herself to death; some, that she had got drunk; and one very fat man that she had seen something to eat which had frightened her so much (not being used to it) that she had fallen into a fit. This last suggestion particularly delighted the bystanders, who cheered it rather uproariously, and were, with some difficulty, deterred from dropping down the area and breaking open the kitchen door to ascertain the fact. Nor was this all. Rumours having gone abroad that Arthur was to be married that morning, very particular inquiries were made after the bride, who was held by the majority to be disguised in the person of Mr Ralph Nickleby, which gave rise to much jocose indignation at the public appearance of a bride in boots and pantaloons, and called forth a great many hoots and groans. At length, the two moneylenders obtained shelter in a house next door, and, being accommodated with a ladder, clambered over the wall of the backyardwhich was not a high oneand descended in safety on the other side.

'I am almost afraid to go in, I declare,' said Arthur, turning to Ralph when they were alone. 'Suppose she should be murdered. Lying with her brains knocked out by a poker, eh?'

'Suppose she were,' said Ralph. 'I tell you, I wish such things were more common than they are, and more easily done. You may stare and shiver. I do!'

He applied himself to a pump in the yard; and, having taken a deep draught of water and flung a quantity on his head and face, regained his accustomed

manner and led the way into the house: Gride following close at his heels.

It was the same dark place as ever: every room dismal and silent as it was wont to be, and every ghostly article of furniture in its customary place. The iron heart of the grim old clock, undisturbed by all the noise without, still beat heavily within its dusty case; the tottering presses slunk from the sight, as usual, in their melancholy corners; the echoes of footsteps returned the same dreary sound; the longlegged spider paused in his nimble run, and, scared by the sight of men in that his dull domain, hung motionless on the wall, counterfeiting death until they should have passed him by.

From cellar to garret went the two usurers, opening every creaking door and looking into every deserted room. But no Peg was there. At last, they sat them down in the apartment which Arthur Gride usually inhabited, to rest after their search.

'The hag is out, on some preparation for your wedding festivities, I suppose,' said Ralph, preparing to depart. 'See here! I destroy the bond; we shall never need it now.'

Gride, who had been peering narrowly about the room, fell, at that moment, upon his knees before a large chest, and uttered a terrible yell.

'How now?' said Ralph, looking sternly round.

'Robbed! robbed!' screamed Arthur Gride.

'Robbed! of money?'

'No, no, no. Worse! far worse!'

'Of what then?' demanded Ralph.

'Worse than money, worse than money!' cried the old man, casting the papers out of the chest, like some beast tearing up the earth. 'She had better have stolen moneyall my moneyI haven't much! She had better have made me a beggar than have done this!'

'Done what?' said Ralph. 'Done what, you devil's dotard?'

Still Gride made no answer, but tore and scratched among the papers, and yelled and screeched like a fiend in torment.

'There is something missing, you say,' said Ralph, shaking him furiously by the collar. 'What is it?'

'Papers, deeds. I am a ruined man. Lost, lost! I am robbed, I am ruined! She

saw me reading itreading it of lateI did very oftenShe watched me, saw me put it in the box that fitted into this, the box is gone, she has stolen it. Damnation seize her, she has robbed me!'

'Of WHAT?' cried Ralph, on whom a sudden light appeared to break, for his eyes flashed and his frame trembled with agitation as he clutched Gride by his bony arm. 'Of what?'

'She don't know what it is; she can't read!' shrieked Gride, not heeding the inquiry. 'There's only one way in which money can be made of it, and that is by taking it to her. Somebody will read it for her, and tell her what to do. She and her accomplice will get money for it and be let off besides; they'll make a merit of itsay they found itknew itand be evidence against me. The only person it will fall upon is me, me, me!'

'Patience!' said Ralph, clutching him still tighter and eyeing him with a sidelong look, so fixed and eager as sufficiently to denote that he had some hidden purpose in what he was about to say. 'Hear reason. She can't have been gone long. I'll call the police. Do you but give information of what she has stolen, and they'll lay hands upon her, trust me. Here! Help!'

'No, no, no!' screamed the old man, putting his hand on Ralph's mouth. 'I can't, I daren't.'

'Help! help!' cried Ralph.

'No, no, no!' shrieked the other, stamping on the ground with the energy of a madman. 'I tell you no. I daren't, I daren't!'

'Daren't make this robbery public?' said Ralph.

'No!' rejoined Gride, wringing his hands. 'Hush! Hush! Not a word of this; not a word must be said. I am undone. Whichever way I turn, I am undone. I am betrayed. I shall be given up. I shall die in Newgate!'

With frantic exclamations such as these, and with many others in which fear, grief, and rage, were strangely blended, the panicstricken wretch gradually subdued his first loud outcry, until it had softened down into a low despairing moan, chequered now and then by a howl, as, going over such papers as were left in the chest, he discovered some new loss. With very little excuse for departing so abruptly, Ralph left him, and, greatly disappointing the loiterers outside the house by telling them there was nothing the matter, got into the coach, and was driven to his own home.

A letter lay on his table. He let it lie there for some time, as if he had not the courage to open it, but at length did so and turned deadly pale.

'The worst has happened,' he said; 'the house has failed. I see. The rumour was abroad in the city last night, and reached the ears of those merchants. Well, well!'

He strode violently up and down the room and stopped again.

'Ten thousand pounds! And only lying there for a dayfor one day! How many anxious years, how many pinching days and sleepless nights, before I scraped together that ten thousand pounds!Ten thousand pounds! How many proud painted dames would have fawned and smiled, and how many spendthrift blockheads done me lipservice to my face and cursed me in their hearts, while I turned that ten thousand pounds into twenty! While I ground, and pinched, and used these needy borrowers for my pleasure and profit, what smoothtongued speeches, and courteous looks, and civil letters, they would have given me! The cant of the lying world is, that men like me compass our riches by dissimulation and treachery: by fawning, cringing, and stooping. Why, how many lies, what mean and abject evasions, what humbled behaviour from upstarts who, but for my money, would spurn me aside as they do their betters every day, would that ten thousand pounds have brought me in! Grant that I had doubled itmade cent. per cent.for every sovereign told anotherthere would not be one piece of money in all the heap which wouldn't represent ten thousand mean and paltry lies, told, not by the moneylender, oh no! but by the moneyborrowers, your liberal, thoughtless, generous, dashing folks, who wouldn't be so mean as save a sixpence for the world!'

Striving, as it would seem, to lose part of the bitterness of his regrets in the bitterness of these other thoughts, Ralph continued to pace the room. There was less and less of resolution in his manner as his mind gradually reverted to his loss; at length, dropping into his elbowchair and grasping its sides so firmly that they creaked again, he said:

'The time has been when nothing could have moved me like the loss of this great sum. Nothing. For births, deaths, marriages, and all the events which are of interest to most men, have (unless they are connected with gain or loss of money) no interest for me. But now, I swear, I mix up with the loss, his triumph in telling it. If he had brought it about,I almost feel as if he had,I couldn't hate him more. Let me but retaliate upon him, by degrees, however slowlet me but begin to get the better of him, let me but turn the scaleand I can bear it.'

His meditations were long and deep. They terminated in his dispatching a letter by Newman, addressed to Mr Squeers at the Saracen's Head, with instructions to inquire whether he had arrived in town, and, if so, to wait an answer. Newman brought back the information that Mr Squeers had come by

mail that morning, and had received the letter in bed; but that he sent his duty, and word that he would get up and wait upon Mr Nickleby directly.

The interval between the delivery of this message, and the arrival of Mr Squeers, was very short; but, before he came, Ralph had suppressed every sign of emotion, and once more regained the hard, immovable, inflexible manner which was habitual to him, and to which, perhaps, was ascribable no small part of the influence which, over many men of no very strong prejudices on the score of morality, he could exert, almost at will.

'Well, Mr Squeers,' he said, welcoming that worthy with his accustomed smile, of which a sharp look and a thoughtful frown were part and parcel: 'how do YOU do?'

'Why, sir,' said Mr Squeers, 'I'm pretty well. So's the family, and so's the boys, except for a sort of rash as is a running through the school, and rather puts 'em off their feed. But it's a ill wind as blows no good to nobody; that's what I always say when them lads has a wisitation. A wisitation, sir, is the lot of mortality. Mortality itself, sir, is a wisitation. The world is chock full of wisitations; and if a boy repines at a wisitation and makes you uncomfortable with his noise, he must have his head punched. That's going according to the Scripter, that is.'

'Mr Squeers,' said Ralph, drily.

'Sir.'

'We'll avoid these precious morsels of morality if you please, and talk of business.'

'With all my heart, sir,' rejoined Squeers, 'and first let me say'

'First let ME say, if you please.Noggs!'

Newman presented himself when the summons had been twice or thrice repeated, and asked if his master called.

'I did. Go to your dinner. And go at once. Do you hear?'

'It an't time,' said Newman, doggedly.

'My time is yours, and I say it is,' returned Ralph.

'You alter it every day,' said Newman. 'It isn't fair.'

'You don't keep many cooks, and can easily apologise to them for the trouble,' retorted Ralph. 'Begone, sir!'

Ralph not only issued this order in his most peremptory manner, but, under pretence of fetching some papers from the little office, saw it obeyed, and, when Newman had left the house, chained the door, to prevent the possibility of his returning secretly, by means of his latchkey.

'I have reason to suspect that fellow,' said Ralph, when he returned to his own office. 'Therefore, until I have thought of the shortest and least troublesome way of ruining him, I hold it best to keep him at a distance.'

'It wouldn't take much to ruin him, I should think,' said Squeers, with a grin.

'Perhaps not,' answered Ralph. 'Nor to ruin a great many people whom I know. You were going to say?'

Ralph's summary and matterofcourse way of holding up this example, and throwing out the hint that followed it, had evidently an effect (as doubtless it was designed to have) upon Mr Squeers, who said, after a little hesitation and in a much more subdued tone:

'Why, what I was agoing to say, sir, is, that this here business regarding of that ungrateful and hardhearted chap, Snawley senior, puts me out of my way, and occasions a inconveniency quite unparalleled, besides, as I may say, making, for whole weeks together, Mrs Squeers a perfect widder. It's a pleasure to me to act with you, of course.'

'Of course,' said Ralph, drily.

'Yes, I say of course,' resumed Mr Squeers, rubbing his knees, 'but at the same time, when one comes, as I do now, better than two hundred and fifty mile to take a afferdavid, it does put a man out a good deal, letting alone the risk.'

'And where may the risk be, Mr Squeers?' said Ralph.

'I said, letting alone the risk,' replied Squeers, evasively.

'And I said, where was the risk?'

'I wasn't complaining, you know, Mr Nickleby,' pleaded Squeers. 'Upon my word I never see such a'

'I ask you where is the risk?' repeated Ralph, emphatically.

'Where the risk?' returned Squeers, rubbing his knees still harder. 'Why, it an't necessary to mention. Certain subjects is best awoided. Oh, you know what risk I mean.'

'How often have I told you,' said Ralph, 'and how often am I to tell you, that

you run no risk? What have you sworn, or what are you asked to swear, but that at such and such a time a boy was left with you in the name of Smike; that he was at your school for a given number of years, was lost under such and such circumstances, is now found, and has been identified by you in such and such keeping? This is all true; is it not?'

'Yes,' replied Squeers, 'that's all true.'

'Well, then,' said Ralph, 'what risk do you run? Who swears to a lie but Snawley; a man whom I have paid much less than I have you?'

'He certainly did it cheap, did Snawley,' observed Squeers.

'He did it cheap!' retorted Ralph, testily; 'yes, and he did it well, and carries it off with a hypocritical face and a sanctified air, but you! Risk! What do you mean by risk? The certificates are all genuine, Snawley HAD another son, he HAS been married twice, his first wife IS dead, none but her ghost could tell that she didn't write that letter, none but Snawley himself can tell that this is not his son, and that his son is food for worms! The only perjury is Snawley's, and I fancy he is pretty well used to it. Where's your risk?'

'Why, you know,' said Squeers, fidgeting in his chair, 'if you come to that, I might say where's yours?'

'You might say where's mine!' returned Ralph; 'you may say where's mine. I don't appear in the business, neither do you. All Snawley's interest is to stick well to the story he has told; and all his risk is, to depart from it in the least. Talk of YOUR risk in the conspiracy!'

'I say,' remonstrated Squeers, looking uneasily round: 'don't call it that! Just as a favour, don't.'

'Call it what you like,' said Ralph, irritably, 'but attend to me. This tale was originally fabricated as a means of annoyance against one who hurt your trade and half cudgelled you to death, and to enable you to obtain repossession of a halfdead drudge, whom you wished to regain, because, while you wreaked your vengeance on him for his share in the business, you knew that the knowledge that he was again in your power would be the best punishment you could inflict upon your enemy. Is that so, Mr Squeers?'

'Why, sir,' returned Squeers, almost overpowered by the determination which Ralph displayed to make everything tell against him, and by his stern unyielding manner, 'in a measure it was.'

'What does that mean?' said Ralph.

'Why, in a measure means,' returned Squeers, 'as it may be, that it wasn't all on my account, because you had some old grudge to satisfy, too.'

'If I had not had,' said Ralph, in no way abashed by the reminder, 'do you think I should have helped you?'

'Why no, I don't suppose you would,' Squeers replied. 'I only wanted that point to be all square and straight between us.'

'How can it ever be otherwise?' retorted Ralph. 'Except that the account is against me, for I spend money to gratify my hatred, and you pocket it, and gratify yours at the same time. You are, at least, as avaricious as you are revengeful. So am I. Which is best off? You, who win money and revenge, at the same time and by the same process, and who are, at all events, sure of money, if not of revenge; or I, who am only sure of spending money in any case, and can but win bare revenge at last?'

As Mr Squeers could only answer this proposition by shrugs and smiles, Ralph bade him be silent, and thankful that he was so well off; and then, fixing his eyes steadily upon him, proceeded to say:

First, that Nicholas had thwarted him in a plan he had formed for the disposal in marriage of a certain young lady, and had, in the confusion attendant on her father's sudden death, secured that lady himself, and borne her off in triumph.

Secondly, that by some will or settlementcertainly by some instrument in writing, which must contain the young lady's name, and could be, therefore, easily selected from others, if access to the place where it was deposited were once securedshe was entitled to property which, if the existence of this deed ever became known to her, would make her husband (and Ralph represented that Nicholas was certain to marry her) a rich and prosperous man, and most formidable enemy.

Thirdly, that this deed had been, with others, stolen from one who had himself obtained or concealed it fraudulently, and who feared to take any steps for its recovery; and that he (Ralph) knew the thief.

To all this Mr Squeers listened, with greedy ears that devoured every syllable, and with his one eye and his mouth wide open: marvelling for what special reason he was honoured with so much of Ralph's confidence, and to what it all tended.

'Now,' said Ralph, leaning forward, and placing his hand on Squeers's arm, 'hear the design which I have conceived, and which I mustI say, must, if I can ripen ithave carried into execution. No advantage can be reaped from this

deed, whatever it is, save by the girl herself, or her husband; and the possession of this deed by one or other of them is indispensable to any advantage being gained. THAT I have discovered beyond the possibility of doubt. I want that deed brought here, that I may give the man who brings it fifty pounds in gold, and burn it to ashes before his face.'

Mr Squeers, after following with his eye the action of Ralph's hand towards the fireplace as if he were at that moment consuming the paper, drew a long breath, and said:

'Yes; but who's to bring it?'

'Nobody, perhaps, for much is to be done before it can be got at,' said Ralph. 'But if anybodyyou!'

Mr Squeers's first tokens of consternation, and his flat relinquishment of the task, would have staggered most men, if they had not immediately occasioned an utter abandonment of the proposition. On Ralph they produced not the slightest effect. Resuming, when the schoolmaster had quite talked himself out of breath, as coolly as if he had never been interrupted, Ralph proceeded to expatiate on such features of the case as he deemed it most advisable to lay the greatest stress on.

These were, the age, decrepitude, and weakness of Mrs Sliderskew; the great improbability of her having any accomplice or even acquaintance: taking into account her secluded habits, and her long residence in such a house as Gride's; the strong reason there was to suppose that the robbery was not the result of a concerted plan: otherwise she would have watched an opportunity of carrying off a sum of money; the difficulty she would be placed in when she began to think on what she had done, and found herself encumbered with documents of whose nature she was utterly ignorant; and the comparative ease with which somebody, with a full knowledge of her position, obtaining access to her, and working on her fears, if necessary, might worm himself into her confidence and obtain, under one pretence or another, free possession of the deed. To these were added such considerations as the constant residence of Mr Squeers at a long distance from London, which rendered his association with Mrs Sliderskew a mere masquerading frolic, in which nobody was likely to recognise him, either at the time or afterwards; the impossibility of Ralph's undertaking the task himself, he being already known to her by sight; and various comments on the uncommon tact and experience of Mr Squeers: which would make his overreaching one old woman a mere matter of child's play and amusement. In addition to these influences and persuasions, Ralph drew, with his utmost skill and power, a vivid picture of the defeat which Nicholas would sustain, should they succeed, in linking himself to a beggar,

where he expected to wed an heiressglanced at the immeasurable importance it must be to a man situated as Squeers, to preserve such a friend as himselfdwelt on a long train of benefits, conferred since their first acquaintance, when he had reported favourably of his treatment of a sickly boy who had died under his hands (and whose death was very convenient to Ralph and his clients, but this he did NOT say), and finally hinted that the fifty pounds might be increased to seventyfive, or, in the event of very great success, even to a hundred.

These arguments at length concluded, Mr Squeers crossed his legs, uncrossed them, scratched his head, rubbed his eye, examined the palms of his hands, and bit his nails, and after exhibiting many other signs of restlessness and indecision, asked 'whether one hundred pound was the highest that Mr Nickleby could go.' Being answered in the affirmative, he became restless again, and, after some thought, and an unsuccessful inquiry 'whether he couldn't go another fifty,' said he supposed he must try and do the most he could for a friend: which was always his maxim, and therefore he undertook the job.

'But how are you to get at the woman?' he said; 'that's what it is as puzzles me.'

'I may not get at her at all,' replied Ralph, 'but I'll try. I have hunted people in this city, before now, who have been better hid than she; and I know quarters in which a guinea or two, carefully spent, will often solve darker riddles than this. Ay, and keep them close too, if need be! I hear my man ringing at the door. We may as well part. You had better not come to and fro, but wait till you hear from me.'

'Good!' returned Squeers. 'I say! If you shouldn't find her out, you'll pay expenses at the Saracen, and something for loss of time?'

'Well,' said Ralph, testily; 'yes! You have nothing more to say?'

Squeers shaking his head, Ralph accompanied him to the streetdoor, and audibly wondering, for the edification of Newman, why it was fastened as if it were night, let him in and Squeers out, and returned to his own room.

'Now!' he muttered, 'come what come may, for the present I am firm and unshaken. Let me but retrieve this one small portion of my loss and disgrace; let me but defeat him in this one hope, dear to his heart as I know it must be; let me but do this; and it shall be the first link in such a chain which I will wind about him, as never man forged yet.'

CHAPTER 57

How Ralph Nickleby's Auxiliary went about his Work, and how he prospered with it

It was a dark, wet, gloomy night in autumn, when in an upper room of a mean house situated in an obscure street, or rather court, near Lambeth, there sat, all alone, a oneeyed man grotesquely habited, either for lack of better garments or for purposes of disguise, in a loose greatcoat, with arms half as long again as his own, and a capacity of breadth and length which would have admitted of his winding himself in it, head and all, with the utmost ease, and without any risk of straining the old and greasy material of which it was composed.

So attired, and in a place so far removed from his usual haunts and occupations, and so very poor and wretched in its character, perhaps Mrs Squeers herself would have had some difficulty in recognising her lord: quickened though her natural sagacity doubtless would have been by the affectionate yearnings and impulses of a tender wife. But Mrs Squeers's lord it was; and in a tolerably disconsolate mood Mrs Squeers's lord appeared to be, as, helping himself from a black bottle which stood on the table beside him, he cast round the chamber a look, in which very slight regard for the objects within view was plainly mingled with some regretful and impatient recollection of distant scenes and persons.

There were, certainly, no particular attractions, either in the room over which the glance of Mr Squeers so discontentedly wandered, or in the narrow street into which it might have penetrated, if he had thought fit to approach the window. The attic chamber in which he sat was bare and mean; the bedstead, and such few other articles of necessary furniture as it contained, were of the commonest description, in a most crazy state, and of a most uninviting appearance. The street was muddy, dirty, and deserted. Having but one outlet, it was traversed by few but the inhabitants at any time; and the night being one of those on which most people are glad to be within doors, it now presented no other signs of life than the dull glimmering of poor candles from the dirty windows, and few sounds but the pattering of the rain, and occasionally the heavy closing of some creaking door.

Mr Squeers continued to look disconsolately about him, and to listen to these noises in profound silence, broken only by the rustling of his large coat, as he now and then moved his arm to raise his glass to his lips. Mr Squeers continued to do this for some time, until the increasing gloom warned him to snuff the candle. Seeming to be slightly roused by this exertion, he raised his eye to the ceiling, and fixing it upon some uncouth and fantastic figures,

traced upon it by the wet and damp which had penetrated through the roof, broke into the following soliloquy:

'Well, this is a pretty go, is this here! An uncommon pretty go! Here have I been, a matter of how many weekshard upon sixa follering up this here blessed old dowager petty larcenerer,'Mr Squeers delivered himself of this epithet with great difficulty and effort,'and Dotheboys Hall arunning itself regularly to seed the while! That's the worst of ever being in with a owdacious chap like that old Nickleby. You never know when he's done with you, and if you're in for a penny, you're in for a pound.'

This remark, perhaps, reminded Mr Squeers that he was in for a hundred pound at any rate. His countenance relaxed, and he raised his glass to his mouth with an air of greater enjoyment of its contents than he had before evinced.

'I never see,' soliloquised Mr Squeers in continuation, 'I never see nor come across such a file as that old Nickleby. Never! He's out of everybody's depth, he is. He's what you may call a rasper, is Nickleby. To see how sly and cunning he grubbed on, day after day, aworming and plodding and tracing and turning and twining of hisself about, till he found out where this precious Mrs Peg was hid, and cleared the ground for me to work upon. Creeping and crawling and gliding, like a ugly, old, brighteyed, stagnationblooded adder! Ah! He'd have made a good 'un in our line, but it would have been too limited for him; his genius would have busted all bonds, and coming over every obstacle, broke down all before it, till it erected itself into a monneyment ofWell, I'll think of the rest, and say it when conwenient.'

Making a halt in his reflections at this place, Mr Squeers again put his glass to his lips, and drawing a dirty letter from his pocket, proceeded to con over its contents with the air of a man who had read it very often, and now refreshed his memory rather in the absence of better amusement than for any specific information.

'The pigs is well,' said Mr Squeers, 'the cows is well, and the boys is bobbish. Young Sprouter has been awinking, has he? I'll wink him when I get back. "Cobbey would persist in sniffing while he was aeating his dinner, and said that the beef was so strong it made him."Very good, Cobbey, we'll see if we can't make you sniff a little without beef. "Pitcher was took with another fever,"of course he was"and being fetched by his friends, died the day after he got home,"of course he did, and out of aggravation; it's part of a deeplaid system. There an't another chap in the school but that boy as would have died exactly at the end of the quarter: taking it out of me to the very last, and then carrying his spite to the utmost extremity. "The juniorest Palmer said he

wished he was in Heaven." I really don't know, I do NOT know what's to be done with that young fellow; he's always awishing something horrid. He said once, he wished he was a donkey, because then he wouldn't have a father as didn't love him! Pretty wicious that for a child of six!'

Mr Squeers was so much moved by the contemplation of this hardened nature in one so young, that he angrily put up the letter, and sought, in a new train of ideas, a subject of consolation.

'It's a long time to have been alingering in London,' he said; 'and this is a precious hole to come and live in, even if it has been only for a week or so. Still, one hundred pound is five boys, and five boys takes a whole year to pay one hundred pounds, and there's their keep to be substracted, besides. There's nothing lost, neither, by one's being here; because the boys' money comes in just the same as if I was at home, and Mrs Squeers she keeps them in order. There'll be some lost time to make up, of course. There'll be an arrear of flogging as'll have to be gone through: still, a couple of days makes that all right, and one don't mind a little extra work for one hundred pound. It's pretty nigh the time to wait upon the old woman. From what she said last night, I suspect that if I'm to succeed at all, I shall succeed tonight; so I'll have half a glass more, to wish myself success, and put myself in spirits. Mrs Squeers, my dear, your health!'

Leering with his one eye as if the lady to whom he drank had been actually present, Mr Squeersin his enthusiasm, no doubtpoured out a full glass, and emptied it; and as the liquor was raw spirits, and he had applied himself to the same bottle more than once already, it is not surprising that he found himself, by this time, in an extremely cheerful state, and quite enough excited for his purpose.

What this purpose was soon appeared; for, after a few turns about the room to steady himself, he took the bottle under his arm and the glass in his hand, and blowing out the candle as if he purposed being gone some time, stole out upon the staircase, and creeping softly to a door opposite his own, tapped gently at it.

'But what's the use of tapping?' he said, 'She'll never hear. I suppose she isn't doing anything very particular; and if she is, it don't much matter, that I see.'

With this brief preface, Mr Squeers applied his hand to the latch of the door, and thrusting his head into a garret far more deplorable than that he had just left, and seeing that there was nobody there but an old woman, who was bending over a wretched fire (for although the weather was still warm, the evening was chilly), walked in, and tapped her on the shoulder.

'Well, my Slider,' said Mr Squeers, jocularly.

'Is that you?' inquired Peg.

'Ah! it's me, and me's the first person singular, nominative case, agreeing with the verb "it's", and governed by Squeers understood, as a acorn, a hour; but when the h is sounded, the a only is to be used, as a and, a art, a ighway,' replied Mr Squeers, quoting at random from the grammar. 'At least, if it isn't, you don't know any better, and if it is, I've done it accidentally.'

Delivering this reply in his accustomed tone of voice, in which of course it was inaudible to Peg, Mr Squeers drew a stool to the fire, and placing himself over against her, and the bottle and glass on the floor between them, roared out again, very loud,

'Well, my Slider!'

'I hear you,' said Peg, receiving him very graciously.

'I've come according to promise,' roared Squeers.

'So they used to say in that part of the country I come from,' observed Peg, complacently, 'but I think oil's better.'

'Better than what?' roared Squeers, adding some rather strong language in an undertone.

'No,' said Peg, 'of course not.'

'I never saw such a monster as you are!' muttered Squeers, looking as amiable as he possibly could the while; for Peg's eye was upon him, and she was chuckling fearfully, as though in delight at having made a choice repartee, 'Do you see this? This is a bottle.'

'I see it,' answered Peg.

'Well, and do you see THIS?' bawled Squeers. 'This is a glass.' Peg saw that too.

'See here, then,' said Squeers, accompanying his remarks with appropriate action, 'I fill the glass from the bottle, and I say "Your health, Slider," and empty it; then I rinse it genteelly with a little drop, which I'm forced to throw into the firehallo! we shall have the chimbley alight nextfill it again, and hand it over to you.'

'YOUR health,' said Peg.

'She understands that, anyways,' muttered Squeers, watching Mrs Sliderskew as she dispatched her portion, and choked and gasped in a most awful manner after so doing. 'Now then, let's have a talk. How's the rheumatics?'

Mrs Sliderskew, with much blinking and chuckling, and with looks expressive of her strong admiration of Mr Squeers, his person, manners, and conversation, replied that the rheumatics were better.

'What's the reason,' said Mr Squeers, deriving fresh facetiousness from the bottle; 'what's the reason of rheumatics? What do they mean? What do people have'em foreh?'

Mrs Sliderskew didn't know, but suggested that it was possibly because they couldn't help it.

'Measles, rheumatics, hoopingcough, fevers, agers, and lumbagers,' said Mr Squeers, 'is all philosophy together; that's what it is. The heavenly bodies is philosophy, and the earthly bodies is philosophy. If there's a screw loose in a heavenly body, that's philosophy; and if there's screw loose in a earthly body, that's philosophy too; or it may be that sometimes there's a little metaphysics in it, but that's not often. Philosophy's the chap for me. If a parent asks a question in the classical, commercial, or mathematical line, says I, gravely, "Why, sir, in the first place, are you a philosopher?""No, Mr Squeers," he says, "I an't." "Then, sir," says I, "I am sorry for you, for I shan't be able to explain it." Naturally, the parent goes away and wishes he was a philosopher, and, equally naturally, thinks I'm one.'

Saying this, and a great deal more, with tipsy profundity and a seriocomic air, and keeping his eye all the time on Mrs Sliderskew, who was unable to hear one word, Mr Squeers concluded by helping himself and passing the bottle: to which Peg did becoming reverence.

'That's the time of day!' said Mr Squeers. 'You look twenty pound ten better than you did.'

Again Mrs Sliderskew chuckled, but modesty forbade her assenting verbally to the compliment.

'Twenty pound ten better,' repeated Mr Squeers, 'than you did that day when I first introduced myself. Don't you know?'

'Ah!' said Peg, shaking her head, 'but you frightened me that day.'

'Did I?' said Squeers; 'well, it was rather a startling thing for a stranger to come and recommend himself by saying that he knew all about you, and what your name was, and why you were living so quiet here, and what you had boned,

and who you boned it from, wasn't it?'

Peg nodded her head in strong assent.

'But I know everything that happens in that way, you see,' continued Squeers. 'Nothing takes place, of that kind, that I an't up to entirely. I'm a sort of a lawyer, Slider, of firstrate standing, and understanding too; I'm the intimate friend and confidential adwiser of pretty nigh every man, woman, and child that gets themselves into difficulties by being too nimble with their fingers, I'm'

Mr Squeers's catalogue of his own merits and accomplishments, which was partly the result of a concerted plan between himself and Ralph Nickleby, and flowed, in part, from the black bottle, was here interrupted by Mrs Sliderskew.

'Ha, ha, ha!' she cried, folding her arms and wagging her head; 'and so he wasn't married after all, wasn't he. Not married after all?'

'No,' replied Squeers, 'that he wasn't!'

'And a young lover come and carried off the bride, eh?' said Peg.

'From under his very nose,' replied Squeers; 'and I'm told the young chap cut up rough besides, and broke the winders, and forced him to swaller his wedding favour which nearly choked him.'

'Tell me all about it again,' cried Peg, with a malicious relish of her old master's defeat, which made her natural hideousness something quite fearful; 'let's hear it all again, beginning at the beginning now, as if you'd never told me. Let's have it every wordnownowbeginning at the very first, you know, when he went to the house that morning!'

Mr Squeers, plying Mrs Sliderskew freely with the liquor, and sustaining himself under the exertion of speaking so loud by frequent applications to it himself, complied with this request by describing the discomfiture of Arthur Gride, with such improvements on the truth as happened to occur to him, and the ingenious invention and application of which had been very instrumental in recommending him to her notice in the beginning of their acquaintance. Mrs Sliderskew was in an ecstasy of delight, rolling her head about, drawing up her skinny shoulders, and wrinkling her cadaverous face into so many and such complicated forms of ugliness, as awakened the unbounded astonishment and disgust even of Mr Squeers.

'He's a treacherous old goat,' said Peg, 'and cozened me with cunning tricks and lying promises, but never mind. I'm even with him. I'm even with him.'

'More than even, Slider,' returned Squeers; 'you'd have been even with him if he'd got married; but with the disappointment besides, you're a long way ahead. Out of sight, Slider, quite out of sight. And that reminds me,' he added, handing her the glass, 'if you want me to give you my opinion of them deeds, and tell you what you'd better keep and what you'd better burn, why, now's your time, Slider.'

'There an't no hurry for that,' said Peg, with several knowing looks and winks.

'Oh! very well!' observed Squeers, 'it don't matter to me; you asked me, you know. I shouldn't charge you nothing, being a friend. You're the best judge of course. But you're a bold woman, Slider.'

'How do you mean, bold?' said Peg.

'Why, I only mean that if it was me, I wouldn't keep papers as might hang me, littering about when they might be turned into moneythem as wasn't useful made away with, and them as was, laid by somewheres, safe; that's all,' returned Squeers; 'but everybody's the best judge of their own affairs. All I say is, Slider, I wouldn't do it.'

'Come,' said Peg, 'then you shall see 'em.'

'I don't want to see 'em,' replied Squeers, affecting to be out of humour; 'don't talk as if it was a treat. Show 'em to somebody else, and take their advice.'

Mr Squeers would, very likely, have carried on the farce of being offended a little longer, if Mrs Sliderskew, in her anxiety to restore herself to her former high position in his good graces, had not become so extremely affectionate that he stood at some risk of being smothered by her caresses. Repressing, with as good a grace as possible, these little familiaritiesfor which, there is reason to believe, the black bottle was at least as much to blame as any constitutional infirmity on the part of Mrs Sliderskewhe protested that he had only been joking: and, in proof of his unimpaired goodhumour, that he was ready to examine the deeds at once, if, by so doing, he could afford any satisfaction or relief of mind to his fair friend.

'And now you're up, my Slider,' bawled Squeers, as she rose to fetch them, 'bolt the door.'

Peg trotted to the door, and after fumbling at the bolt, crept to the other end of the room, and from beneath the coals which filled the bottom of the cupboard, drew forth a small deal box. Having placed this on the floor at Squeers's feet, she brought, from under the pillow of her bed, a small key, with which she signed to that gentleman to open it. Mr Squeers, who had eagerly followed her

every motion, lost no time in obeying this hint: and, throwing back the lid, gazed with rapture on the documents which lay within.

'Now you see,' said Peg, kneeling down on the floor beside him, and staying his impatient hand; 'what's of no use we'll burn; what we can get any money by, we'll keep; and if there's any we could get him into trouble by, and fret and waste away his heart to shreds, those we'll take particular care of; for that's what I want to do, and what I hoped to do when I left him.'

'I thought,' said Squeers, 'that you didn't bear him any particular goodwill. But, I say, why didn't you take some money besides?'

'Some what?' asked Peg.

'Some money,' roared Squeers. 'I do believe the woman hears me, and wants to make me break a wessel, so that she may have the pleasure of nursing me. Some money, Slider, money!'

'Why, what a man you are to ask!' cried Peg, with some contempt. 'If I had taken money from Arthur Gride, he'd have scoured the whole earth to find meaye, and he'd have smelt it out, and raked it up, somehow, if I had buried it at the bottom of the deepest well in England. No, no! I knew better than that. I took what I thought his secrets were hid in: and them he couldn't afford to make public, let'em be worth ever so much money. He's an old dog; a sly, old, cunning, thankless dog! He first starved, and then tricked me; and if I could I'd kill him.'

'All right, and very laudable,' said Squeers. 'But, first and foremost, Slider, burn the box. You should never keep things as may lead to discovery. Always mind that. So while you pull it to pieces (which you can easily do, for it's very old and rickety) and burn it in little bits, I'll look over the papers and tell you what they are.'

Peg, expressing her acquiescence in this arrangement, Mr Squeers turned the box bottom upwards, and tumbling the contents upon the floor, handed it to her; the destruction of the box being an extemporary device for engaging her attention, in case it should prove desirable to distract it from his own proceedings.

'There!' said Squeers; 'you poke the pieces between the bars, and make up a good fire, and I'll read the while. Let me see, let me see.' And taking the candle down beside him, Mr Squeers, with great eagerness and a cunning grin overspreading his face, entered upon his task of examination.

If the old woman had not been very deaf, she must have heard, when she last

went to the door, the breathing of two persons close behind it: and if those two persons had been unacquainted with her infirmity, they must probably have chosen that moment either for presenting themselves or taking to flight. But, knowing with whom they had to deal, they remained quite still, and now, not only appeared unobserved at the doorwhich was not bolted, for the bolt had no haspbut warily, and with noiseless footsteps, advanced into the room.

As they stole farther and farther in by slight and scarcely perceptible degrees, and with such caution that they scarcely seemed to breathe, the old hag and Squeers little dreaming of any such invasion, and utterly unconscious of there being any soul near but themselves, were busily occupied with their tasks. The old woman, with her wrinkled face close to the bars of the stove, puffing at the dull embers which had not yet caught the wood; Squeers stooping down to the candle, which brought out the full ugliness of his face, as the light of the fire did that of his companion; both intently engaged, and wearing faces of exultation which contrasted strongly with the anxious looks of those behind, who took advantage of the slightest sound to cover their advance, and, almost before they had moved an inch, and all was silent, stopped again. This, with the large bare room, damp walls, and flickering doubtful light, combined to form a scene which the most careless and indifferent spectator (could any have been present) could scarcely have failed to derive some interest from, and would not readily have forgotten.

Of the stealthy comers, Frank Cheeryble was one, and Newman Noggs the other. Newman had caught up, by the rusty nozzle, an old pair of bellows, which were just undergoing a flourish in the air preparatory to a descent upon the head of Mr Squeers, when Frank, with an earnest gesture, stayed his arm, and, taking another step in advance, came so close behind the schoolmaster that, by leaning slightly forward, he could plainly distinguish the writing which he held up to his eye.

Mr Squeers, not being remarkably erudite, appeared to be considerably puzzled by this first prize, which was in an engrossing hand, and not very legible except to a practised eye. Having tried it by reading from left to right, and from right to left, and finding it equally clear both ways, he turned it upside down with no better success.

'Ha, ha, ha!' chuckled Peg, who, on her knees before the fire, was feeding it with fragments of the box, and grinning in most devilish exultation. 'What's that writing about, eh?'

'Nothing particular,' replied Squeers, tossing it towards her. 'It's only an old lease, as well as I can make out. Throw it in the fire.'

Mrs Sliderskew complied, and inquired what the next one was.

'This,' said Squeers, 'is a bundle of overdue acceptances and renewed bills of six or eight young gentlemen, but they're all MPs, so it's of no use to anybody. Throw it in the fire!' Peg did as she was bidden, and waited for the next.

'This,' said Squeers, 'seems to be some deed of sale of the right of presentation to the rectory of Purechurch, in the valley of Cashup. Take care of that, Slider, literally for God's sake. It'll fetch its price at the Auction Mart.'

'What's the next?' inquired Peg.

'Why, this,' said Squeers, 'seems, from the two letters that's with it, to be a bond from a curate down in the country, to pay half a year's wages of forty pound for borrowing twenty. Take care of that, for if he don't pay it, his bishop will very soon be down upon him. We know what the camel and the needle's eye means; no man as can't live upon his income, whatever it is, must expect to go to heaven at any price. It's very odd; I don't see anything like it yet.'

'What's the matter?' said Peg.

'Nothing,' replied Squeers, 'only I'm looking for'

Newman raised the bellows again. Once more, Frank, by a rapid motion of his arm, unaccompanied by any noise, checked him in his purpose.

'Here you are,' said Squeers, 'bondstake care of them. Warrant of attorneytake care of that. Two cognovitstake care of them. Lease and releaseburn that. Ah! "Madeline Braycome of age or marrythe said Madeline"here, burn THAT!'

Eagerly throwing towards the old woman a parchment that he caught up for the purpose, Squeers, as she turned her head, thrust into the breast of his large coat, the deed in which these words had caught his eye, and burst into a shout of triumph.

'I've got it!' said Squeers. 'I've got it! Hurrah! The plan was a good one, though the chance was desperate, and the day's our own at last!'

Peg demanded what he laughed at, but no answer was returned. Newman's arm could no longer be restrained; the bellows, descending heavily and with unerring aim on the very centre of Mr Squeers's head, felled him to the floor, and stretched him on it flat and senseless.

CHAPTER 58

In which one Scene of this History is closed

Dividing the distance into two days' journey, in order that his charge might sustain the less exhaustion and fatigue from travelling so far, Nicholas, at the end of the second day from their leaving home, found himself within a very few miles of the spot where the happiest years of his life had been passed, and which, while it filled his mind with pleasant and peaceful thoughts, brought back many painful and vivid recollections of the circumstances in which he and his had wandered forth from their old home, cast upon the rough world and the mercy of strangers.

It needed no such reflections as those which the memory of old days, and wanderings among scenes where our childhood has been passed, usually awaken in the most insensible minds, to soften the heart of Nicholas, and render him more than usually mindful of his drooping friend. By night and day, at all times and seasons: always watchful, attentive, and solicitous, and never varying in the discharge of his selfimposed duty to one so friendless and helpless as he whose sands of life were now fast running out and dwindling rapidly away: he was ever at his side. He never left him. To encourage and animate him, administer to his wants, support and cheer him to the utmost of his power, was now his constant and unceasing occupation.

They procured a humble lodging in a small farmhouse, surrounded by meadows where Nicholas had often revelled when a child with a troop of merry schoolfellows; and here they took up their rest.

At first, Smike was strong enough to walk about, for short distances at a time, with no other support or aid than that which Nicholas could afford him. At this time, nothing appeared to interest him so much as visiting those places which had been most familiar to his friend in bygone days. Yielding to this fancy, and pleased to find that its indulgence beguiled the sick boy of many tedious hours, and never failed to afford him matter for thought and conversation afterwards, Nicholas made such spots the scenes of their daily rambles: driving him from place to place in a little ponychair, and supporting him on his arm while they walked slowly among these old haunts, or lingered in the sunlight to take long parting looks of those which were most quiet and beautiful.

It was on such occasions as these, that Nicholas, yielding almost unconsciously to the interest of old associations, would point out some tree that he had climbed, a hundred times, to peep at the young birds in their nest;

and the branch from which he used to shout to little Kate, who stood below terrified at the height he had gained, and yet urging him higher still by the intensity of her admiration. There was the old house too, which they would pass every day, looking up at the tiny window through which the sun used to stream in and wake him on the summer morningsthey were all summer mornings thenand climbing up the gardenwall and looking over, Nicholas could see the very rosebush which had come, a present to Kate, from some little lover, and she had planted with her own hands. There were the hedgerows where the brother and sister had so often gathered wild flowers together, and the green fields and shady paths where they had so often strayed. There was not a lane, or brook, or copse, or cottage near, with which some childish event was not entwined, and back it came upon the mindas events of childhood donothing in itself: perhaps a word, a laugh, a look, some slight distress, a passing thought or fear: and yet more strongly and distinctly marked, and better remembered, than the hardest trials or severest sorrows of a year ago.

One of these expeditions led them through the churchyard where was his father's grave. 'Even here,' said Nicholas softly, 'we used to loiter before we knew what death was, and when we little thought whose ashes would rest beneath; and, wondering at the silence, sit down to rest and speak below our breath. Once, Kate was lost, and after an hour of fruitless search, they found her, fast asleep, under that tree which shades my father's grave. He was very fond of her, and said when he took her up in his arms, still sleeping, that whenever he died he would wish to be buried where his dear little child had laid her head. You see his wish was not forgotten.'

Nothing more passed at the time, but that night, as Nicholas sat beside his bed, Smike started from what had seemed to be a slumber, and laying his hand in his, prayed, as the tears coursed down his face, that he would make him one solemn promise.

'What is that?' said Nicholas, kindly. 'If I can redeem it, or hope to do so, you know I will.'

'I am sure you will,' was the reply. 'Promise me that when I die, I shall be buried nearas near as they can make my graveto the tree we saw today.'

Nicholas gave the promise; he had few words to give it in, but they were solemn and earnest. His poor friend kept his hand in his, and turned as if to sleep. But there were stifled sobs; and the hand was pressed more than once, or twice, or thrice, before he sank to rest, and slowly loosed his hold.

In a fortnight's time, he became too ill to move about. Once or twice, Nicholas

drove him out, propped up with pillows; but the motion of the chaise was painful to him, and brought on fits of fainting, which, in his weakened state, were dangerous. There was an old couch in the house, which was his favourite restingplace by day; and when the sun shone, and the weather was warm, Nicholas had this wheeled into a little orchard which was close at hand, and his charge being well wrapped up and carried out to it, they used to sit there sometimes for hours together.

It was on one of these occasions that a circumstance took place, which Nicholas, at the time, thoroughly believed to be the mere delusion of an imagination affected by disease; but which he had, afterwards, too good reason to know was of real and actual occurrence.

He had brought Smike out in his armspoor fellow! a child might have carried him thento see the sunset, and, having arranged his couch, had taken his seat beside it. He had been watching the whole of the night before, and being greatly fatigued both in mind and body, gradually fell asleep.

He could not have closed his eyes five minutes, when he was awakened by a scream, and starting up in that kind of terror which affects a person suddenly roused, saw, to his great astonishment, that his charge had struggled into a sitting posture, and with eyes almost starting from their sockets, cold dew standing on his forehead, and in a fit of trembling which quite convulsed his frame, was calling to him for help.

'Good Heaven, what is this?' said Nicholas, bending over him. 'Be calm; you have been dreaming.'

'No, no, no!' cried Smike, clinging to him. 'Hold me tight. Don't let me go. There, there. Behind the tree!'

Nicholas followed his eyes, which were directed to some distance behind the chair from which he himself had just risen. But, there was nothing there.

'This is nothing but your fancy,' he said, as he strove to compose him; 'nothing else, indeed.'

'I know better. I saw as plain as I see now,' was the answer. 'Oh! say you'll keep me with you. Swear you won't leave me for an instant!'

'Do I ever leave you?' returned Nicholas. 'Lie down againthere! You see I'm here. Now, tell me; what was it?'

'Do you remember,' said Smike, in a low voice, and glancing fearfully round, 'do you remember my telling you of the man who first took me to the school?'

'Yes, surely.'

'I raised my eyes, just now, towards that treethat one with the thick trunkand there, with his eyes fixed on me, he stood!'

'Only reflect for one moment,' said Nicholas; 'granting, for an instant, that it's likely he is alive and wandering about a lonely place like this, so far removed from the public road, do you think that at this distance of time you could possibly know that man again?'

'Anywherein any dress,' returned Smike; 'but, just now, he stood leaning upon his stick and looking at me, exactly as I told you I remembered him. He was dusty with walking, and poorly dressedI think his clothes were raggedbut directly I saw him, the wet night, his face when he left me, the parlour I was left in, and the people that were there, all seemed to come back together. When he knew I saw him, he looked frightened; for he started, and shrunk away. I have thought of him by day, and dreamt of him by night. He looked in my sleep, when I was quite a little child, and has looked in my sleep ever since, as he did just now.'

Nicholas endeavoured, by every persuasion and argument he could think of, to convince the terrified creature that his imagination had deceived him, and that this close resemblance between the creation of his dreams and the man he supposed he had seen was but a proof of it; but all in vain. When he could persuade him to remain, for a few moments, in the care of the people to whom the house belonged, he instituted a strict inquiry whether any stranger had been seen, and searched himself behind the tree, and through the orchard, and upon the land immediately adjoining, and in every place near, where it was possible for a man to lie concealed; but all in vain. Satisfied that he was right in his original conjecture, he applied himself to calming the fears of Smike, which, after some time, he partially succeeded in doing, though not in removing the impression upon his mind; for he still declared, again and again, in the most solemn and fervid manner, that he had positively seen what he had described, and that nothing could ever remove his conviction of its reality.

And now, Nicholas began to see that hope was gone, and that, upon the partner of his poverty, and the sharer of his better fortune, the world was closing fast. There was little pain, little uneasiness, but there was no rallying, no effort, no struggle for life. He was worn and wasted to the last degree; his voice had sunk so low, that he could scarce be heard to speak. Nature was thoroughly exhausted, and he had lain him down to die.

On a fine, mild autumn day, when all was tranquil and at peace: when the soft sweet air crept in at the open window of the quiet room, and not a sound was

heard but the gentle rustling of the leaves: Nicholas sat in his old place by the bedside, and knew that the time was nearly come. So very still it was, that, every now and then, he bent down his ear to listen for the breathing of him who lay asleep, as if to assure himself that life was still there, and that he had not fallen into that deep slumber from which on earth there is no waking.

While he was thus employed, the closed eyes opened, and on the pale face there came a placid smile.

'That's well!' said Nicholas. 'The sleep has done you good.'

'I have had such pleasant dreams,' was the answer. 'Such pleasant, happy dreams!'

'Of what?' said Nicholas.

The dying boy turned towards him, and, putting his arm about his neck, made answer, 'I shall soon be there!'

After a short silence, he spoke again.

'I am not afraid to die,' he said. 'I am quite contented. I almost think that if I could rise from this bed quite well I would not wish to do so, now. You have so often told me we shall meet againso very often lately, and now I feel the truth of that so stronglythat I can even bear to part from you.'

The trembling voice and tearful eye, and the closer grasp of the arm which accompanied these latter words, showed how they filled the speaker's heart; nor were there wanting indications of how deeply they had touched the heart of him to whom they were addressed.

'You say well,' returned Nicholas at length, 'and comfort me very much, dear fellow. Let me hear you say you are happy, if you can.'

'I must tell you something, first. I should not have a secret from you. You would not blame me, at a time like this, I know.'

'I blame you!' exclaimed Nicholas.

'I am sure you would not. You asked me why I was so changed, andand sat so much alone. Shall I tell you why?'

'Not if it pains you,' said Nicholas. 'I only asked that I might make you happier, if I could.'

'I know. I felt that, at the time.' He drew his friend closer to him. 'You will forgive me; I could not help it, but though I would have died to make her

happy, it broke my heart to seeI know he loves her dearlyOh! who could find that out so soon as I?'

The words which followed were feebly and faintly uttered, and broken by long pauses; but, from them, Nicholas learnt, for the first time, that the dying boy, with all the ardour of a nature concentrated on one absorbing, hopeless, secret passion, loved his sister Kate.

He had procured a lock of her hair, which hung at his breast, folded in one or two slight ribbons she had worn. He prayed that, when he was dead, Nicholas would take it off, so that no eyes but his might see it, and that when he was laid in his coffin and about to be placed in the earth, he would hang it round his neck again, that it might rest with him in the grave.

Upon his knees Nicholas gave him this pledge, and promised again that he should rest in the spot he had pointed out. They embraced, and kissed each other on the cheek.

'Now,' he murmured, 'I am happy.'

He fell into a light slumber, and waking smiled as before; then, spoke of beautiful gardens, which he said stretched out before him, and were filled with figures of men, women, and many children, all with light upon their faces; then, whispered that it was Edenand so died.

CHAPTER 59

The Plots begin to fail, and Doubts and Dangers to disturb the Plotter

Ralph sat alone, in the solitary room where he was accustomed to take his meals, and to sit of nights when no profitable occupation called him abroad. Before him was an untasted breakfast, and near to where his fingers beat restlessly upon the table, lay his watch. It was long past the time at which, for many years, he had put it in his pocket and gone with measured steps downstairs to the business of the day, but he took as little heed of its monotonous warning, as of the meat and drink before him, and remained with his head resting on one hand, and his eyes fixed moodily on the ground.

This departure from his regular and constant habit, in one so regular and

unvarying in all that appertained to the daily pursuit of riches, would almost of itself have told that the usurer was not well. That he laboured under some mental or bodily indisposition, and that it was one of no slight kind so to affect a man like him, was sufficiently shown by his haggard face, jaded air, and hollow languid eyes: which he raised at last with a start and a hasty glance around him, as one who suddenly awakes from sleep, and cannot immediately recognise the place in which he finds himself.

'What is this,' he said, 'that hangs over me, and I cannot shake off? I have never pampered myself, and should not be ill. I have never moped, and pined, and yielded to fancies; but what CAN a man do without rest?'

He pressed his hand upon his forehead.

'Night after night comes and goes, and I have no rest. If I sleep, what rest is that which is disturbed by constant dreams of the same detested faces crowding round meof the same detested people, in every variety of action, mingling with all I say and do, and always to my defeat? Waking, what rest have I, constantly haunted by this heavy shadow ofI know not whatwhich is its worst character? I must have rest. One night's unbroken rest, and I should be a man again.'

Pushing the table from him while he spoke, as though he loathed the sight of food, he encountered the watch: the hands of which were almost upon noon.

'This is strange!' he said; 'noon, and Noggs not here! What drunken brawl keeps him away? I would give something nowsomething in money even after that dreadful lossif he had stabbed a man in a tavern scuffle, or broken into a house, or picked a pocket, or done anything that would send him abroad with an iron ring upon his leg, and rid me of him. Better still, if I could throw temptation in his way, and lure him on to rob me. He should be welcome to what he took, so I brought the law upon him; for he is a traitor, I swear! How, or when, or where, I don't know, though I suspect.'

After waiting for another halfhour, he dispatched the woman who kept his house to Newman's lodging, to inquire if he were ill, and why he had not come or sent. She brought back answer that he had not been home all night, and that no one could tell her anything about him.

'But there is a gentleman, sir,' she said, 'below, who was standing at the door when I came in, and he says'

'What says he?' demanded Ralph, turning angrily upon her. 'I told you I would see nobody.'

'He says,' replied the woman, abashed by his harshness, 'that he comes on very particular business which admits of no excuse; and I thought perhaps it might be about'

'About what, in the devil's name?' said Ralph. 'You spy and speculate on people's business with me, do you?'

'Dear, no, sir! I saw you were anxious, and thought it might be about Mr Noggs; that's all.'

'Saw I was anxious!' muttered Ralph; 'they all watch me, now. Where is this person? You did not say I was not down yet, I hope?'

The woman replied that he was in the little office, and that she had said her master was engaged, but she would take the message.

'Well,' said Ralph, 'I'll see him. Go you to your kitchen, and keep there. Do you mind me?'

Glad to be released, the woman quickly disappeared. Collecting himself, and assuming as much of his accustomed manner as his utmost resolution could summon, Ralph descended the stairs. After pausing for a few moments, with his hand upon the lock, he entered Newman's room, and confronted Mr Charles Cheeryble.

Of all men alive, this was one of the last he would have wished to meet at any time; but, now that he recognised in him only the patron and protector of Nicholas, he would rather have seen a spectre. One beneficial effect, however, the encounter had upon him. It instantly roused all his dormant energies; rekindled in his breast the passions that, for many years, had found an improving home there; called up all his wrath, hatred, and malice; restored the sneer to his lip, and the scowl to his brow; and made him again, in all outward appearance, the same Ralph Nickleby whom so many had bitter cause to remember.

'Humph!' said Ralph, pausing at the door. 'This is an unexpected favour, sir.'

'And an unwelcome one,' said brother Charles; 'an unwelcome one, I know.'

'Men say you are truth itself, sir,' replied Ralph. 'You speak truth now, at all events, and I'll not contradict you. The favour is, at least, as unwelcome as it is unexpected. I can scarcely say more.'

'Plainly, sir' began brother Charles.

'Plainly, sir,' interrupted Ralph, 'I wish this conference to be a short one, and to

end where it begins. I guess the subject upon which you are about to speak, and I'll not hear you. You like plainness, I believe; there it is. Here is the door as you see. Our way lies in very different directions. Take yours, I beg of you, and leave me to pursue mine in quiet.'

'In quiet!' repeated brother Charles mildly, and looking at him with more of pity than reproach. 'To pursue HIS way in quiet!'

'You will scarcely remain in my house, I presume, sir, against my will,' said Ralph; 'or you can scarcely hope to make an impression upon a man who closes his ears to all that you can say, and is firmly and resolutely determined not to hear you.'

'Mr Nickleby, sir,' returned brother Charles: no less mildly than before, but firmly too: 'I come here against my will, sorely and grievously against my will. I have never been in this house before; and, to speak my mind, sir, I don't feel at home or easy in it, and have no wish ever to be here again. You do not guess the subject on which I come to speak to you; you do not indeed. I am sure of that, or your manner would be a very different one.'

Ralph glanced keenly at him, but the clear eye and open countenance of the honest old merchant underwent no change of expression, and met his look without reserve.

'Shall I go on?' said Mr Cheeryble.

'Oh, by all means, if you please,' returned Ralph drily. 'Here are walls to speak to, sir, a desk, and two stools: most attentive auditors, and certain not to interrupt you. Go on, I beg; make my house yours, and perhaps by the time I return from my walk, you will have finished what you have to say, and will yield me up possession again.'

So saying, he buttoned his coat, and turning into the passage, took down his hat. The old gentleman followed, and was about to speak, when Ralph waved him off impatiently, and said:

'Not a word. I tell you, sir, not a word. Virtuous as you are, you are not an angel yet, to appear in men's houses whether they will or no, and pour your speech into unwilling ears. Preach to the walls I tell you; not to me!'

'I am no angel, Heaven knows,' returned brother Charles, shaking his head, 'but an erring and imperfect man; nevertheless, there is one quality which all men have, in common with the angels, blessed opportunities of exercising, if they will; mercy. It is an errand of mercy that brings me here. Pray let me discharge it.'

'I show no mercy,' retorted Ralph with a triumphant smile, 'and I ask none. Seek no mercy from me, sir, in behalf of the fellow who has imposed upon your childish credulity, but let him expect the worst that I can do.'

'HE ask mercy at your hands!' exclaimed the old merchant warmly; 'ask it at his, sir; ask it at his. If you will not hear me now, when you may, hear me when you must, or anticipate what I would say, and take measures to prevent our ever meeting again. Your nephew is a noble lad, sir, an honest, noble lad. What you are, Mr Nickleby, I will not say; but what you have done, I know. Now, sir, when you go about the business in which you have been recently engaged, and find it difficult of pursuing, come to me and my brother Ned, and Tim Linkinwater, sir, and we'll explain it for youand come soon, or it may be too late, and you may have it explained with a little more roughness, and a little less delicacyand never forget, sir, that I came here this morning, in mercy to you, and am still ready to talk to you in the same spirit.'

With these words, uttered with great emphasis and emotion, brother Charles put on his broadbrimmed hat, and, passing Ralph Nickleby without any other remark, trotted nimbly into the street. Ralph looked after him, but neither moved nor spoke for some time: when he broke what almost seemed the silence of stupefaction, by a scornful laugh.

'This,' he said, 'from its wildness, should be another of those dreams that have so broken my rest of late. In mercy to me! Pho! The old simpleton has gone mad.'

Although he expressed himself in this derisive and contemptuous manner, it was plain that, the more Ralph pondered, the more ill at ease he became, and the more he laboured under some vague anxiety and alarm, which increased as the time passed on and no tidings of Newman Noggs arrived. After waiting until late in the afternoon, tortured by various apprehensions and misgivings, and the recollection of the warning which his nephew had given him when they last met: the further confirmation of which now presented itself in one shape of probability, now in another, and haunted him perpetually: he left home, and, scarcely knowing why, save that he was in a suspicious and agitated mood, betook himself to Snawley's house. His wife presented herself; and, of her, Ralph inquired whether her husband was at home.

'No,' she said sharply, 'he is not indeed, and I don't think he will be at home for a very long time; that's more.'

'Do you know who I am?' asked Ralph.

'Oh yes, I know you very well; too well, perhaps, and perhaps he does too, and sorry am I that I should have to say it.'

'Tell him that I saw him through the windowblind above, as I crossed the road just now, and that I would speak to him on business,' said Ralph. 'Do you hear?'

'I hear,' rejoined Mrs Snawley, taking no further notice of the request.

'I knew this woman was a hypocrite, in the way of psalms and Scripture phrases,' said Ralph, passing quietly by, 'but I never knew she drank before.'

'Stop! You don't come in here,' said Mr Snawley's betterhalf, interposing her person, which was a robust one, in the doorway. 'You have said more than enough to him on business, before now. I always told him what dealing with you and working out your schemes would come to. It was either you or the schoolmasterone of you, or the two between youthat got the forged letter done; remember that! That wasn't his doing, so don't lay it at his door.'

'Hold your tongue, you Jezebel,' said Ralph, looking fearfully round.

'Ah, I know when to hold my tongue, and when to speak, Mr Nickleby,' retorted the dame. 'Take care that other people know when to hold theirs.'

'You jade,' said Ralph, 'if your husband has been idiot enough to trust you with his secrets, keep them; keep them, shedevil that you are!'

'Not so much his secrets as other people's secrets, perhaps,' retorted the woman; 'not so much his secrets as yours. None of your black looks at me! You'll want 'em all, perhaps, for another time. You had better keep 'em.'

'Will you,' said Ralph, suppressing his passion as well as he could, and clutching her tightly by the wrist; 'will you go to your husband and tell him that I know he is at home, and that I must see him? And will you tell me what it is that you and he mean by this new style of behaviour?'

'No,' replied the woman, violently disengaging herself, 'I'll do neither.'

'You set me at defiance, do you?' said Ralph.

'Yes,' was the answer. I do.'

For an instant Ralph had his hand raised, as though he were about to strike her; but, checking himself, and nodding his head and muttering as though to assure her he would not forget this, walked away.

Thence, he went straight to the inn which Mr Squeers frequented, and inquired when he had been there last; in the vague hope that, successful or unsuccessful, he might, by this time, have returned from his mission and be able to assure him that all was safe. But Mr Squeers had not been there for ten

days, and all that the people could tell about him was, that he had left his luggage and his bill.

Disturbed by a thousand fears and surmises, and bent upon ascertaining whether Squeers had any suspicion of Snawley, or was, in any way, a party to this altered behaviour, Ralph determined to hazard the extreme step of inquiring for him at the Lambeth lodging, and having an interview with him even there. Bent upon this purpose, and in that mood in which delay is insupportable, he repaired at once to the place; and being, by description, perfectly acquainted with the situation of his room, crept upstairs and knocked gently at the door.

Not one, nor two, nor three, nor yet a dozen knocks, served to convince Ralph, against his wish, that there was nobody inside. He reasoned that he might be asleep; and, listening, almost persuaded himself that he could hear him breathe. Even when he was satisfied that he could not be there, he sat patiently on a broken stair and waited; arguing, that he had gone out upon some slight errand, and must soon return.

Many feet came up the creaking stairs; and the step of some seemed to his listening ear so like that of the man for whom he waited, that Ralph often stood up to be ready to address him when he reached the top; but, one by one, each person turned off into some room short of the place where he was stationed: and at every such disappointment he felt quite chilled and lonely.

At length he felt it was hopeless to remain, and going downstairs again, inquired of one of the lodgers if he knew anything of Mr Squeers's movementsmentioning that worthy by an assumed name which had been agreed upon between them. By this lodger he was referred to another, and by him to someone else, from whom he learnt, that, late on the previous night, he had gone out hastily with two men, who had shortly afterwards returned for the old woman who lived on the same floor; and that, although the circumstance had attracted the attention of the informant, he had not spoken to them at the time, nor made any inquiry afterwards.

This possessed him with the idea that, perhaps, Peg Sliderskew had been apprehended for the robbery, and that Mr Squeers, being with her at the time, had been apprehended also, on suspicion of being a confederate. If this were so, the fact must be known to Gride; and to Gride's house he directed his steps; now thoroughly alarmed, and fearful that there were indeed plots afoot, tending to his discomfiture and ruin.

Arrived at the usurer's house, he found the windows close shut, the dingy blinds drawn down; all was silent, melancholy, and deserted. But this was its

usual aspect. He knockedgently at firstthen loud and vigorously. Nobody came. He wrote a few words in pencil on a card, and having thrust it under the door was going away, when a noise above, as though a windowsash were stealthily raised, caught his ear, and looking up he could just discern the face of Gride himself, cautiously peering over the house parapet from the window of the garret. Seeing who was below, he drew it in again; not so quickly, however, but that Ralph let him know he was observed, and called to him to come down.

The call being repeated, Gride looked out again, so cautiously that no part of the old man's body was visible. The sharp features and white hair appearing alone, above the parapet, looked like a severed head garnishing the wall.

'Hush!' he cried. 'Go away, go away!'

'Come down,' said Ralph, beckoning him.

'Go away!' squeaked Gride, shaking his head in a sort of ecstasy of impatience. 'Don't speak to me, don't knock, don't call attention to the house, but go away.'

'I'll knock, I swear, till I have your neighbours up in arms,' said Ralph, 'if you don't tell me what you mean by lurking there, you whining cur.'

'I can't hear what you saydon't talk to meit isn't safego awaygo away!' returned Gride.

'Come down, I say. Will you come down?' said Ralph fiercely.

'Nooooo,' snarled Gride. He drew in his head; and Ralph, left standing in the street, could hear the sash closed, as gently and carefully as it had been opened.

'How is this,' said he, 'that they all fall from me, and shun me like the plague, these men who have licked the dust from my feet? IS my day past, and is this indeed the coming on of night? I'll know what it means! I will, at any cost. I am firmer and more myself, just now, than I have been these many days.'

Turning from the door, which, in the first transport of his rage, he had meditated battering upon until Gride's very fears should impel him to open it, he turned his face towards the city, and working his way steadily through the crowd which was pouring from it (it was by this time between five and six o'clock in the afternoon) went straight to the house of business of the brothers Cheeryble, and putting his head into the glass case, found Tim Linkinwater alone.

'My name's Nickleby,' said Ralph.

'I know it,' replied Tim, surveying him through his spectacles.

'Which of your firm was it who called on me this morning?' demanded Ralph.

'Mr Charles.'

'Then, tell Mr Charles I want to see him.'

'You shall see,' said Tim, getting off his stool with great agility, 'you shall see, not only Mr Charles, but Mr Ned likewise.'

Tim stopped, looked steadily and severely at Ralph, nodded his head once, in a curt manner which seemed to say there was a little more behind, and vanished. After a short interval, he returned, and, ushering Ralph into the presence of the two brothers, remained in the room himself.

'I want to speak to you, who spoke to me this morning,' said Ralph, pointing out with his finger the man whom he addressed.

'I have no secrets from my brother Ned, or from Tim Linkinwater,' observed brother Charles quietly.

'I have,' said Ralph.

'Mr Nickleby, sir,' said brother Ned, 'the matter upon which my brother Charles called upon you this morning is one which is already perfectly well known to us three, and to others besides, and must unhappily soon become known to a great many more. He waited upon you, sir, this morning, alone, as a matter of delicacy and consideration. We feel, now, that further delicacy and consideration would be misplaced; and, if we confer together, it must be as we are or not at all.'

'Well, gentlemen,' said Ralph with a curl of the lip, 'talking in riddles would seem to be the peculiar forte of you two, and I suppose your clerk, like a prudent man, has studied the art also with a view to your good graces. Talk in company, gentlemen, in God's name. I'll humour you.'

'Humour!' cried Tim Linkinwater, suddenly growing very red in the face. 'He'll humour us! He'll humour Cheeryble Brothers! Do you hear that? Do you hear him? DO you hear him say he'll humour Cheeryble Brothers?'

'Tim,' said Charles and Ned together, 'pray, Tim, pray now, don't.'

Tim, taking the hint, stifled his indignation as well as he could, and suffered it to escape through his spectacles, with the additional safetyvalve of a short hysterical laugh now and then, which seemed to relieve him mightily.

'As nobody bids me to a seat,' said Ralph, looking round, 'I'll take one, for I am fatigued with walking. And now, if you please, gentlemen, I wish to knowI demand to know; I have the rightwhat you have to say to me, which justifies such a tone as you have assumed, and that underhand interference in my affairs which, I have reason to suppose, you have been practising. I tell you plainly, gentlemen, that little as I care for the opinion of the world (as the slang goes), I don't choose to submit quietly to slander and malice. Whether you suffer yourselves to be imposed upon too easily, or wilfully make yourselves parties to it, the result to me is the same. In either case, you can't expect from a plain man like myself much consideration or forbearance.'

So coolly and deliberately was this said, that nine men out of ten, ignorant of the circumstances, would have supposed Ralph to be really an injured man. There he sat, with folded arms; paler than usual, certainly, and sufficiently illfavoured, but quite collectedfar more so than the brothers or the exasperated Timand ready to face out the worst.

'Very well, sir,' said brother Charles. 'Very well. Brother Ned, will you ring the bell?'

'Charles, my dear fellow! stop one instant,' returned the other. 'It will be better for Mr Nickleby and for our object that he should remain silent, if he can, till we have said what we have to say. I wish him to understand that.'

'Quite right, quite right,' said brother Charles.

Ralph smiled, but made no reply. The bell was rung; the roomdoor opened; a man came in, with a halting walk; and, looking round, Ralph's eyes met those of Newman Noggs. From that moment, his heart began to fail him.

'This is a good beginning,' he said bitterly. 'Oh! this is a good beginning. You are candid, honest, openhearted, fairdealing men! I always knew the real worth of such characters as yours! To tamper with a fellow like this, who would sell his soul (if he had one) for drink, and whose every word is a lie. What men are safe if this is done? Oh, it's a good beginning!'

'I WILL speak,' cried Newman, standing on tiptoe to look over Tim's head, who had interposed to prevent him. 'Hallo, you sirold Nickleby!what do you mean when you talk of "a fellow like this"? Who made me "a fellow like this"? If I would sell my soul for drink, why wasn't I a thief, swindler, housebreaker, area sneak, robber of pence out of the trays of blind men's dogs, rather than your drudge and packhorse? If my every word was a lie, why wasn't I a pet and favourite of yours? Lie! When did I ever cringe and fawn to you. Tell me that! I served you faithfully. I did more work, because I was poor, and took more hard words from you because I despised you and them, than

any man you could have got from the parish workhouse. I did. I served you because I was proud; because I was a lonely man with you, and there were no other drudges to see my degradation; and because nobody knew, better than you, that I was a ruined man: that I hadn't always been what I am: and that I might have been better off, if I hadn't been a fool and fallen into the hands of you and others who were knaves. Do you deny that?'

'Gently,' reasoned Tim; 'you said you wouldn't.'

'I said I wouldn't!' cried Newman, thrusting him aside, and moving his hand as Tim moved, so as to keep him at arm's length; 'don't tell me! Here, you Nickleby! Don't pretend not to mind me; it won't do; I know better. You were talking of tampering, just now. Who tampered with Yorkshire schoolmasters, and, while they sent the drudge out, that he shouldn't overhear, forgot that such great caution might render him suspicious, and that he might watch his master out at nights, and might set other eyes to watch the schoolmaster? Who tampered with a selfish father, urging him to sell his daughter to old Arthur Gride, and tampered with Gride too, and did so in the little office, WITH A CLOSET IN THE ROOM?'

Ralph had put a great command upon himself; but he could not have suppressed a slight start, if he had been certain to be beheaded for it next moment.

'Aha!' cried Newman, 'you mind me now, do you? What first set this fag to be jealous of his master's actions, and to feel that, if he hadn't crossed him when he might, he would have been as bad as he, or worse? That master's cruel treatment of his own flesh and blood, and vile designs upon a young girl who interested even his brokendown, drunken, miserable hack, and made him linger in his service, in the hope of doing her some good (as, thank God, he had done others once or twice before), when he would, otherwise, have relieved his feelings by pummelling his master soundly, and then going to the Devil. He wouldmark that; and mark thisthat I'm here now, because these gentlemen thought it best. When I sought them out (as I did; there was no tampering with me), I told them I wanted help to find you out, to trace you down, to go through with what I had begun, to help the right; and that when I had done it, I'd burst into your room and tell you all, face to face, man to man, and like a man. Now I've said my say, and let anybody else say theirs, and fire away!'

With this concluding sentiment, Newman Noggs, who had been perpetually sitting down and getting up again all through his speech, which he had delivered in a series of jerks; and who was, from the violent exercise and the excitement combined, in a state of most intense and fiery heat; became,

without passing through any intermediate stage, stiff, upright, and motionless, and so remained, staring at Ralph Nickleby with all his might and main.

Ralph looked at him for an instant, and for an instant only; then, waved his hand, and beating the ground with his foot, said in a choking voice:

'Go on, gentlemen, go on! I'm patient, you see. There's law to be had, there's law. I shall call you to an account for this. Take care what you say; I shall make you prove it.'

'The proof is ready,' returned brother Charles, 'quite ready to our hands. The man Snawley, last night, made a confession.'

'Who may "the man Snawley" be,' returned Ralph, 'and what may his "confession" have to do with my affairs?'

To this inquiry, put with a dogged inflexibility of manner, the old gentleman returned no answer, but went on to say, that to show him how much they were in earnest, it would be necessary to tell him, not only what accusations were made against him, but what proof of them they had, and how that proof had been acquired. This laying open of the whole question brought up brother Ned, Tim Linkinwater, and Newman Noggs, all three at once; who, after a vast deal of talking together, and a scene of great confusion, laid before Ralph, in distinct terms, the following statement.

That, Newman, having been solemnly assured by one not then producible that Smike was not the son of Snawley, and this person having offered to make oath to that effect, if necessary, they had by this communication been first led to doubt the claim set up, which they would otherwise have seen no reason to dispute, supported as it was by evidence which they had no power of disproving. That, once suspecting the existence of a conspiracy, they had no difficulty in tracing back its origin to the malice of Ralph, and the vindictiveness and avarice of Squeers. That, suspicion and proof being two very different things, they had been advised by a lawyer, eminent for his sagacity and acuteness in such practice, to resist the proceedings taken on the other side for the recovery of the youth as slowly and artfully as possible, and meanwhile to beset Snawley (with whom it was clear the main falsehood must rest); to lead him, if possible, into contradictory and conflicting statements; to harass him by all available means; and so to practise on his fears, and regard for his own safety, as to induce him to divulge the whole scheme, and to give up his employer and whomsoever else he could implicate. That, all this had been skilfully done; but that Snawley, who was well practised in the arts of low cunning and intrigue, had successfully baffled all their attempts, until an unexpected circumstance had brought him, last night, upon his knees.

It thus arose. When Newman Noggs reported that Squeers was again in town, and that an interview of such secrecy had taken place between him and Ralph that he had been sent out of the house, plainly lest he should overhear a word, a watch was set upon the schoolmaster, in the hope that something might be discovered which would throw some light upon the suspected plot. It being found, however, that he held no further communication with Ralph, nor any with Snawley, and lived quite alone, they were completely at fault; the watch was withdrawn, and they would have observed his motions no longer, if it had not happened that, one night, Newman stumbled unobserved on him and Ralph in the street together. Following them, he discovered, to his surprise, that they repaired to various low lodginghouses, and taverns kept by broken gamblers, to more than one of whom Ralph was known, and that they were in pursuitso he found by inquiries when they had leftof an old woman, whose description exactly tallied with that of deaf Mrs Sliderskew. Affairs now appearing to assume a more serious complexion, the watch was renewed with increased vigilance; an officer was procured, who took up his abode in the same tavern with Squeers: and by him and Frank Cheeryble the footsteps of the unconscious schoolmaster were dogged, until he was safely housed in the lodging at Lambeth. Mr Squeers having shifted his lodging, the officer shifted his, and lying concealed in the same street, and, indeed, in the opposite house, soon found that Mr Squeers and Mrs Sliderskew were in constant communication.

In this state of things, Arthur Gride was appealed to. The robbery, partly owing to the inquisitiveness of the neighbours, and partly to his own grief and rage, had, long ago, become known; but he positively refused to give his sanction or yield any assistance to the old woman's capture, and was seized with such a panic at the idea of being called upon to give evidence against her, that he shut himself up close in his house, and refused to hold communication with anybody. Upon this, the pursuers took counsel together, and, coming so near the truth as to arrive at the conclusion that Gride and Ralph, with Squeers for their instrument, were negotiating for the recovery of some of the stolen papers which would not bear the light, and might possibly explain the hints relative to Madeline which Newman had overheard, resolved that Mrs Sliderskew should be taken into custody before she had parted with them: and Squeers too, if anything suspicious could be attached to him. Accordingly, a searchwarrant being procured, and all prepared, Mr Squeers's window was watched, until his light was put out, and the time arrived when, as had been previously ascertained, he usually visited Mrs Sliderskew. This done, Frank Cheeryble and Newman stole upstairs to listen to their discourse, and to give the signal to the officer at the most favourable time. At what an opportune moment they arrived, how they listened, and what they heard, is already known to the reader. Mr Squeers, still half stunned, was hurried off with a

stolen deed in his possession, and Mrs Sliderskew was apprehended likewise. The information being promptly carried to Snawley that Squeers was in custodyhe was not told for whatthat worthy, first extorting a promise that he should be kept harmless, declared the whole tale concerning Smike to be a fiction and forgery, and implicated Ralph Nickleby to the fullest extent. As to Mr Squeers, he had, that morning, undergone a private examination before a magistrate; and, being unable to account satisfactorily for his possession of the deed or his companionship with Mrs Sliderskew, had been, with her, remanded for a week.

All these discoveries were now related to Ralph, circumstantially, and in detail. Whatever impression they secretly produced, he suffered no sign of emotion to escape him, but sat perfectly still, not raising his frowning eyes from the ground, and covering his mouth with his hand. When the narrative was concluded; he raised his head hastily, as if about to speak, but on brother Charles resuming, fell into his old attitude again.

'I told you this morning,' said the old gentleman, laying his hand upon his brother's shoulder, 'that I came to you in mercy. How far you may be implicated in this last transaction, or how far the person who is now in custody may criminate you, you best know. But, justice must take its course against the parties implicated in the plot against this poor, unoffending, injured lad. It is not in my power, or in the power of my brother Ned, to save you from the consequences. The utmost we can do is, to warn you in time, and to give you an opportunity of escaping them. We would not have an old man like you disgraced and punished by your near relation; nor would we have him forget, like you, all ties of blood and nature. We entreat youbrother Ned, you join me, I know, in this entreaty, and so, Tim Linkinwater, do you, although you pretend to be an obstinate dog, sir, and sit there frowning as if you didn'twe entreat you to retire from London, to take shelter in some place where you will be safe from the consequences of these wicked designs, and where you may have time, sir, to atone for them, and to become a better man.'

'And do you think,' returned Ralph, rising, 'and do you think, you will so easily crush ME? Do you think that a hundred wellarranged plans, or a hundred suborned witnesses, or a hundred false curs at my heels, or a hundred canting speeches full of oily words, will move me? I thank you for disclosing your schemes, which I am now prepared for. You have not the man to deal with that you think; try me! and remember that I spit upon your fair words and false dealings, and dare youprovoke youtaunt youto do to me the very worst you can!'

Thus they parted, for that time; but the worst had not come yet.

CHAPTER 60

The Dangers thicken, and the Worst is told

Instead of going home, Ralph threw himself into the first street cabriolet he could find, and, directing the driver towards the policeoffice of the district in which Mr Squeers's misfortunes had occurred, alighted at a short distance from it, and, discharging the man, went the rest of his way thither on foot. Inquiring for the object of his solicitude, he learnt that he had timed his visit well; for Mr Squeers was, in fact, at that moment waiting for a hackney coach he had ordered, and in which he purposed proceeding to his week's retirement, like a gentleman.

Demanding speech with the prisoner, he was ushered into a kind of waitingroom in which, by reason of his scholastic profession and superior respectability, Mr Squeers had been permitted to pass the day. Here, by the light of a guttering and blackened candle, he could barely discern the schoolmaster, fast asleep on a bench in a remote corner. An empty glass stood on a table before him, which, with his somnolent condition and a very strong smell of brandy and water, forewarned the visitor that Mr Squeers had been seeking, in creature comforts, a temporary forgetfulness of his unpleasant situation.

It was not a very easy matter to rouse him: so lethargic and heavy were his slumbers. Regaining his faculties by slow and faint glimmerings, he at length sat upright; and, displaying a very yellow face, a very red nose, and a very bristly beard: the joint effect of which was considerably heightened by a dirty white handkerchief, spotted with blood, drawn over the crown of his head and tied under his chin: stared ruefully at Ralph in silence, until his feelings found a vent in this pithy sentence:

'I say, young fellow, you've been and done it now; you have!'

'What's the matter with your head?' asked Ralph.

'Why, your man, your informing kidnapping man, has been and broke it,' rejoined Squeers sulkily; 'that's what's the matter with it. You've come at last, have you?'

'Why have you not sent to me?' said Ralph. 'How could I come till I knew

what had befallen you?'

'My family!' hiccuped Mr Squeers, raising his eye to the ceiling: 'my daughter, as is at that age when all the sensibilities is acoming out strong in blowmy son as is the young Norval of private life, and the pride and ornament of a doting willagehere's a shock for my family! The coatofarms of the Squeerses is tore, and their sun is gone down into the ocean wave!'

'You have been drinking,' said Ralph, 'and have not yet slept yourself sober.'

'I haven't been drinking YOUR health, my codger,' replied Mr Squeers; 'so you have nothing to do with that.'

Ralph suppressed the indignation which the schoolmaster's altered and insolent manner awakened, and asked again why he had not sent to him.

'What should I get by sending to you?' returned Squeers. 'To be known to be in with you wouldn't do me a deal of good, and they won't take bail till they know something more of the case, so here am I hard and fast: and there are you, loose and comfortable.'

'And so must you be in a few days,' retorted Ralph, with affected goodhumour. 'They can't hurt you, man.'

'Why, I suppose they can't do much to me, if I explain how it was that I got into the good company of that there cadaverous old Slider,' replied Squeers viciously, 'who I wish was dead and buried, and resurrected and dissected, and hung upon wires in a anatomical museum, before ever I'd had anything to do with her. This is what him with the powdered head says this morning, in so many words: "Prisoner! As you have been found in company with this woman; as you were detected in possession of this document; as you were engaged with her in fraudulently destroying others, and can give no satisfactory account of yourself; I shall remand you for a week, in order that inquiries may be made, and evidence got. And meanwhile I can't take any bail for your appearance." Well then, what I say now is, that I CAN give a satisfactory account of myself; I can hand in the card of my establishment and say, "I am the Wackford Squeers as is therein named, sir. I am the man as is guaranteed, by unimpeachable references, to be a outandouter in morals and uprightness of principle. Whatever is wrong in this business is no fault of mine. I had no evil design in it, sir. I was not aware that anything was wrong. I was merely employed by a friend, my friend Mr Ralph Nickleby, of Golden Square. Send for him, sir, and ask him what he has to say; he's the man; not me!'"

'What document was it that you had?' asked Ralph, evading, for the moment,

the point just raised.

'What document? Why, THE document,' replied Squeers. 'The Madeline What'shername one. It was a will; that's what it was.'

'Of what nature, whose will, when dated, how benefiting her, to what extent?' asked Ralph hurriedly.

'A will in her favour; that's all I know,' rejoined Squeers, 'and that's more than you'd have known, if you'd had them bellows on your head. It's all owing to your precious caution that they got hold of it. If you had let me burn it, and taken my word that it was gone, it would have been a heap of ashes behind the fire, instead of being whole and sound, inside of my greatcoat.'

'Beaten at every point!' muttered Ralph.

'Ah!' sighed Squeers, who, between the brandy and water and his broken head, wandered strangely, 'at the delightful village of Dotheboys near Greta Bridge in Yorkshire, youth are boarded, clothed, booked, washed, furnished with pocketmoney, provided with all necessaries, instructed in all languages living and dead, mathematics, orthography, geometry, astronomy, trigonometrythis is a altered state of trigonomics, this is! A double 1all, everythinga cobbler's weapon. Upup, adjective, not down. Squdouble ersSqueers, noun substantive, a educator of youth. Total, all up with Squeers!'

His running on, in this way, had afforded Ralph an opportunity of recovering his presence of mind, which at once suggested to him the necessity of removing, as far as possible, the schoolmaster's misgivings, and leading him to believe that his safety and best policy lay in the preservation of a rigid silence.

'I tell you, once again,' he said, 'they can't hurt you. You shall have an action for false imprisonment, and make a profit of this, yet. We will devise a story for you that should carry you through twenty times such a trivial scrape as this; and if they want security in a thousand pounds for your reappearance in case you should be called upon, you shall have it. All you have to do is, to keep back the truth. You're a little fuddled tonight, and may not be able to see this as clearly as you would at another time; but this is what you must do, and you'll need all your senses about you; for a slip might be awkward.'

'Oh!' said Squeers, who had looked cunningly at him, with his head stuck on one side, like an old raven. 'That's what I'm to do, is it? Now then, just you hear a word or two from me. I an't agoing to have any stories made for me, and I an't agoing to stick to any. If I find matters going again me, I shall expect you to take your share, and I'll take care you do. You never said anything about danger. I never bargained for being brought into such a plight as this,

and I don't mean to take it as quiet as you think. I let you lead me on, from one thing to another, because we had been mixed up together in a certain sort of a way, and if you had liked to be illnatured you might perhaps have hurt the business, and if you liked to be goodnatured you might throw a good deal in my way. Well; if all goes right now, that's quite correct, and I don't mind it; but if anything goes wrong, then times are altered, and I shall just say and do whatever I think may serve me most, and take advice from nobody. My moral influence with them lads,' added Mr Squeers, with deeper gravity, 'is a tottering to its basis. The images of Mrs Squeers, my daughter, and my son Wackford, all short of vittles, is perpetually before me; every other consideration melts away and vanishes, in front of these; the only number in all arithmetic that I know of, as a husband and a father, is number one, under this here most fatal go!'

How long Mr Squeers might have declaimed, or how stormy a discussion his declamation might have led to, nobody knows. Being interrupted, at this point, by the arrival of the coach and an attendant who was to bear him company, he perched his hat with great dignity on the top of the handkerchief that bound his head; and, thrusting one hand in his pocket, and taking the attendant's arm with the other, suffered himself to be led forth.

'As I supposed from his not sending!' thought Ralph. 'This fellow, I plainly see through all his tipsy fooling, has made up his mind to turn upon me. I am so beset and hemmed in, that they are not only all struck with fear, but, like the beasts in the fable, have their fling at me now, though time was, and no longer ago than yesterday too, when they were all civility and compliance. But they shall not move me. I'll not give way. I will not budge one inch!'

He went home, and was glad to find his housekeeper complaining of illness, that he might have an excuse for being alone and sending her away to where she lived: which was hard by. Then, he sat down by the light of a single candle, and began to think, for the first time, on all that had taken place that day.

He had neither eaten nor drunk since last night, and, in addition to the anxiety of mind he had undergone, had been travelling about, from place to place almost incessantly, for many hours. He felt sick and exhausted, but could taste nothing save a glass of water, and continued to sit with his head upon his hand; not resting nor thinking, but laboriously trying to do both, and feeling that every sense but one of weariness and desolation, was for the time benumbed.

It was nearly ten o'clock when he heard a knocking at the door, and still sat quiet as before, as if he could not even bring his thoughts to bear upon that. It

had been often repeated, and he had, several times, heard a voice outside, saying there was a light in the window (meaning, as he knew, his own candle), before he could rouse himself and go downstairs.

'Mr Nickleby, there is terrible news for you, and I am sent to beg you will come with me directly,' said a voice he seemed to recognise. He held his hand above his eyes, and, looking out, saw Tim Linkinwater on the steps.

'Come where?' demanded Ralph.

'To our house, where you came this morning. I have a coach here.'

'Why should I go there?' said Ralph.

'Don't ask me why, but pray come with me.'

'Another edition of today!' returned Ralph, making as though he would shut the door.

'No, no!' cried Tim, catching him by the arm and speaking most earnestly; 'it is only that you may hear something that has occurred: something very dreadful, Mr Nickleby, which concerns you nearly. Do you think I would tell you so or come to you like this, if it were not the case?'

Ralph looked at him more closely. Seeing that he was indeed greatly excited, he faltered, and could not tell what to say or think.

'You had better hear this now, than at any other time,' said Tim; 'it may have some influence with you. For Heaven's sake come!'

Perhaps, at, another time, Ralph's obstinacy and dislike would have been proof against any appeal from such a quarter, however emphatically urged; but now, after a moment's hesitation, he went into the hall for his hat, and returning, got into the coach without speaking a word.

Tim well remembered afterwards, and often said, that as Ralph Nickleby went into the house for this purpose, he saw him, by the light of the candle which he had set down upon a chair, reel and stagger like a drunken man. He well remembered, too, that when he had placed his foot upon the coachsteps, he turned round and looked upon him with a face so ashy pale and so very wild and vacant that it made him shudder, and for the moment almost afraid to follow. People were fond of saying that he had some dark presentiment upon him then, but his emotion might, perhaps, with greater show of reason, be referred to what he had undergone that day.

A profound silence was observed during the ride. Arrived at their place of

destination, Ralph followed his conductor into the house, and into a room where the two brothers were. He was so astounded, not to say awed, by something of a mute compassion for himself which was visible in their manner and in that of the old clerk, that he could scarcely speak.

Having taken a seat, however, he contrived to say, though in broken words, 'Whatwhat have you to say to memore than has been said already?'

The room was old and large, very imperfectly lighted, and terminated in a bay window, about which hung some heavy drapery. Casting his eyes in this direction as he spoke, he thought he made out the dusky figure of a man. He was confirmed in this impression by seeing that the object moved, as if uneasy under his scrutiny.

'Who's that yonder?' he said.

'One who has conveyed to us, within these two hours, the intelligence which caused our sending to you,' replied brother Charles. 'Let him be, sir, let him be for the present.'

'More riddles!' said Ralph, faintly. 'Well, sir?'

In turning his face towards the brothers he was obliged to avert it from the window; but, before either of them could speak, he had looked round again. It was evident that he was rendered restless and uncomfortable by the presence of the unseen person; for he repeated this action several times, and at length, as if in a nervous state which rendered him positively unable to turn away from the place, sat so as to have it opposite him, muttering as an excuse that he could not bear the light.

The brothers conferred apart for a short time: their manner showing that they were agitated. Ralph glanced at them twice or thrice, and ultimately said, with a great effort to recover his selfpossession, 'Now, what is this? If I am brought from home at this time of night, let it be for something. What have you got to tell me?' After a short pause, he added, 'Is my niece dead?'

He had struck upon a key which rendered the task of commencement an easier one. Brother Charles turned, and said that it was a death of which they had to tell him, but that his niece was well.

'You don't mean to tell me,' said Ralph, as his eyes brightened, 'that her brother's dead? No, that's too good. I'd not believe it, if you told me so. It would be too welcome news to be true.'

'Shame on you, you hardened and unnatural man,' cried the other brother, warmly. 'Prepare yourself for intelligence which, if you have any human

feeling in your breast, will make even you shrink and tremble. What if we tell you that a poor unfortunate boy: a child in everything but never having known one of those tender endearments, or one of those lightsome hours which make our childhood a time to be remembered like a happy dream through all our after life: a warmhearted, harmless, affectionate creature, who never offended you, or did you wrong, but on whom you have vented the malice and hatred you have conceived for your nephew, and whom you have made an instrument for wreaking your bad passions upon him: what if we tell you that, sinking under your persecution, sir, and the misery and illusage of a life short in years but long in suffering, this poor creature has gone to tell his sad tale where, for your part in it, you must surely answer?'

'If you tell me,' said Ralph; 'if you tell me that he is dead, I forgive you all else. If you tell me that he is dead, I am in your debt and bound to you for life. He is! I see it in your faces. Who triumphs now? Is this your dreadful news; this your terrible intelligence? You see how it moves me. You did well to send. I would have travelled a hundred miles afoot, through mud, mire, and darkness, to hear this news just at this time.'

Even then, moved as he was by this savage joy, Ralph could see in the faces of the two brothers, mingling with their look of disgust and horror, something of that indefinable compassion for himself which he had noticed before.

'And HE brought you the intelligence, did he?' said Ralph, pointing with his finger towards the recess already mentioned; 'and sat there, no doubt, to see me prostrated and overwhelmed by it! Ha, ha, ha! But I tell him that I'll be a sharp thorn in his side for many a long day to come; and I tell you two, again, that you don't know him yet; and that you'll rue the day you took compassion on the vagabond.'

'You take me for your nephew,' said a hollow voice; 'it would be better for you, and for me too, if I were he indeed.'

The figure that he had seen so dimly, rose, and came slowly down. He started back, for he found that he confrontednot Nicholas, as he had supposed, but Brooker.

Ralph had no reason, that he knew, to fear this man; he had never feared him before; but the pallor which had been observed in his face when he issued forth that night, came upon him again. He was seen to tremble, and his voice changed as he said, keeping his eyes upon him,

'What does this fellow here? Do you know he is a convict, a felon, a common thief?'

'Hear what he has to tell you. Oh, Mr Nickleby, hear what he has to tell you, be he what he may!' cried the brothers, with such emphatic earnestness, that Ralph turned to them in wonder. They pointed to Brooker. Ralph again gazed at him: as it seemed mechanically.

'That boy,' said the man, 'that these gentlemen have been talking of'

'That boy,' repeated Ralph, looking vacantly at him.

'Whom I saw, stretched dead and cold upon his bed, and who is now in his grave'

'Who is now in his grave,' echoed Ralph, like one who talks in his sleep.

The man raised his eyes, and clasped his hands solemnly together:

'Was your only son, so help me God in heaven!'

In the midst of a dead silence, Ralph sat down, pressing his two hands upon his temples. He removed them, after a minute, and never was there seen, part of a living man undisfigured by any wound, such a ghastly face as he then disclosed. He looked at Brooker, who was by this time standing at a short distance from him; but did not say one word, or make the slightest sound or gesture.

'Gentlemen,' said the man, 'I offer no excuses for myself. I am long past that. If, in telling you how this has happened, I tell you that I was harshly used, and perhaps driven out of my real nature, I do it only as a necessary part of my story, and not to shield myself. I am a guilty man.'

He stopped, as if to recollect, and looking away from Ralph, and addressing himself to the brothers, proceeded in a subdued and humble tone:

'Among those who once had dealings with this man, gentlementhat's from twenty to fiveandtwenty years agothere was one: a rough foxhunting, harddrinking gentleman, who had run through his own fortune, and wanted to squander away that of his sister: they were both orphans, and she lived with him and managed his house. I don't know whether it was, originally, to back his influence and try to overpersuade the young woman or not, but he,' pointing, to Ralph, 'used to go down to the house in Leicestershire pretty often, and stop there many days at a time. They had had a great many dealings together, and he may have gone on some of those, or to patch up his client's affairs, which were in a ruinous state; of course he went for profit. The gentlewoman was not a girl, but she was, I have heard say, handsome, and entitled to a pretty large property. In course of time, he married her. The same love of gain which led him to contract this marriage, led to its being kept

strictly private; for a clause in her father's will declared that if she married without her brother's consent, the property, in which she had only some life interest while she remained single, should pass away altogether to another branch of the family. The brother would give no consent that the sister didn't buy, and pay for handsomely; Mr Nickleby would consent to no such sacrifice; and so they went on, keeping their marriage secret, and waiting for him to break his neck or die of a fever. He did neither, and meanwhile the result of this private marriage was a son. The child was put out to nurse, a long way off; his mother never saw him but once or twice, and then by stealth; and his fatherso eagerly did he thirst after the money which seemed to come almost within his grasp now, for his brotherinlaw was very ill, and breaking more and more every daynever went near him, to avoid raising any suspicion. The brother lingered on; Mr Nickleby's wife constantly urged him to avow their marriage; he peremptorily refused. She remained alone in a dull country house: seeing little or no company but riotous, drunken sportsmen. He lived in London and clung to his business. Angry quarrels and recriminations took place, and when they had been married nearly seven years, and were within a few weeks of the time when the brother's death would have adjusted all, she eloped with a younger man, and left him.'

Here he paused, but Ralph did not stir, and the brothers signed to him to proceed.

'It was then that I became acquainted with these circumstances from his own lips. They were no secrets then; for the brother, and others, knew them; but they were communicated to me, not on this account, but because I was wanted. He followed the fugitives. Some said to make money of his wife's shame, but, I believe, to take some violent revenge, for that was as much his character as the other; perhaps more. He didn't find them, and she died not long after. I don't know whether he began to think he might like the child, or whether he wished to make sure that it should never fall into its mother's hands; but, before he went, he intrusted me with the charge of bringing it home. And I did so.'

He went on, from this point, in a still more humble tone, and spoke in a very low voice; pointing to Ralph as he resumed.

'He had used me illcruellyI reminded him in what, not long ago when I met him in the streetand I hated him. I brought the child home to his own house, and lodged him in the front garret. Neglect had made him very sickly, and I was obliged to call in a doctor, who said he must be removed for change of air, or he would die. I think that first put it in my head. I did it then. He was gone six weeks, and when he came back, I told himwith every circumstance well planned and proved; nobody could have suspected methat the child was dead

and buried. He might have been disappointed in some intention he had formed, or he might have had some natural affection, but he WAS grieved at THAT, and I was confirmed in my design of opening up the secret one day, and making it a means of getting money from him. I had heard, like most other men, of Yorkshire schools. I took the child to one kept by a man named Squeers, and left it there. I gave him the name of Smike. Year by year, I paid twenty pounds ayear for him for six years; never breathing the secret all the time; for I had left his father's service after more hard usage, and quarrelled with him again. I was sent away from this country. I have been away nearly eight years. Directly I came home again, I travelled down into Yorkshire, and, skulking in the village of an eveningtime, made inquiries about the boys at the school, and found that this one, whom I had placed there, had run away with a young man bearing the name of his own father. I sought his father out in London, and hinting at what I could tell him, tried for a little money to support life; but he repulsed me with threats. I then found out his clerk, and, going on from little to little, and showing him that there were good reasons for communicating with me, learnt what was going on; and it was I who told him that the boy was no son of the man who claimed to be his father. All this time I had never seen the boy. At length, I heard from this same source that he was very ill, and where he was. I travelled down there, that I might recall myself, if possible, to his recollection and confirm my story. I came upon him unexpectedly; but before I could speak he knew mehe had good cause to remember me, poor lad!and I would have sworn to him if I had met him in the Indies. I knew the piteous face I had seen in the little child. After a few days' indecision, I applied to the young gentleman in whose care he was, and I found that he was dead. He knows how quickly he recognised me again, how often he had described me and my leaving him at the school, and how he told him of a garret he recollected: which is the one I have spoken of, and in his father's house to this day. This is my story. I demand to be brought face to face with the schoolmaster, and put to any possible proof of any part of it, and I will show that it's too true, and that I have this guilt upon my soul.'

'Unhappy man!' said the brothers. 'What reparation can you make for this?'

'None, gentlemen, none! I have none to make, and nothing to hope now. I am old in years, and older still in misery and care. This confession can bring nothing upon me but new suffering and punishment; but I make it, and will abide by it whatever comes. I have been made the instrument of working out this dreadful retribution upon the head of a man who, in the hot pursuit of his bad ends, has persecuted and hunted down his own child to death. It must descend upon me too. I know it must fall. My reparation comes too late; and, neither in this world nor in the next, can I have hope again!'

He had hardly spoken, when the lamp, which stood upon the table close to where Ralph was seated, and which was the only one in the room, was thrown to the ground, and left them in darkness. There was some trifling confusion in obtaining another light; the interval was a mere nothing; but when the light appeared, Ralph Nickleby was gone.

The good brothers and Tim Linkinwater occupied some time in discussing the probability of his return; and, when it became apparent that he would not come back, they hesitated whether or no to send after him. At length, remembering how strangely and silently he had sat in one immovable position during the interview, and thinking he might possibly be ill, they determined, although it was now very late, to send to his house on some pretence. Finding an excuse in the presence of Brooker, whom they knew not how to dispose of without consulting his wishes, they concluded to act upon this resolution before going to bed.

CHAPTER 61

Wherein Nicholas and his Sister forfeit the good Opinion of all worldly and prudent People

On the next morning after Brooker's disclosure had been made, Nicholas returned home. The meeting between him and those whom he had left there was not without strong emotion on both sides; for they had been informed by his letters of what had occurred: and, besides that his griefs were theirs, they mourned with him the death of one whose forlorn and helpless state had first established a claim upon their compassion, and whose truth of heart and grateful earnest nature had, every day, endeared him to them more and more.

'I am sure,' said Mrs Nickleby, wiping her eyes, and sobbing bitterly, 'I have lost the best, the most zealous, and most attentive creature that has ever been a companion to me in my lifeputting you, my dear Nicholas, and Kate, and your poor papa, and that wellbehaved nurse who ran away with the linen and the twelve small forks, out of the question, of course. Of all the tractable, equaltempered, attached, and faithful beings that ever lived, I believe he was the most so. To look round upon the garden, now, that he took so much pride in, or to go into his room and see it filled with so many of those little contrivances for our comfort that he was so fond of making, and made so well, and so little thought he would leave unfinishedI can't bear it, I cannot really. Ah! This is a great trial to me, a great trial. It will be comfort to you, my dear

Nicholas, to the end of your life, to recollect how kind and good you always were to himso it will be to me, to think what excellent terms we were always upon, and how fond he always was of me, poor fellow! It was very natural you should have been attached to him, my dearveryand of course you were, and are very much cut up by this. I am sure it's only necessary to look at you and see how changed you are, to see that; but nobody knows what my feelings arenobody canit's quite impossible!'

While Mrs Nickleby, with the utmost sincerity, gave vent to her sorrows after her own peculiar fashion of considering herself foremost, she was not the only one who indulged such feelings. Kate, although well accustomed to forget herself when others were to be considered, could not repress her grief; Madeline was scarcely less moved than she; and poor, hearty, honest little Miss La Creevy, who had come upon one of her visits while Nicholas was away, and had done nothing, since the sad news arrived, but console and cheer them all, no sooner beheld him coming in at the door, than she sat herself down upon the stairs, and bursting into a flood of tears, refused for a long time to be comforted.

'It hurts me so,' cried the poor body, 'to see him come back alone. I can't help thinking what he must have suffered himself. I wouldn't mind so much if he gave way a little more; but he bears it so manfully.'

'Why, so I should,' said Nicholas, 'should I not?'

'Yes, yes,' replied the little woman, 'and bless you for a good creature! but this does seem at first to a simple soul like meI know it's wrong to say so, and I shall be sorry for it presentlythis does seem such a poor reward for all you have done.'

'Nay,' said Nicholas gently, 'what better reward could I have, than the knowledge that his last days were peaceful and happy, and the recollection that I was his constant companion, and was not prevented, as I might have been by a hundred circumstances, from being beside him?'

'To be sure,' sobbed Miss La Creevy; 'it's very true, and I'm an ungrateful, impious, wicked little fool, I know.'

With that, the good soul fell to crying afresh, and, endeavouring to recover herself, tried to laugh. The laugh and the cry, meeting each other thus abruptly, had a struggle for the mastery; the result was, that it was a drawn battle, and Miss La Creevy went into hysterics.

Waiting until they were all tolerably quiet and composed again, Nicholas, who stood in need of some rest after his long journey, retired to his own room, and

throwing himself, dressed as he was, upon the bed, fell into a sound sleep. When he awoke, he found Kate sitting by his bedside, who, seeing that he had opened his eyes, stooped down to kiss him.

'I came to tell you how glad I am to see you home again.'

'But I can't tell you how glad I am to see you, Kate.'

'We have been wearying so for your return,' said Kate, 'mama and I, andand Madeline.'

'You said in your last letter that she was quite well,' said Nicholas, rather hastily, and colouring as he spoke. 'Has nothing been said, since I have been away, about any future arrangements that the brothers have in contemplation for her?'

'Oh, not a word,' replied Kate. 'I can't think of parting from her without sorrow; and surely, Nicholas, YOU don't wish it!'

Nicholas coloured again, and, sitting down beside his sister on a little couch near the window, said:

'No, Kate, no, I do not. I might strive to disguise my real feelings from anybody but you; but I will tell you thatbriefly and plainly, Katethat I love her.'

Kate's eyes brightened, and she was going to make some reply, when Nicholas laid his hand upon her arm, and went on:

'Nobody must know this but you. She, last of all.'

'Dear Nicholas!'

'Last of all; never, though never is a long day. Sometimes, I try to think that the time may come when I may honestly tell her this; but it is so far off; in such distant perspective, so many years must elapse before it comes, and when it does come (if ever) I shall be so unlike what I am now, and shall have so outlived my days of youth and romancethough not, I am sure, of love for herthat even I feel how visionary all such hopes must be, and try to crush them rudely myself, and have the pain over, rather than suffer time to wither them, and keep the disappointment in store. No, Kate! Since I have been absent, I have had, in that poor fellow who is gone, perpetually before my eyes, another instance of the munificent liberality of these noble brothers. As far as in me lies, I will deserve it, and if I have wavered in my bounden duty to them before, I am now determined to discharge it rigidly, and to put further delays and temptations beyond my reach.'

'Before you say another word, dear Nicholas,' said Kate, turning pale, 'you must hear what I have to tell you. I came on purpose, but I had not the courage. What you say now, gives me new heart.' She faltered, and burst into tears.

There was that in her manner which prepared Nicholas for what was coming. Kate tried to speak, but her tears prevented her.

'Come, you foolish girl,' said Nicholas; 'why, Kate, Kate, be a woman! I think I know what you would tell me. It concerns Mr Frank, does it not?'

Kate sunk her head upon his shoulder, and sobbed out 'Yes.'

'And he has offered you his hand, perhaps, since I have been away,' said Nicholas; 'is that it? Yes. Well, well; it is not so difficult, you see, to tell me, after all. He offered you his hand?'

'Which I refused,' said Kate.

'Yes; and why?'

'I told him,' she said, in a trembling voice, 'all that I have since found you told mama; and while I could not conceal from him, and cannot from you, thatthat it was a pang and a great trial, I did so firmly, and begged him not to see me any more.'

'That's my own brave Kate!' said Nicholas, pressing her to his breast. 'I knew you would.'

'He tried to alter my resolution,' said Kate, 'and declared that, be my decision what it might, he would not only inform his uncles of the step he had taken, but would communicate it to you also, directly you returned. I am afraid,' she added, her momentary composure forsaking her, 'I am afraid I may not have said, strongly enough, how deeply I felt such disinterested love, and how earnestly I prayed for his future happiness. If you do talk together, I shouldI should like him to know that.'

'And did you suppose, Kate, when you had made this sacrifice to what you knew was right and honourable, that I should shrink from mine?' said Nicholas tenderly.

'Oh no! not if your position had been the same, but'

'But it is the same,' interrupted Nicholas. 'Madeline is not the near relation of our benefactors, but she is closely bound to them by ties as dear; and I was first intrusted with her history, specially because they reposed unbounded

confidence in me, and believed that I was as true as steel. How base would it be of me to take advantage of the circumstances which placed her here, or of the slight service I was happily able to render her, and to seek to engage her affections when the result must be, if I succeeded, that the brothers would be disappointed in their darling wish of establishing her as their own child, and that I must seem to hope to build my fortunes on their compassion for the young creature whom I had so meanly and unworthily entrapped: turning her very gratitude and warmth of heart to my own purpose and account, and trading in her misfortunes! I, too, whose duty, and pride, and pleasure, Kate, it is to have other claims upon me which I will never forget; and who have the means of a comfortable and happy life already, and have no right to look beyond it! I have determined to remove this weight from my mind. I doubt whether I have not done wrong, even now; and today I will, without reserve or equivocation, disclose my real reasons to Mr Cherryble, and implore him to take immediate measures for removing this young lady to the shelter of some other roof.'

'Today? so very soon?'

'I have thought of this for weeks, and why should I postpone it? If the scene through which I have just passed has taught me to reflect, and has awakened me to a more anxious and careful sense of duty, why should I wait until the impression has cooled? You would not dissuade me, Kate; now would you?'

'You may grow rich, you know,' said Kate.

'I may grow rich!' repeated Nicholas, with a mournful smile, 'ay, and I may grow old! But rich or poor, or old or young, we shall ever be the same to each other, and in that our comfort lies. What if we have but one home? It can never be a solitary one to you and me. What if we were to remain so true to these first impressions as to form no others? It is but one more link to the strong chain that binds us together. It seems but yesterday that we were playfellows, Kate, and it will seem but tomorrow when we are staid old people, looking back to these cares as we look back, now, to those of our childish days: and recollecting with a melancholy pleasure that the time was, when they could move us. Perhaps then, when we are quaint old folks and talk of the times when our step was lighter and our hair not grey, we may be even thankful for the trials that so endeared us to each other, and turned our lives into that current, down which we shall have glided so peacefully and calmly. And having caught some inkling of our story, the young people about usas young as you and I are now, Katemay come to us for sympathy, and pour distresses which hope and inexperience could scarcely feel enough for, into the compassionate ears of the old bachelor brother and his maiden sister.'

Kate smiled through her tears as Nicholas drew this picture; but they were not tears of sorrow, although they continued to fall when he had ceased to speak.

'Am I not right, Kate?' he said, after a short silence.

'Quite, quite, dear brother; and I cannot tell you how happy I am that I have acted as you would have had me.'

'You don't regret?'

'Nnno,' said Kate timidly, tracing some pattern upon the ground with her little foot. 'I don't regret having done what was honourable and right, of course; but I do regret that this should have ever happenedat least sometimes I regret it, and sometimes II don't know what I say; I am but a weak girl, Nicholas, and it has agitated me very much.'

It is no vaunt to affirm that if Nicholas had had ten thousand pounds at the minute, he would, in his generous affection for the owner of the blushing cheek and downcast eye, have bestowed its utmost farthing, in perfect forgetfulness of himself, to secure her happiness. But all he could do was to comfort and console her by kind words; and words they were of such love and kindness, and cheerful encouragement, that poor Kate threw her arms about his neck, and declared she would weep no more.

'What man,' thought Nicholas proudly, while on his way, soon afterwards, to the brothers' house, 'would not be sufficiently rewarded for any sacrifice of fortune by the possession of such a heart as Kate's, which, but that hearts weigh light, and gold and silver heavy, is beyond all praise? Frank has money, and wants no more. Where would it buy him such a treasure as Kate? And yet, in unequal marriages, the rich party is always supposed to make a great sacrifice, and the other to get a good bargain! But I am thinking like a lover, or like an ass: which I suppose is pretty nearly the same.'

Checking thoughts so little adapted to the business on which he was bound, by such selfreproofs as this and many others no less sturdy, he proceeded on his way and presented himself before Tim Linkinwater.

'Ah! Mr Nickleby!' cried Tim, 'God bless you! how d'ye do? Well? Say you're quite well and never better. Do now.'

'Quite,' said Nicholas, shaking him by both hands.

'Ah!' said Tim, 'you look tired though, now I come to look at you. Hark! there he is, d'ye hear him? That was Dick, the blackbird. He hasn't been himself since you've been gone. He'd never get on without you, now; he takes as naturally to you as he does to me.'

'Dick is a far less sagacious fellow than I supposed him, if he thinks I am half so well worthy of his notice as you,' replied Nicholas.

'Why, I'll tell you what, sir,' said Tim, standing in his favourite attitude and pointing to the cage with the feather of his pen, 'it's a very extraordinary thing about that bird, that the only people he ever takes the smallest notice of, are Mr Charles, and Mr Ned, and you, and me.'

Here, Tim stopped and glanced anxiously at Nicholas; then unexpectedly catching his eye repeated, 'And you and me, sir, and you and me.' And then he glanced at Nicholas again, and, squeezing his hand, said, 'I am a bad one at putting off anything I am interested in. I didn't mean to ask you, but I should like to hear a few particulars about that poor boy. Did he mention Cheeryble Brothers at all?'

'Yes,' said Nicholas, 'many and many a time.'

'That was right of him,' returned Tim, wiping his eyes; 'that was very right of him.'

'And he mentioned your name a score of times,' said Nicholas, 'and often bade me carry back his love to Mr Linkinwater.'

'No, no, did he though?' rejoined Tim, sobbing outright. 'Poor fellow! I wish we could have had him buried in town. There isn't such a buryingground in all London as that little one on the other side of the squarethere are countinghouses all round it, and if you go in there, on a fine day, you can see the books and safes through the open windows. And he sent his love to me, did he? I didn't expect he would have thought of me. Poor fellow, poor fellow! His love too!'

Tim was so completely overcome by this little mark of recollection, that he was quite unequal to any more conversation at the moment. Nicholas therefore slipped quietly out, and went to brother Charles's room.

If he had previously sustained his firmness and fortitude, it had been by an effort which had cost him no little pain; but the warm welcome, the hearty manner, the homely unaffected commiseration, of the good old man, went to his heart, and no inward struggle could prevent his showing it.

'Come, come, my dear sir,' said the benevolent merchant; 'we must not be cast down; no, no. We must learn to bear misfortune, and we must remember that there are many sources of consolation even in death. Every day that this poor lad had lived, he must have been less and less qualified for the world, and more and more unhappy in is own deficiencies. It is better as it is, my dear sir.

Yes, yes, yes, it's better as it is.'

'I have thought of all that, sir,' replied Nicholas, clearing his throat. 'I feel it, I assure you.'

'Yes, that's well,' replied Mr Cheeryble, who, in the midst of all his comforting, was quite as much taken aback as honest old Tim; 'that's well. Where is my brother Ned? Tim Linkinwater, sir, where is my brother Ned?'

'Gone out with Mr Trimmers, about getting that unfortunate man into the hospital, and sending a nurse to his children,' said Tim.

'My brother Ned is a fine fellow, a great fellow!' exclaimed brother Charles as he shut the door and returned to Nicholas. 'He will be overjoyed to see you, my dear sir. We have been speaking of you every day.'

'To tell you the truth, sir, I am glad to find you alone,' said Nicholas, with some natural hesitation; 'for I am anxious to say something to you. Can you spare me a very few minutes?'

'Surely, surely,' returned brother Charles, looking at him with an anxious countenance. 'Say on, my dear sir, say on.'

'I scarcely know how, or where, to begin,' said Nicholas. 'If ever one mortal had reason to be penetrated with love and reverence for another: with such attachment as would make the hardest service in his behalf a pleasure and delight: with such grateful recollections as must rouse the utmost zeal and fidelity of his nature: those are the feelings which I should entertain for you, and do, from my heart and soul, believe me!'

'I do believe you,' replied the old gentleman, 'and I am happy in the belief. I have never doubted it; I never shall. I am sure I never shall.'

'Your telling me that so kindly,' said Nicholas, 'emboldens me to proceed. When you first took me into your confidence, and dispatched me on those missions to Miss Bray, I should have told you that I had seen her long before; that her beauty had made an impression upon me which I could not efface; and that I had fruitlessly endeavoured to trace her, and become acquainted with her history. I did not tell you so, because I vainly thought I could conquer my weaker feelings, and render every consideration subservient to my duty to you.'

'Mr Nickleby,' said brother Charles, 'you did not violate the confidence I placed in you, or take an unworthy advantage of it. I am sure you did not.'

'I did not,' said Nicholas, firmly. 'Although I found that the necessity for

selfcommand and restraint became every day more imperious, and the difficulty greater, I never, for one instant, spoke or looked but as I would have done had you been by. I never, for one moment, deserted my trust, nor have I to this instant. But I find that constant association and companionship with this sweet girl is fatal to my peace of mind, and may prove destructive to the resolutions I made in the beginning, and up to this time have faithfully kept. In short, sir, I cannot trust myself, and I implore and beseech you to remove this young lady from under the charge of my mother and sister without delay. I know that to anyone but myselfto you, who consider the immeasurable distance between me and this young lady, who is now your ward, and the object of your peculiar caremy loving her, even in thought, must appear the height of rashness and presumption. I know it is so. But who can see her as I have seen, who can know what her life has been, and not love her? I have no excuse but that; and as I cannot fly from this temptation, and cannot repress this passion, with its object constantly before me, what can I do but pray and beseech you to remove it, and to leave me to forget her?'

'Mr Nickleby,' said the old man, after a short silence, 'you can do no more. I was wrong to expose a young man like you to this trial. I might have foreseen what would happen. Thank you, sir, thank you. Madeline shall be removed.'

'If you would grant me one favour, dear sir, and suffer her to remember me with esteem, by never revealing to her this confession'

'I will take care,' said Mr Cheeryble. 'And now, is this all you have to tell me?'

'No!' returned Nicholas, meeting his eye, 'it is not.'

'I know the rest,' said Mr Cheeryble, apparently very much relieved by this prompt reply. 'When did it come to your knowledge?'

'When I reached home this morning.'

'You felt it your duty immediately to come to me, and tell me what your sister no doubt acquainted you with?'

'I did,' said Nicholas, 'though I could have wished to have spoken to Mr Frank first.'

'Frank was with me last night,' replied the old gentleman. 'You have done well, Mr Nicklebyvery well, sirand I thank you again.'

Upon this head, Nicholas requested permission to add a few words. He ventured to hope that nothing he had said would lead to the estrangement of Kate and Madeline, who had formed an attachment for each other, any interruption of which would, he knew, be attended with great pain to them,

and, most of all, with remorse and pain to him, as its unhappy cause. When these things were all forgotten, he hoped that Frank and he might still be warm friends, and that no word or thought of his humble home, or of her who was well contented to remain there and share his quiet fortunes, would ever again disturb the harmony between them. He recounted, as nearly as he could, what had passed between himself and Kate that morning: speaking of her with such warmth of pride and affection, and dwelling so cheerfully upon the confidence they had of overcoming any selfish regrets and living contented and happy in each other's love, that few could have heard him unmoved. More moved himself than he had been yet, he expressed in a few hurried wordsas expressive, perhaps, as the most eloquent phraseshis devotion to the brothers, and his hope that he might live and die in their service.

To all this, brother Charles listened in profound silence, and with his chair so turned from Nicholas that his face could not be seen. He had not spoken either, in his accustomed manner, but with a certain stiffness and embarrassment very foreign to it. Nicholas feared he had offended him. He said, 'No, no, he had done quite right,' but that was all.

'Frank is a heedless, foolish fellow,' he said, after Nicholas had paused for some time; 'a very heedless, foolish fellow. I will take care that this is brought to a close without delay. Let us say no more upon the subject; it's a very painful one to me. Come to me in half an hour; I have strange things to tell you, my dear sir, and your uncle has appointed this afternoon for your waiting upon him with me.'

'Waiting upon him! With you, sir!' cried Nicholas.

'Ay, with me,' replied the old gentleman. 'Return to me in half an hour, and I'll tell you more.'

Nicholas waited upon him at the time mentioned, and then learnt all that had taken place on the previous day, and all that was known of the appointment Ralph had made with the brothers; which was for that night; and for the better understanding of which it will be requisite to return and follow his own footsteps from the house of the twin brothers. Therefore, we leave Nicholas somewhat reassured by the restored kindness of their manner towards him, and yet sensible that it was different from what it had been (though he scarcely knew in what respect): so he was full of uneasiness, uncertainty, and disquiet.

CHAPTER 62

Ralph makes one last Appointmentand keeps it

Creeping from the house, and slinking off like a thief; groping with his hands, when first he got into the street, as if he were a blind man; and looking often over his shoulder while he hurried away, as though he were followed in imagination or reality by someone anxious to question or detain him; Ralph Nickleby left the city behind him, and took the road to his own home.

The night was dark, and a cold wind blew, driving the clouds, furiously and fast, before it. There was one black, gloomy mass that seemed to follow him: not hurrying in the wild chase with the others, but lingering sullenly behind, and gliding darkly and stealthily on. He often looked back at this, and, more than once, stopped to let it pass over; but, somehow, when he went forward again, it was still behind him, coming mournfully and slowly up, like a shadowy funeral train.

He had to pass a poor, mean burialgrounda dismal place, raised a few feet above the level of the street, and parted from it by a low parapetwall and an iron railing; a rank, unwholesome, rotten spot, where the very grass and weeds seemed, in their frouzy growth, to tell that they had sprung from paupers' bodies, and had struck their roots in the graves of men, sodden, while alive, in steaming courts and drunken hungry dens. And here, in truth, they lay, parted from the living by a little earth and a board or twolay thick and closecorrupting in body as they had in minda dense and squalid crowd. Here they lay, cheek by jowl with life: no deeper down than the feet of the throng that passed there every day, and piled high as their throats. Here they lay, a grisly family, all these dear departed brothers and sisters of the ruddy clergyman who did his task so speedily when they were hidden in the ground!

As he passed here, Ralph called to mind that he had been one of a jury, long before, on the body of a man who had cut his throat; and that he was buried in this place. He could not tell how he came to recollect it now, when he had so often passed and never thought about him, or how it was that he felt an interest in the circumstance; but he did both; and stopping, and clasping the iron railings with his hands, looked eagerly in, wondering which might be his grave.

While he was thus engaged, there came towards him, with noise of shouts and singing, some fellows full of drink, followed by others, who were remonstrating with them and urging them to go home in quiet. They were in high goodhumour; and one of them, a little, weazen, humpbacked man, began

to dance. He was a grotesque, fantastic figure, and the few bystanders laughed. Ralph himself was moved to mirth, and echoed the laugh of one who stood near and who looked round in his face. When they had passed on, and he was left alone again, he resumed his speculation with a new kind of interest; for he recollected that the last person who had seen the suicide alive, had left him very merry, and he remembered how strange he and the other jurors had thought that at the time.

He could not fix upon the spot among such a heap of graves, but he conjured up a strong and vivid idea of the man himself, and how he looked, and what had led him to do it; all of which he recalled with ease. By dint of dwelling upon this theme, he carried the impression with him when he went away; as he remembered, when a child, to have had frequently before him the figure of some goblin he had once seen chalked upon a door. But as he drew nearer and nearer home he forgot it again, and began to think how very dull and solitary the house would be inside.

This feeling became so strong at last, that when he reached his own door, he could hardly make up his mind to turn the key and open it. When he had done that, and gone into the passage, he felt as though to shut it again would be to shut out the world. But he let it go, and it closed with a loud noise. There was no light. How very dreary, cold, and still it was!

Shivering from head to foot, he made his way upstairs into the room where he had been last disturbed. He had made a kind of compact with himself that he would not think of what had happened until he got home. He was at home now, and suffered himself to consider it.

His own child, his own child! He never doubted the tale; he felt it was true; knew it as well, now, as if he had been privy to it all along. His own child! And dead too. Dying beside Nicholas, loving him, and looking upon him as something like an angel. That was the worst!

They had all turned from him and deserted him in his very first need. Even money could not buy them now; everything must come out, and everybody must know all. Here was the young lord dead, his companion abroad and beyond his reach, ten thousand pounds gone at one blow, his plot with Gride overset at the very moment of triumph, his afterschemes discovered, himself in danger, the object of his persecution and Nicholas's love, his own wretched boy; everything crumbled and fallen upon him, and he beaten down beneath the ruins and grovelling in the dust.

If he had known his child to be alive; if no deceit had been ever practised, and he had grown up beneath his eye; he might have been a careless, indifferent,

rough, harsh fatherlike enoughhe felt that; but the thought would come that he might have been otherwise, and that his son might have been a comfort to him, and they two happy together. He began to think now, that his supposed death and his wife's flight had had some share in making him the morose, hard man he was. He seemed to remember a time when he was not quite so rough and obdurate; and almost thought that he had first hated Nicholas because he was young and gallant, and perhaps like the stripling who had brought dishonour and loss of fortune on his head.

But one tender thought, or one of natural regret, in his whirlwind of passion and remorse, was as a drop of calm water in a stormy maddened sea. His hatred of Nicholas had been fed upon his own defeat, nourished on his interference with his schemes, fattened upon his old defiance and success. There were reasons for its increase; it had grown and strengthened gradually. Now it attained a height which was sheer wild lunacy. That his, of all others, should have been the hands to rescue his miserable child; that he should have been his protector and faithful friend; that he should have shown him that love and tenderness which, from the wretched moment of his birth, he had never known; that he should have taught him to hate his own parent and execrate his very name; that he should now know and feel all this, and triumph in the recollection; was gall and madness to the usurer's heart. The dead boy's love for Nicholas, and the attachment of Nicholas to him, was insupportable agony. The picture of his deathbed, with Nicholas at his side, tending and supporting him, and he breathing out his thanks, and expiring in his arms, when he would have had them mortal enemies and hating each other to the last, drove him frantic. He gnashed his teeth and smote the air, and looking wildly round, with eyes which gleamed through the darkness, cried aloud:

'I am trampled down and ruined. The wretch told me true. The night has come! Is there no way to rob them of further triumph, and spurn their mercy and compassion? Is there no devil to help me?'

Swiftly, there glided again into his brain the figure he had raised that night. It seemed to lie before him. The head was covered now. So it was when he first saw it. The rigid, upturned, marble feet too, he remembered well. Then came before him the pale and trembling relatives who had told their tale upon the inquestthe shrieks of womenthe silent dread of menthe consternation and disquietthe victory achieved by that heap of clay, which, with one motion of its hand, had let out the life and made this stir among them

He spoke no more; but, after a pause, softly groped his way out of the room, and up the echoing stairsup to the topto the front garretwhere he closed the door behind him, and remained.

It was a mere lumberroom now, but it yet contained an old dismantled bedstead; the one on which his son had slept; for no other had ever been there. He avoided it hastily, and sat down as far from it as he could.

The weakened glare of the lights in the street below, shining through the window which had no blind or curtain to intercept it, was enough to show the character of the room, though not sufficient fully to reveal the various articles of lumber, old corded trunks and broken furniture, which were scattered about. It had a shelving roof; high in one part, and at another descending almost to the floor. It was towards the highest part that Ralph directed his eyes; and upon it he kept them fixed steadily for some minutes, when he rose, and dragging thither an old chest upon which he had been seated, mounted on it, and felt along the wall above his head with both hands. At length, they touched a large iron hook, firmly driven into one of the beams.

At that moment, he was interrupted by a loud knocking at the door below. After a little hesitation he opened the window, and demanded who it was.

'I want Mr Nickleby,' replied a voice.

'What with him?'

'That's not Mr Nickleby's voice, surely?' was the rejoinder.

It was not like it; but it was Ralph who spoke, and so he said.

The voice made answer that the twin brothers wished to know whether the man whom he had seen that night was to be detained; and that although it was now midnight they had sent, in their anxiety to do right.

'Yes,' cried Ralph, 'detain him till tomorrow; then let them bring him herehim and my nephewand come themselves, and be sure that I will be ready to receive them.'

'At what hour?' asked the voice.

'At any hour,' replied Ralph fiercely. 'In the afternoon, tell them. At any hour, at any minute. All times will be alike to me.'

He listened to the man's retreating footsteps until the sound had passed, and then, gazing up into the sky, saw, or thought he saw, the same black cloud that had seemed to follow him home, and which now appeared to hover directly above the house.

'I know its meaning now,' he muttered, 'and the restless nights, the dreams, and why I have quailed of late. All pointed to this. Oh! if men by selling their own

souls could ride rampant for a term, for how short a term would I barter mine tonight!'

The sound of a deep bell came along the wind. One.

'Lie on!' cried the usurer, 'with your iron tongue! Ring merrily for births that make expectants writhe, and marriages that are made in hell, and toll ruefully for the dead whose shoes are worn already! Call men to prayers who are godly because not found out, and ring chimes for the coming in of every year that brings this cursed world nearer to its end. No bell or book for me! Throw me on a dunghill, and let me rot there, to infect the air!'

With a wild look around, in which frenzy, hatred, and despair were horribly mingled, he shook his clenched hand at the sky above him, which was still dark and threatening, and closed the window.

The rain and hail pattered against the glass; the chimneys quaked and rocked; the crazy casement rattled with the wind, as though an impatient hand inside were striving to burst it open. But no hand was there, and it opened no more.

'How's this?' cried one. 'The gentleman say they can't make anybody hear, and have been trying these two hours.'

'And yet he came home last night,' said another; 'for he spoke to somebody out of that window upstairs.'

They were a little knot of men, and, the window being mentioned, went out into the road to look up at it. This occasioned their observing that the house was still close shut, as the housekeeper had said she had left it on the previous night, and led to a great many suggestions: which terminated in two or three of the boldest getting round to the back, and so entering by a window, while the others remained outside, in impatient expectation.

They looked into all the rooms below: opening the shutters as they went, to admit the fading light: and still finding nobody, and everything quiet and in its place, doubted whether they should go farther. One man, however, remarking that they had not yet been into the garret, and that it was there he had been last seen, they agreed to look there too, and went up softly; for the mystery and silence made them timid.

After they had stood for an instant, on the landing, eyeing each other, he who had proposed their carrying the search so far, turned the handle of the door, and, pushing it open, looked through the chink, and fell back directly.

'It's very odd,' he whispered, 'he's hiding behind the door! Look!'

They pressed forward to see; but one among them thrusting the others aside with a loud exclamation, drew a claspknife from his pocket, and dashing into the room, cut down the body.

He had torn a rope from one of the old trunks, and hung himself on an iron hook immediately below the trapdoor in the ceilingin the very place to which the eyes of his son, a lonely, desolate, little creature, had so often been directed in childish terror, fourteen years before.

CHAPTER 63

The Brothers Cheeryble make various Declarations for themselves and others. Tim Linkinwater makes a Declaration for himself

Some weeks had passed, and the first shock of these events had subsided. Madeline had been removed; Frank had been absent; and Nicholas and Kate had begun to try in good earnest to stifle their own regrets, and to live for each other and for their motherwho, poor lady, could in nowise be reconciled to this dull and altered state of affairswhen there came one evening, per favour of Mr Linkinwater, an invitation from the brothers to dinner on the next day but one: comprehending, not only Mrs Nickleby, Kate, and Nicholas, but little Miss La Creevy, who was most particularly mentioned.

'Now, my dears,' said Mrs Nickleby, when they had rendered becoming honour to the bidding, and Tim had taken his departure, 'what does THIS mean?'

'What do YOU mean, mother?' asked Nicholas, smiling.

'I say, my dear,' rejoined that lady, with a face of unfathomable mystery, 'what does this invitation to dinner mean? What is its intention and object?'

'I conclude it means, that on such a day we are to eat and drink in their house, and that its intent and object is to confer pleasure upon us,' said Nicholas.

'And that's all you conclude it is, my dear?'

'I have not yet arrived at anything deeper, mother.'

'Then I'll just tell you one thing,' said Mrs Nickleby, you'll find yourself a little surprised; that's all. You may depend upon it that this means something besides dinner.'

'Tea and supper, perhaps,' suggested Nicholas.

'I wouldn't be absurd, my dear, if I were you,' replied Mrs Nickleby, in a lofty manner, 'because it's not by any means becoming, and doesn't suit you at all. What I mean to say is, that the Mr Cheerybles don't ask us to dinner with all this ceremony for nothing. Never mind; wait and see. You won't believe anything I say, of course. It's much better to wait; a great deal better; it's satisfactory to all parties, and there can be no disputing. All I say is, remember what I say now, and when I say I said so, don't say I didn't.'

With this stipulation, Mrs Nickleby, who was troubled, night and day, with a vision of a hot messenger tearing up to the door to announce that Nicholas had been taken into partnership, quitted that branch of the subject, and entered upon a new one.

'It's a very extraordinary thing,' she said, 'a most extraordinary thing, that they should have invited Miss La Creevy. It quite astonishes me, upon my word it does. Of course it's very pleasant that she should be invited, very pleasant, and I have no doubt that she'll conduct herself extremely well; she always does. It's very gratifying to think that we should have been the means of introducing her into such society, and I'm quite glad of itquite rejoicedfor she certainly is an exceedingly wellbehaved and goodnatured little person. I could wish that some friend would mention to her how very badly she has her cap trimmed, and what very preposterous bows those are, but of course that's impossible, and if she likes to make a fright of herself, no doubt she has a perfect right to do so. We never see ourselvesnever do, and never didand I suppose we never shall.'

This moral reflection reminding her of the necessity of being peculiarly smart on the occasion, so as to counterbalance Miss La Creevy, and be herself an effectual setoff and atonement, led Mrs Nickleby into a consultation with her daughter relative to certain ribbons, gloves, and trimmings: which, being a complicated question, and one of paramount importance, soon routed the previous one, and put it to flight.

The great day arriving, the good lady put herself under Kate's hands an hour or so after breakfast, and, dressing by easy stages, completed her toilette in sufficient time to allow of her daughter's making hers, which was very simple, and not very long, though so satisfactory that she had never appeared more charming or looked more lovely. Miss La Creevy, too, arrived with two bandboxes (whereof the bottoms fell out as they were handed from the coach) and something in a newspaper, which a gentleman had sat upon, coming down, and which was obliged to be ironed again, before it was fit for service. At last, everybody was dressed, including Nicholas, who had come home to

fetch them, and they went away in a coach sent by the brothers for the purpose: Mrs Nickleby wondering very much what they would have for dinner, and crossexamining Nicholas as to the extent of his discoveries in the morning; whether he had smelt anything cooking at all like turtle, and if not, what he had smelt; and diversifying the conversation with reminiscences of dinners to which she had gone some twenty years ago, concerning which she particularised not only the dishes but the guests, in whom her hearers did not feel a very absorbing interest, as not one of them had ever chanced to hear their names before.

The old butler received them with profound respect and many smiles, and ushered them into the drawingroom, where they were received by the brothers with so much cordiality and kindness that Mrs Nickleby was quite in a flutter, and had scarcely presence of mind enough, even to patronise Miss La Creevy. Kate was still more affected by the reception: for, knowing that the brothers were acquainted with all that had passed between her and Frank, she felt her position a most delicate and trying one, and was trembling on the arm of Nicholas, when Mr Charles took her in his, and led her to another part of the room.

'Have you seen Madeline, my dear,' he said, 'since she left your house?'

'No, sir!' replied Kate. 'Not once.'

'And not heard from her, eh? Not heard from her?'

'I have only had one letter,' rejoined Kate, gently. 'I thought she would not have forgotten me quite so soon.'

'Ah,' said the old man, patting her on the head, and speaking as affectionately as if she had been his favourite child. 'Poor dear! what do you think of this, brother Ned? Madeline has only written to her once, only once, Ned, and she didn't think she would have forgotten her quite so soon, Ned.'

'Oh! sad, sad; very sad!' said Ned.

The brothers interchanged a glance, and looking at Kate for a little time without speaking, shook hands, and nodded as if they were congratulating each other on something very delightful.

'Well, well,' said brother Charles, 'go into that room, my dearthat door yonderand see if there's not a letter for you from her. I think there's one upon the table. You needn't hurry back, my love, if there is, for we don't dine just yet, and there's plenty of time. Plenty of time.'

Kate retired as she was directed. Brother Charles, having followed her

graceful figure with his eyes, turned to Mrs Nickleby, and said:

'We took the liberty of naming one hour before the real dinnertime, ma'am, because we had a little business to speak about, which would occupy the interval. Ned, my dear fellow, will you mention what we agreed upon? Mr Nickleby, sir, have the goodness to follow me.'

Without any further explanation, Mrs Nickleby, Miss La Creevy, and brother Ned, were left alone together, and Nicholas followed brother Charles into his private room; where, to his great astonishment, he encountered Frank, whom he supposed to be abroad.

'Young men,' said Mr Cheeryble, 'shake hands!'

'I need no bidding to do that,' said Nicholas, extending his.

'Nor I,' rejoined Frank, as he clasped it heartily.

The old gentleman thought that two handsomer or finer young fellows could scarcely stand side by side than those on whom he looked with so much pleasure. Suffering his eyes to rest upon them, for a short time in silence, he said, while he seated himself at his desk:

'I wish to see you friendsclose and firm friendsand if I thought you otherwise, I should hesitate in what I am about to say. Frank, look here! Mr Nickleby, will you come on the other side?'

The young men stepped up on either hand of brother Charles, who produced a paper from his desk, and unfolded it.

'This,' he said, 'is a copy of the will of Madeline's maternal grandfather, bequeathing her the sum of twelve thousand pounds, payable either upon her coming of age or marrying. It would appear that this gentleman, angry with her (his only relation) because she would not put herself under his protection, and detach herself from the society of her father, in compliance with his repeated overtures, made a will leaving this property (which was all he possessed) to a charitable institution. He would seem to have repented this determination, however, for three weeks afterwards, and in the same month, he executed this. By some fraud, it was abstracted immediately after his decease, and the otherthe only will foundwas proved and administered. Friendly negotiations, which have only just now terminated, have been proceeding since this instrument came into our hands, and, as there is no doubt of its authenticity, and the witnesses have been discovered (after some trouble), the money has been refunded. Madeline has therefore obtained her right, and is, or will be, when either of the contingencies which I have mentioned has arisen,

mistress of this fortune. You understand me?'

Frank replied in the affirmative. Nicholas, who could not trust himself to speak lest his voice should be heard to falter, bowed his head.

'Now, Frank,' said the old gentleman, 'you were the immediate means of recovering this deed. The fortune is but a small one; but we love Madeline; and such as it is, we would rather see you allied to her with that, than to any other girl we know who has three times the money. Will you become a suitor to her for her hand?'

'No, sir. I interested myself in the recovery of that instrument, believing that her hand was already pledged to one who has a thousand times the claims upon her gratitude, and, if I mistake not, upon her heart, that I or any other man can ever urge. In this it seems I judged hastily.'

'As you always do, sir,' cried brother Charles, utterly forgetting his assumed dignity, 'as you always do. How dare you think, Frank, that we would have you marry for money, when youth, beauty, and every amiable virtue and excellence were to be had for love? How dared you, Frank, go and make love to Mr Nickleby's sister without telling us first what you meant to do, and letting us speak for you?'

'I hardly dared to hope'

'You hardly dared to hope! Then, so much the greater reason for having our assistance! Mr Nickleby, sir, Frank, although he judged hastily, judged, for once, correctly. Madeline's heart IS occupied. Give me your hand, sir; it is occupied by you, and worthily and naturally. This fortune is destined to be yours, but you have a greater fortune in her, sir, than you would have in money were it forty times told. She chooses you, Mr Nickleby. She chooses as we, her dearest friends, would have her choose. Frank chooses as we would have HIM choose. He should have your sister's little hand, sir, if she had refused it a score of times; ay, he should, and he shall! You acted nobly, not knowing our sentiments, but now you know them, sir, you must do as you are bid. What! You are the children of a worthy gentleman! The time was, sir, when my dear brother Ned and I were two poor simplehearted boys, wandering, almost barefoot, to seek our fortunes: are we changed in anything but years and worldly circumstances since that time? No, God forbid! Oh, Ned, Ned, Ned, what a happy day this is for you and me! If our poor mother had only lived to see us now, Ned, how proud it would have made her dear heart at last!'

Thus apostrophised, brother Ned, who had entered with Mrs Nickleby, and who had been before unobserved by the young men, darted forward, and fairly hugged brother Charles in his arms.

'Bring in my little Kate,' said the latter, after a short silence. 'Bring her in, Ned. Let me see Kate, let me kiss her. I have a right to do so now; I was very near it when she first came; I have often been very near it. Ah! Did you find the letter, my bird? Did you find Madeline herself, waiting for you and expecting you? Did you find that she had not quite forgotten her friend and nurse and sweet companion? Why, this is almost the best of all!'

'Come, come,' said Ned, 'Frank will be jealous, and we shall have some cutting of throats before dinner.'

'Then let him take her away, Ned, let him take her away. Madeline's in the next room. Let all the lovers get out of the way, and talk among themselves, if they've anything to say. Turn 'em out, Ned, every one!'

Brother Charles began the clearance by leading the blushing girl to the door, and dismissing her with a kiss. Frank was not very slow to follow, and Nicholas had disappeared first of all. So there only remained Mrs Nickleby and Miss La Creevy, who were both sobbing heartily; the two brothers; and Tim Linkinwater, who now came in to shake hands with everybody: his round face all radiant and beaming with smiles.

'Well, Tim Linkinwater, sir,' said brother Charles, who was always spokesman, 'now the young folks are happy, sir.'

'You didn't keep 'em in suspense as long as you said you would, though,' returned Tim, archly. 'Why, Mr Nickleby and Mr Frank were to have been in your room for I don't know how long; and I don't know what you weren't to have told them before you came out with the truth.'

'Now, did you ever know such a villain as this, Ned?' said the old gentleman; 'did you ever know such a villain as Tim Linkinwater? He accusing me of being impatient, and he the very man who has been wearying us morning, noon, and night, and torturing us for leave to go and tell 'em what was in store, before our plans were half complete, or we had arranged a single thing. A treacherous dog!'

'So he is, brother Charles,' returned Ned; 'Tim is a treacherous dog. Tim is not to be trusted. Tim is a wild young fellow. He wants gravity and steadiness; he must sow his wild oats, and then perhaps he'll become in time a respectable member of society.'

This being one of the standing jokes between the old fellows and Tim, they all three laughed very heartily, and might have laughed much longer, but that the brothers, seeing that Mrs Nickleby was labouring to express her feelings, and

was really overwhelmed by the happiness of the time, took her between them, and led her from the room under pretence of having to consult her on some most important arrangements.

Now, Tim and Miss La Creevy had met very often, and had always been very chatty and pleasant togetherhad always been great friendsand consequently it was the most natural thing in the world that Tim, finding that she still sobbed, should endeavour to console her. As Miss La Creevy sat on a large oldfashioned windowseat, where there was ample room for two, it was also natural that Tim should sit down beside her; and as to Tim's being unusually spruce and particular in his attire that day, why it was a high festival and a great occasion, and that was the most natural thing of all.

Tim sat down beside Miss La Creevy, and, crossing one leg over the other so that his foothe had very comely feet and happened to be wearing the neatest shoes and black silk stockings possibleshould come easily within the range of her eye, said in a soothing way:

'Don't cry!'

'I must,' rejoined Miss La Creevy.

'No, don't,' said Tim. 'Please don't; pray don't.'

'I am so happy!' sobbed the little woman.

'Then laugh,' said Tim. 'Do laugh.'

What in the world Tim was doing with his arm, it is impossible to conjecture, but he knocked his elbow against that part of the window which was quite on the other side of Miss La Creevy; and it is clear that it could have no business there.

'Do laugh,' said Tim, 'or I'll cry.'

'Why should you cry?' asked Miss La Creevy, smiling.

'Because I'm happy too,' said Tim. 'We are both happy, and I should like to do as you do.'

Surely, there never was a man who fidgeted as Tim must have done then; for he knocked the window againalmost in the same placeand Miss La Creevy said she was sure he'd break it.

'I knew,' said Tim, 'that you would be pleased with this scene.'

'It was very thoughtful and kind to remember me,' returned Miss La Creevy.

'Nothing could have delighted me half so much.'

Why on earth should Miss La Creevy and Tim Linkinwater have said all this in a whisper? It was no secret. And why should Tim Linkinwater have looked so hard at Miss La Creevy, and why should Miss La Creevy have looked so hard at the ground?

'It's a pleasant thing,' said Tim, 'to people like us, who have passed all our lives in the world alone, to see young folks that we are fond of, brought together with so many years of happiness before them.'

'Ah!' cried the little woman with all her heart, 'that it is!'

'Although,' pursued Tim 'although it makes one feel quite solitary and cast away. Now don't it?'

Miss La Creevy said she didn't know. And why should she say she didn't know? Because she must have known whether it did or not.

'It's almost enough to make us get married after all, isn't it?' said Tim.

'Oh, nonsense!' replied Miss La Creevy, laughing. 'We are too old.'

'Not a bit,' said Tim; 'we are too old to be single. Why shouldn't we both be married, instead of sitting through the long winter evenings by our solitary firesides? Why shouldn't we make one fireside of it, and marry each other?'

'Oh, Mr Linkinwater, you're joking!'

'No, no, I'm not. I'm not indeed,' said Tim. 'I will, if you will. Do, my dear!'

'It would make people laugh so.'

'Let 'em laugh,' cried Tim stoutly; 'we have good tempers I know, and we'll laugh too. Why, what hearty laughs we have had since we've known each other!'

'So we have,' cried Miss La Creevygiving way a little, as Tim thought.

'It has been the happiest time in all my life; at least, away from the countinghouse and Cheeryble Brothers,' said Tim. 'Do, my dear! Now say you will.'

'No, no, we mustn't think of it,' returned Miss La Creevy. 'What would the brothers say?'

'Why, God bless your soul!' cried Tim, innocently, 'you don't suppose I should think of such a thing without their knowing it! Why they left us here on

purpose.'

'I can never look 'em in the face again!' exclaimed Miss La Creevy, faintly.

'Come,' said Tim, 'let's be a comfortable couple. We shall live in the old house here, where I have been for fourandforty year; we shall go to the old church, where I've been, every Sunday morning, all through that time; we shall have all my old friends about usDick, the archway, the pump, the flowerpots, and Mr Frank's children, and Mr Nickleby's children, that we shall seem like grandfather and grandmother to. Let's be a comfortable couple, and take care of each other! And if we should get deaf, or lame, or blind, or bedridden, how glad we shall be that we have somebody we are fond of, always to talk to and sit with! Let's be a comfortable couple. Now, do, my dear!'

Five minutes after this honest and straightforward speech, little Miss La Creevy and Tim were talking as pleasantly as if they had been married for a score of years, and had never once quarrelled all the time; and five minutes after that, when Miss La Creevy had bustled out to see if her eyes were red and put her hair to rights, Tim moved with a stately step towards the drawingroom, exclaiming as he went, 'There an't such another woman in all London! I KNOW there an't!'

By this time, the apoplectic butler was nearly in fits, in consequence of the unheardof postponement of dinner. Nicholas, who had been engaged in a manner in which every reader may imagine for himself or herself, was hurrying downstairs in obedience to his angry summons, when he encountered a new surprise.

On his way down, he overtook, in one of the passages, a stranger genteelly dressed in black, who was also moving towards the diningroom. As he was rather lame, and walked slowly, Nicholas lingered behind, and was following him step by step, wondering who he was, when he suddenly turned round and caught him by both hands.

'Newman Noggs!' cried Nicholas joyfully

'Ah! Newman, your own Newman, your own old faithful Newman! My dear boy, my dear Nick, I give you joyhealth, happiness, every blessing! I can't bear itit's too much, my dear boyit makes a child of me!'

'Where have you been?' said Nicholas. 'What have you been doing? How often have I inquired for you, and been told that I should hear before long!'

'I know, I know!' returned Newman. 'They wanted all the happiness to come together. I've been helping 'em. IIlook at me, Nick, look at me!'

'You would never let ME do that,' said Nicholas in a tone of gentle reproach.

'I didn't mind what I was, then. I shouldn't have had the heart to put on gentleman's clothes. They would have reminded me of old times and made me miserable. I am another man now, Nick. My dear boy, I can't speak. Don't say anything to me. Don't think the worse of me for these tears. You don't know what I feel today; you can't, and never will!'

They walked in to dinner arminarm, and sat down side by side.

Never was such a dinner as that, since the world began. There was the superannuated bank clerk, Tim Linkinwater's friend; and there was the chubby old lady, Tim Linkinwater's sister; and there was so much attention from Tim Linkinwater's sister to Miss La Creevy, and there were so many jokes from the superannuated bank clerk, and Tim Linkinwater himself was in such tiptop spirits, and little Miss La Creevy was in such a comical state, that of themselves they would have composed the pleasantest party conceivable. Then, there was Mrs Nickleby, so grand and complacent; Madeline and Kate, so blushing and beautiful; Nicholas and Frank, so devoted and proud; and all four so silently and tremblingly happy; there was Newman so subdued yet so overjoyed, and there were the twin brothers so delighted and interchanging such looks, that the old servant stood transfixed behind his master's chair, and felt his eyes grow dim as they wandered round the table.

When the first novelty of the meeting had worn off, and they began truly to feel how happy they were, the conversation became more general, and the harmony and pleasure if possible increased. The brothers were in a perfect ecstasy; and their insisting on saluting the ladies all round, before they would permit them to retire, gave occasion to the superannuated bank clerk to say so many good things, that he quite outshone himself, and was looked upon as a prodigy of humour.

'Kate, my dear,' said Mrs Nickleby, taking her daughter aside, as soon as they got upstairs, 'you don't really mean to tell me that this is actually true about Miss La Creevy and Mr Linkinwater?'

'Indeed it is, mama.'

'Why, I never heard such a thing in my life!' exclaimed Mrs Nickleby.

'Mr Linkinwater is a most excellent creature,' reasoned Kate, 'and, for his age, quite young still.'

'For HIS age, my dear!' returned Mrs Nickleby, 'yes; nobody says anything against him, except that I think he is the weakest and most foolish man I ever

knew. It's HER age I speak of. That he should have gone and offered himself to a woman who must beah, half as old again as I amand that she should have dared to accept him! It don't signify, Kate; I'm disgusted with her!'

Shaking her head very emphatically indeed, Mrs Nickleby swept away; and all the evening, in the midst of the merriment and enjoyment that ensued, and in which with that exception she freely participated, conducted herself towards Miss La Creevy in a stately and distant manner, designed to mark her sense of the impropriety of her conduct, and to signify her extreme and cutting disapprobation of the misdemeanour she had so flagrantly committed.

CHAPTER 64

An old Acquaintance is recognised under melancholy Circumstances, and Dotheboys Hall breaks up for ever

Nicholas was one of those whose joy is incomplete unless it is shared by the friends of adverse and less fortunate days. Surrounded by every fascination of love and hope, his warm heart yearned towards plain John Browdie. He remembered their first meeting with a smile, and their second with a tear; saw poor Smike once again with the bundle on his shoulder trudging patiently by his side; and heard the honest Yorkshireman's rough words of encouragement as he left them on their road to London.

Madeline and he sat down, very many times, jointly to produce a letter which should acquaint John at full length with his altered fortunes, and assure him of his friendship and gratitude. It so happened, however, that the letter could never be written. Although they applied themselves to it with the best intentions in the world, it chanced that they always fell to talking about something else, and when Nicholas tried it by himself, he found it impossible to write onehalf of what he wished to say, or to pen anything, indeed, which on reperusal did not appear cold and unsatisfactory compared with what he had in his mind. At last, after going on thus from day to day, and reproaching himself more and more, he resolved (the more readily as Madeline strongly urged him) to make a hasty trip into Yorkshire, and present himself before Mr and Mrs Browdie without a word of notice.

Thus it was that between seven and eight o'clock one evening, he and Kate found themselves in the Saracen's Head bookingoffice, securing a place to Greta Bridge by the next morning's coach. They had to go westward, to

procure some little necessaries for his journey, and, as it was a fine night, they agreed to walk there, and ride home.

The place they had just been in called up so many recollections, and Kate had so many anecdotes of Madeline, and Nicholas so many anecdotes of Frank, and each was so interested in what the other said, and both were so happy and confiding, and had so much to talk about, that it was not until they had plunged for a full halfhour into that labyrinth of streets which lies between Seven Dials and Soho, without emerging into any large thoroughfare, that Nicholas began to think it just possible they might have lost their way.

The possibility was soon converted into a certainty; for, on looking about, and walking first to one end of the street and then to the other, he could find no landmark he could recognise, and was fain to turn back again in quest of some place at which he could seek a direction.

It was a bystreet, and there was nobody about, or in the few wretched shops they passed. Making towards a faint gleam of light which streamed across the pavement from a cellar, Nicholas was about to descend two or three steps so as to render himself visible to those below and make his inquiry, when he was arrested by a loud noise of scolding in a woman's voice.

'Oh come away!' said Kate, 'they are quarrelling. You'll be hurt.'

'Wait one instant, Kate. Let us hear if there's anything the matter,' returned her brother. 'Hush!'

'You nasty, idle, vicious, goodfornothing brute,' cried the woman, stamping on the ground, 'why don't you turn the mangle?'

'So I am, my life and soul!' replied the man's voice. 'I am always turning. I am perpetually turning, like a demd old horse in a demnition mill. My life is one demd horrid grind!'

'Then why don't you go and list for a soldier?' retorted the woman; 'you're welcome to.'

'For a soldier!' cried the man. 'For a soldier! Would his joy and gladness see him in a coarse red coat with a little tail? Would she hear of his being slapped and beat by drummers demnebly? Would she have him fire off real guns, and have his hair cut, and his whiskers shaved, and his eyes turned right and left, and his trousers pipeclayed?'

'Dear Nicholas,' whispered Kate, 'you don't know who that is. It's Mr Mantalini I am confident.'

'Do make sure! Peep at him while I ask the way,' said Nicholas. 'Come down a step or two. Come!'

Drawing her after him, Nicholas crept down the steps and looked into a small boarded cellar. There, amidst clothesbaskets and clothes, stripped up to his shirtsleeves, but wearing still an old patched pair of pantaloons of superlative make, a once brilliant waistcoat, and moustache and whiskers as of yore, but lacking their lustrous dyethere, endeavouring to mollify the wrath of a buxom femalenot the lawful Madame Mantalini, but the proprietress of the concernand grinding meanwhile as if for very life at the mangle, whose creaking noise, mingled with her shrill tones, appeared almost to deafen himthere was the graceful, elegant, fascinating, and once dashing Mantalini.

'Oh you false traitor!' cried the lady, threatening personal violence on Mr Mantalini's face.

'False! Oh dem! Now my soul, my gentle, captivating, bewitching, and most demnebly enslaving chickabiddy, be calm,' said Mr Mantalini, humbly.

'I won't!' screamed the woman. 'I'll tear your eyes out!'

'Oh! What a demd savage lamb!' cried Mr Mantalini.

'You're never to be trusted,' screamed the woman; 'you were out all day yesterday, and gallivanting somewhere I know. You know you were! Isn't it enough that I paid two pound fourteen for you, and took you out of prison and let you live here like a gentleman, but must you go on like this: breaking my heart besides?'

'I will never break its heart, I will be a good boy, and never do so any more; I will never be naughty again; I beg its little pardon,' said Mr Mantalini, dropping the handle of the mangle, and folding his palms together; 'it is all up with its handsome friend! He has gone to the demnition bowwows. It will have pity? It will not scratch and claw, but pet and comfort? Oh, demmit!'

Very little affected, to judge from her action, by this tender appeal, the lady was on the point of returning some angry reply, when Nicholas, raising his voice, asked his way to Piccadilly.

Mr Mantalini turned round, caught sight of Kate, and, without another word, leapt at one bound into a bed which stood behind the door, and drew the counterpane over his face: kicking meanwhile convulsively.

'Demmit,' he cried, in a suffocating voice, 'it's little Nickleby! Shut the door, put out the candle, turn me up in the bedstead! Oh, dem, dem, dem!'

The woman looked, first at Nicholas, and then at Mr Mantalini, as if uncertain on whom to visit this extraordinary behaviour; but Mr Mantalini happening by illluck to thrust his nose from under the bedclothes, in his anxiety to ascertain whether the visitors were gone, she suddenly, and with a dexterity which could only have been acquired by long practice, flung a pretty heavy clothesbasket at him, with so good an aim that he kicked more violently than before, though without venturing to make any effort to disengage his head, which was quite extinguished. Thinking this a favourable opportunity for departing before any of the torrent of her wrath discharged itself upon him, Nicholas hurried Kate off, and left the unfortunate subject of this unexpected recognition to explain his conduct as he best could.

The next morning he began his journey. It was now cold, winter weather: forcibly recalling to his mind under what circumstances he had first travelled that road, and how many vicissitudes and changes he had since undergone. He was alone inside the greater part of the way, and sometimes, when he had fallen into a doze, and, rousing himself, looked out of the window, and recognised some place which he well remembered as having passed, either on his journey down, or in the long walk back with poor Smike, he could hardly believe but that all which had since happened had been a dream, and that they were still plodding wearily on towards London, with the world before them.

To render these recollections the more vivid, it came on to snow as night set in; and, passing through Stamford and Grantham, and by the little alehouse where he had heard the story of the bold Baron of Grogzwig, everything looked as if he had seen it but yesterday, and not even a flake of the white crust on the roofs had melted away. Encouraging the train of ideas which flocked upon him, he could almost persuade himself that he sat again outside the coach, with Squeers and the boys; that he heard their voices in the air; and that he felt again, but with a mingled sensation of pain and pleasure now, that old sinking of the heart, and longing after home. While he was yet yielding himself up to these fancies he fell asleep, and, dreaming of Madeline, forgot them.

He slept at the inn at Greta Bridge on the night of his arrival, and, rising at a very early hour next morning, walked to the market town, and inquired for John Browdie's house. John lived in the outskirts, now he was a family man; and as everbody knew him, Nicholas had no difficulty in finding a boy who undertook to guide him to his residence.

Dismissing his guide at the gate, and in his impatience not even stopping to admire the thriving look of cottage or garden either, Nicholas made his way to the kitchen door, and knocked lustily with his stick.

'Halloa!' cried a voice inside. 'Wa'et be the matther noo? Be the toon afire? Ding, but thou mak'st noise eneaf!'

With these words, John Browdie opened the door himself, and opening his eyes too to their utmost width, cried, as he clapped his hands together, and burst into a hearty roar:

'Ecod, it be the godfeyther, it be the godfeyther! Tilly, here be Misther Nickleby. Gi' us thee hond, mun. Coom awa', coom awa'. In wi 'un, doon beside the fire; tak' a soop o' thot. Dinnot say a word till thou'st droonk it a'! Oop wi' it, mun. Ding! but I'm reeght glod to see thee.'

Adapting his action to his text, John dragged Nicholas into the kitchen, forced him down upon a huge settle beside a blazing fire, poured out from an enormous bottle about a quarter of a pint of spirits, thrust it into his hand, opened his mouth and threw back his head as a sign to him to drink it instantly, and stood with a broad grin of welcome overspreading his great red face like a jolly giant.

'I might ha' knowa'd,' said John, 'that nobody but thou would ha' coom wi' sike a knock as you. Thot was the wa' thou knocked at schoolmeasther's door, eh? Ha, ha, ha! But I say; wa'at be a' this aboot schoolmeasther?'

'You know it then?' said Nicholas.

'They were talking aboot it, doon toon, last neeght,' replied John, 'but neane on 'em seemed quite to un'erstan' it, loike.'

'After various shiftings and delays,' said Nicholas, 'he has been sentenced to be transported for seven years, for being in the unlawful possession of a stolen will; and, after that, he has to suffer the consequence of a conspiracy.'

'Whew!' cried John, 'a conspiracy! Soom'at in the pooderplot wa'? Eh? Soom'at in the Guy Faux line?'

'No, no, no, a conspiracy connected with his school; I'll explain it presently.'

'Thot's reeght!' said John, 'explain it arter breakfast, not noo, for thou be'est hoongry, and so am I; and Tilly she mun' be at the bottom o' a' explanations, for she says thot's the mutual confidence. Ha, ha, ha! Ecod, it's a room start, is the mutual confidence!'

The entrance of Mrs Browdie, with a smart cap on, and very many apologies for their having been detected in the act of breakfasting in the kitchen, stopped John in his discussion of this grave subject, and hastened the breakfast: which, being composed of vast mounds of toast, newlaid eggs, boiled ham, Yorkshire

pie, and other cold substantials (of which heavy relays were constantly appearing from another kitchen under the direction of a very plump servant), was admirably adapted to the cold bleak morning, and received the utmost justice from all parties. At last, it came to a close; and the fire which had been lighted in the best parlour having by this time burnt up, they adjourned thither, to hear what Nicholas had to tell.

Nicholas told them all, and never was there a story which awakened so many emotions in the breasts of two eager listeners. At one time, honest John groaned in sympathy, and at another roared with joy; at one time he vowed to go up to London on purpose to get a sight of the brothers Cheeryble; and, at another, swore that Tim Linkinwater should receive such a ham by coach, and carriage free, as mortal knife had never carved. When Nicholas began to describe Madeline, he sat with his mouth wide open, nudging Mrs Browdie from time to time, and exclaiming under his breath that she must be 'raa'ther a tidy sart,' and when he heard at last that his young friend had come down purposely to communicate his good fortune, and to convey to him all those assurances of friendship which he could not state with sufficient warmth in writingthat the only object of his journey was to share his happiness with them, and to tell them that when he was married they must come up to see him, and that Madeline insisted on it as well as heJohn could hold out no longer, but after looking indignantly at his wife, and demanding to know what she was whimpering for, drew his coat sleeve over his eyes and blubbered outright.

'Tell'ee wa'at though,' said John seriously, when a great deal had been said on both sides, 'to return to schoolmeasther. If this news aboot 'un has reached school today, the old 'ooman wean't have a whole boan in her boddy, nor Fanny neither.'

'Oh, John!' cried Mrs Browdie.

'Ah! and Oh, John agean,' replied the Yorkshireman. 'I dinnot know what they lads mightn't do. When it first got aboot that schoolmeasther was in trouble, some feythers and moothers sent and took their young chaps awa'. If them as is left, should know waat's coom tiv'un, there'll be sike a revolution and rebel!Ding! But I think they'll a' gang daft, and spill bluid like wather!'

In fact, John Browdie's apprehensions were so strong that he determined to ride over to the school without delay, and invited Nicholas to accompany him, which, however, he declined, pleading that his presence might perhaps aggravate the bitterness of their adversity.

'Thot's true!' said John; 'I should ne'er ha' thought o' thot.'

'I must return tomorrow,' said Nicholas, 'but I mean to dine with you today, and if Mrs Browdie can give me a bed'

'Bed!' cried John, 'I wish thou couldst sleep in fower beds at once. Ecod, thou shouldst have 'em a'. Bide till I coom back; on'y bide till I coom back, and ecod we'll make a day of it.'

Giving his wife a hearty kiss, and Nicholas a no less hearty shake of the hand, John mounted his horse and rode off: leaving Mrs Browdie to apply herself to hospitable preparations, and his young friend to stroll about the neighbourhood, and revisit spots which were rendered familiar to him by many a miserable association.

John cantered away, and arriving at Dotheboys Hall, tied his horse to a gate and made his way to the schoolroom door, which he found locked on the inside. A tremendous noise and riot arose from within, and, applying his eye to a convenient crevice in the wall, he did not remain long in ignorance of its meaning.

The news of Mr Squeers's downfall had reached Dotheboys; that was quite clear. To all appearance, it had very recently become known to the young gentlemen; for the rebellion had just broken out.

It was one of the brimstoneandtreacle mornings, and Mrs Squeers had entered school according to custom with the large bowl and spoon, followed by Miss Squeers and the amiable Wackford: who, during his father's absence, had taken upon him such minor branches of the executive as kicking the pupils with his nailed boots, pulling the hair of some of the smaller boys, pinching the others in aggravating places, and rendering himself, in various similar ways, a great comfort and happiness to his mother. Their entrance, whether by premeditation or a simultaneous impulse, was the signal of revolt. While one detachment rushed to the door and locked it, and another mounted on the desks and forms, the stoutest (and consequently the newest) boy seized the cane, and confronting Mrs Squeers with a stern countenance, snatched off her cap and beaver bonnet, put them on his own head, armed himself with the wooden spoon, and bade her, on pain of death, go down upon her knees and take a dose directly. Before that estimable lady could recover herself, or offer the slightest retaliation, she was forced into a kneeling posture by a crowd of shouting tormentors, and compelled to swallow a spoonful of the odious mixture, rendered more than usually savoury by the immersion in the bowl of Master Wackford's head, whose ducking was intrusted to another rebel. The success of this first achievement prompted the malicious crowd, whose faces were clustered together in every variety of lank and halfstarved ugliness, to further acts of outrage. The leader was insisting upon Mrs Squeers repeating

her dose, Master Squeers was undergoing another dip in the treacle, and a violent assault had been commenced on Miss Squeers, when John Browdie, bursting open the door with a vigorous kick, rushed to the rescue. The shouts, screams, groans, hoots, and clapping of hands, suddenly ceased, and a dead silence ensued.

'Ye be noice chaps,' said John, looking steadily round. 'What's to do here, thou yoong dogs?'

'Squeers is in prison, and we are going to run away!' cried a score of shrill voices. 'We won't stop, we won't stop!'

'Weel then, dinnot stop,' replied John; 'who waants thee to stop? Roon awa' loike men, but dinnot hurt the women.'

'Hurrah!' cried the shrill voices, more shrilly still.

'Hurrah?' repeated John. 'Weel, hurrah loike men too. Noo then, look out. Hiphip,hiphurrah!'

'Hurrah!' cried the voices.

'Hurrah! Agean;' said John. 'Looder still.'

The boys obeyed.

'Anoother!' said John. 'Dinnot be afeared on it. Let's have a good 'un!'

'Hurrah!'

'Noo then,' said John, 'let's have yan more to end wi', and then coot off as quick as you loike. Tak'a good breath nooSqueers be in jailthe school's brokken oopit's a' owerpast and ganethink o' thot, and let it be a hearty 'un! Hurrah!'

Such a cheer arose as the walls of Dotheboys Hall had never echoed before, and were destined never to respond to again. When the sound had died away, the school was empty; and of the busy noisy crowd which had peopled it but five minutes before, not one remained.

'Very well, Mr Browdie!' said Miss Squeers, hot and flushed from the recent encounter, but vixenish to the last; 'you've been and excited our boys to run away. Now see if we don't pay you out for that, sir! If my pa IS unfortunate and trod down by henemies, we're not going to be basely crowed and conquered over by you and 'Tilda.'

'Noa!' replied John bluntly, 'thou bean't. Tak' thy oath o' thot. Think betther o'

us, Fanny. I tell 'ee both, that I'm glod the auld man has been caught out at lastdom'd glodbut ye'll sooffer eneaf wi'out any crowin' fra' me, and I be not the mun to crow, nor be Tilly the lass, so I tell 'ee flat. More than thot, I tell 'ee noo, that if thou need'st friends to help thee awa' from this placedinnot turn up thy nose, Fanny, thou may'stthou'lt foind Tilly and I wi' a thout o' old times aboot us, ready to lend thee a hond. And when I say thot, dinnot think I be asheamed of waa't I've deane, for I say again, Hurrah! and dom the schoolmeasther. There!'

His parting words concluded, John Browdie strode heavily out, remounted his nag, put him once more into a smart canter, and, carolling lustily forth some fragments of an old song, to which the horse's hoofs rang a merry accompaniment, sped back to his pretty wife and to Nicholas.

For some days afterwards, the neighbouring country was overrun with boys, who, the report went, had been secretly furnished by Mr and Mrs Browdie, not only with a hearty meal of bread and meat, but with sundry shillings and sixpences to help them on their way. To this rumour John always returned a stout denial, which he accompanied, however, with a lurking grin, that rendered the suspicious doubtful, and fully confirmed all previous believers.

There were a few timid young children, who, miserable as they had been, and many as were the tears they had shed in the wretched school, still knew no other home, and had formed for it a sort of attachment, which made them weep when the bolder spirits fled, and cling to it as a refuge. Of these, some were found crying under hedges and in such places, frightened at the solitude. One had a dead bird in a little cage; he had wandered nearly twenty miles, and when his poor favourite died, lost courage, and lay down beside him. Another was discovered in a yard hard by the school, sleeping with a dog, who bit at those who came to remove him, and licked the sleeping child's pale face.

They were taken back, and some other stragglers were recovered, but by degrees they were claimed, or lost again; and, in course of time, Dotheboys Hall and its last breakingup began to be forgotten by the neighbours, or to be only spoken of as among the things that had been.

CHAPTER 65

Conclusion

When her term of mourning had expired, Madeline gave her hand and fortune

to Nicholas; and, on the same day and at the same time, Kate became Mrs Frank Cheeryble. It was expected that Tim Linkinwater and Miss La Creevy would have made a third couple on the occasion, but they declined, and two or three weeks afterwards went out together one morning before breakfast, and, coming back with merry faces, were found to have been quietly married that day.

The money which Nicholas acquired in right of his wife he invested in the firm of Cheeryble Brothers, in which Frank had become a partner. Before many years elapsed, the business began to be carried on in the names of 'Cheeryble and Nickleby,' so that Mrs Nickleby's prophetic anticipations were realised at last.

The twin brothers retired. Who needs to be told that THEY were happy? They were surrounded by happiness of their own creation, and lived but to increase it.

Tim Linkinwater condescended, after much entreaty and browbeating, to accept a share in the house; but he could never be prevailed upon to suffer the publication of his name as a partner, and always persisted in the punctual and regular discharge of his clerkly duties.

He and his wife lived in the old house, and occupied the very bedchamber in which he had slept for fourandforty years. As his wife grew older, she became even a more cheerful and lighthearted little creature; and it was a common saying among their friends, that it was impossible to say which looked the happier, Tim as he sat calmly smiling in his elbowchair on one side of the fire, or his brisk little wife chatting and laughing, and constantly bustling in and out of hers, on the other.

Dick, the blackbird, was removed from the countinghouse and promoted to a warm corner in the common sittingroom. Beneath his cage hung two miniatures, of Mrs Linkinwater's execution; one representing herself, and the other Tim; and both smiling very hard at all beholders. Tim's head being powdered like a twelfth cake, and his spectacles copied with great nicety, strangers detected a close resemblance to him at the first glance, and this leading them to suspect that the other must be his wife, and emboldening them to say so without scruple, Mrs Linkinwater grew very proud of these achievements in time, and considered them among the most successful likenesses she had ever painted. Tim had the profoundest faith in them, likewise; for on this, as on all other subjects, they held but one opinion; and if ever there were a 'comfortable couple' in the world, it was Mr and Mrs Linkinwater.

Ralph, having died intestate, and having no relations but those with whom he had lived in such enmity, they would have become in legal course his heirs. But they could not bear the thought of growing rich on money so acquired, and felt as though they could never hope to prosper with it. They made no claim to his wealth; and the riches for which he had toiled all his days, and burdened his soul with so many evil deeds, were swept at last into the coffers of the state, and no man was the better or the happier for them.

Arthur Gride was tried for the unlawful possession of the will, which he had either procured to be stolen, or had dishonestly acquired and retained by other means as bad. By dint of an ingenious counsel, and a legal flaw, he escaped; but only to undergo a worse punishment; for, some years afterwards, his house was broken open in the night by robbers, tempted by the rumours of his great wealth, and he was found murdered in his bed.

Mrs Sliderskew went beyond the seas at nearly the same time as Mr Squeers, and in the course of nature never returned. Brooker died penitent. Sir Mulberry Hawk lived abroad for some years, courted and caressed, and in high repute as a fine dashing fellow. Ultimately, returning to this country, he was thrown into jail for debt, and there perished miserably, as such high spirits generally do.

The first act of Nicholas, when he became a rich and prosperous merchant, was to buy his father's old house. As time crept on, and there came gradually about him a group of lovely children, it was altered and enlarged; but none of the old rooms were ever pulled down, no old tree was ever rooted up, nothing with which there was any association of bygone times was ever removed or changed.

Within a stone's throw was another retreat, enlivened by children's pleasant voices too; and here was Kate, with many new cares and occupations, and many new faces courting her sweet smile (and one so like her own, that to her mother she seemed a child again), the same true gentle creature, the same fond sister, the same in the love of all about her, as in her girlish days.

Mrs Nickleby lived, sometimes with her daughter, and sometimes with her son, accompanying one or other of them to London at those periods when the cares of business obliged both families to reside there, and always preserving a great appearance of dignity, and relating her experiences (especially on points connected with the management and bringingup of children) with much solemnity and importance. It was a very long time before she could be induced to receive Mrs Linkinwater into favour, and it is even doubtful whether she ever thoroughly forgave her.

There was one greyhaired, quiet, harmless gentleman, who, winter and

summer, lived in a little cottage hard by Nicholas's house, and, when he was not there, assumed the superintendence of affairs. His chief pleasure and delight was in the children, with whom he was a child himself, and master of the revels. The little people could do nothing without dear Newman Noggs.

The grass was green above the dead boy's grave, and trodden by feet so small and light, that not a daisy drooped its head beneath their pressure. Through all the spring and summertime, garlands of fresh flowers, wreathed by infant hands, rested on the stone; and, when the children came to change them lest they should wither and be pleasant to him no longer, their eyes filled with tears, and they spoke low and softly of their poor dead cousin.