

DICKENS'S  
NICHOLAS  
NICKLEBY



TIME



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Book 155

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CHARLES DICKENS

At the beginning of his literary career. From the  
portrait by his friend Maclise. Courtesy  
of the National Gallery

Dickens, Charles

DICKENS'S  
NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

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*This Edition of  
Nicholas Nickleby  
Is Affectionately Dedicated to  
Ernestine Timm-Harris  
By Her Mother*



## PREFACE

**T**HE editor of this edition has rearranged the sequence of events in chronological order, to assist pupils in following so complicated a plot. She has made some omissions and some explanations very necessary to Americans; for the main thing is to introduce the pupil to a rapid and dramatic story, not to bewilder him with notes and to obscure the plot with difficult and often unimportant Britishisms. But the story she has left absolutely intact, and in simplifying an occasional word or sentence she has in each case intended to preserve the Dickens style and spirit.

The lesson helps have a twofold purpose: to help the pupil to study independently and to lighten the "teacher load" by offering a variety of suggestions for provocative discussion and projects.

C. P. T.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE . . . . .	vi
INTRODUCTION ( <i>Life of Charles Dickens</i> ) . . . . .	ix
PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS . . . . .	xxi
NICHOLAS NICKLEBY . . . . .	1
QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES . . . . .	593

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Charles Dickens . . . . .	<i>Frontispiece</i>
	PAGE
Of which delicious compound she administered a large installment to each boy in succession . . . . .	45
“Just so, Mr. Nickleby,” said Madame Mantalini. “Can you speak French, child?” . . . . .	81
“Farewell, my noble, my lion-hearted boy!” . . . . .	261
The brothers hurried him out, shaking hands with him all the way . . . . .	317
“Here he is, father. Hooray!” vibrated in his ears	349
Into a front room he was shown . . . . .	411
Nothing was visible but a pair of legs . . . . .	423
“What would you say to me if I was to tell you — that I was — going to be married?” . . . . .	443

## INTRODUCTION

### WHY DICKENS IS GREAT

**T**HE people we remember longest are those who have had much influence, who have caused greater things to happen, or not to happen, than those about them. It is necessary to discover in what manner Charles Dickens had such great influence, what he caused to happen which showed greater strength than that of others about him, what made him stand above other people not only of his own time but of all times. For there is no doubt that Charles Dickens is better remembered than any other novelist. He has been not only the most popular novelist of the nineteenth century but is still the writer whose books, as a whole, have had a greater sale than those of any other novelist of the present day. During the World War there were more of these novels read in the army camps than any others.

Success is measured by the handicaps overcome as well as by surpassing achievements. Dickens showed his great strength, courage, and remarkable personality by overcoming the two very great handicaps of poverty and lack of education. He was born at Landport in Portsea on the southern coast of England, February 7, 1812, being the second child in the family, of which there were six more children later. His father, John Dickens, was a clerk in the navy pay office with a salary of eighty pounds a year (about \$388), not enough for such a large family even in those times when money had greater value than in later times. Although the salary was increased afterwards to three hundred and fifty pounds (about \$1697) his father was never able to live within his income. He seemed to be always poor and improvident, a man of considerable ability but not capable of any kind of financial management.

## DICKENS'S BOYHOOD

The boyhood of Dickens was probably quite unhappy, for it was full of hardship and worry. Much of the story of *David Copperfield* was his own life and Mr. Micawber (in the same book), genial, hopeful, sorrowful, despairing, jolly, easy-going, always waiting for "something to turn up" was the character of his own father. Mrs. Dickens is said to have been a great deal like Mrs. Nickleby — not very intellectual, impractical, often rather simple and almost frivolous, although always kind, affectionate, and of excellent character. At one time Mrs. Dickens tried to help out the family income by starting a private school for young ladies. On the front door was a door-plate reading, "Mrs. Dickens's Establishment." Charles was sent around to distribute circulars describing the advantages of this school; but though he left these at many doors, nobody ever came to the school, and he could not remember seeing his mother make any preparation for receiving pupils if they should come. But his mother taught him to read when he was very young and also to construe a little Latin, which showed that she was above the average mother of those times.

At the age of eight began the first regular school experience of Charles Dickens. For one year he attended the school of a Mr. Giles in Clover Lane, Chatham, where John Dickens, his father, happened to be stationed at the time. Mr. Giles did a great deal for the young boy with his sympathy, intelligence, and ability to interest him in books. It was here that Dickens began to read a great deal. When the child was almost ten years old, the family moved to London; and on account of the constantly increasing poverty of his father, they were forced to live in a very poor house in one of the poorest of the London suburbs. About those early years Dickens said: "I know that we got on very badly with the butcher and baker; and that very often we had not too much for dinner; and that at last my father was arrested."

He was arrested because he could not pay his bills, and



placed in the Marshalsea Prison for debtors. Dickens has left a description of his first visit to his father in prison. "My father was waiting for me in the lodge, and we went up to his room (on the story next to the top but one), and cried very much. And he told me, I remember, to take warning by the Marshalsea, and to observe that if a man had twenty pounds a year, and spent nineteen pounds, nineteen shillings, and sixpence, he would be happy; but a shilling spent the other way would make him wretched. I see the fire we sat before, now; with two bricks inside the rusted grate, one on each side, to prevent its burning too many coals. Some other debtor shared the room with him, who came in by and by; and as the dinner was a joint-stock repast, I was sent up to 'Captain Porter' in the room overhead, with Mr. Dickens's compliments and I was his son, and could he, Captain P. lend me a knife and fork?"

Later he said: "I know my father to be as kind-hearted and generous a man as ever lived in the world. Everything that I can remember of his conduct to his wife, or children, or friends, in sickness or affliction is beyond all praise. By me, as a sick child, he has watched night and day, unweariedly and patiently many nights and days. He never undertook any business charge, or trust that he did not jealously, conscientiously, punctually, honorably, discharge. His industry has always been untiring. He was proud of me, in his way. . . . But in the ease of his temper, and the straitness of his means, he appeared to have utterly lost at this time the idea of educating me at all, and to have utterly put from him the notion that I had any claim upon him, in that regard, whatever. So I degenerated into cleaning his boots of a morning, and my own; and making myself useful in the work of the little house; and looking after my younger brothers and sisters; and going on such errands as arose out of our poor way of living." In *The Uncommercial Traveler* Dickens gives a picture of himself as a child. He was a "very queer small boy," nine years old, with delicate health; fond of reading, having read many

books unusual to be read by so young a child. In *David Copperfield* a list of these books is given which included *Roderick Random*, *Peregrine Pickle*, *Humphrey Clinker*, *Tom Jones*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Don Quixote*, *Gil Blas*, and *Robinson Crusoe*. He tells us also that he used to impersonate the characters Tom Jones or Roderick for weeks at a time.

When Charles was twelve years old, a relative who had recently become interested in the blacking business suggested that the boy take a position in this warehouse; so he went to work for the firm, pasting labels on bottles and boxes, a job that he thoroughly detested. He said of himself during that time: "No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared these every-day associates with those of my happier childhood; and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man crushed in my breast. The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that, day by day, what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, was passing away from me, never to be brought back any more, cannot be written. My whole nature was so penetrated with grief and humiliation of such considerations that even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life. . . . At last, one day, my father and the relative quarreled, quarreled by letter, for I took the letter from my father to him which caused the explosion, but quarreled very fiercely. It was about me. All that I am certain of is that soon after I had given him the letter, my cousin (he was a sort of cousin by marriage) told me he was very much insulted about me, and that it was impossible to keep me after that. I cried very much, partly because it was so sudden, and partly because in his anger he was violent about my father, though gentle to me. Thomas, the old soldier, comforted me, and

said he was sure it was for the best. With a relief so strange that it was like oppression, I went home.

“ My mother set herself to accommodate the quarrel, and did so next day. She brought home a request for me to return next morning, and a high character of me, which I am very sure I deserved. My father said I should go back no more, and should go to school. I do not write resentfully or angrily, for I know how all these things have worked together to make me what I am; but I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back.”

He was twelve when he left the blacking warehouse, and up to this time he had felt lonely and neglected very many times. Now he was sent to school at Wellington House Academy for about two years. This was his last school experience. The school, although not an extra fine one, gave him the companionship which he had always wanted. He was a day scholar for about two years. This period did not seem to make much impression on his mind, except to brighten his life and make his disposition more cheerful. From twelve to fourteen he worked as an attorney's clerk at a salary of thirteen shillings sixpence a week, afterward increased to fifteen shillings. Here he picked up the knowledge of human life, criminals, law, and judicial proceedings which he used so effectively in his stories. But he did not intend to be a lawyer's clerk all his life. His father, after leaving the debtor's prison, had taken up journalism, and Charles decided to follow his example. He began the study of shorthand, working very hard at this. At the same time he spent much time reading in the library of the British Museum.

### DICKENS TURNS REPORTER

In a year or two he became an expert stenographer. He was nineteen when he became a reporter for the *True Sun* and entered the gallery of the House of Commons to report the proceedings for the paper. When he was twenty-three



he became a reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*; and from this time his future as a writer seemed established. He soon began to write for periodicals. His first article was a little story called "A Dinner at Poplar Walk." This, he says, he dropped very secretly into "a dark letter box in a dark office up a dark court in Fleet-Street." It was printed in the *Old Monthly Magazine* when he was twenty-one years old. He was overcome with joy at this event. "I walked down to Westminster Hall" he later wrote, "and turned into it for half an hour, because my eyes were so dimmed with joy and pride that they could not bear the streets and were not fit to be seen there."

Other articles were printed in the same magazine and were later collected and printed in two small volumes under the title of *Sketches by Boz* (an old family nickname in the Dickens family). These little sketches give a good description of London in the time of Dickens. They were favorably received and encouraged the author to attempt more writing.

As a new writer he was asked to write a series of comic sketches on sporting subjects. It was suggested that he write the adventures of the members of some eccentric club. So Dickens wrote the *Pickwick Papers*. The story came out in twenty monthly installments, costing one shilling a number, and finally was published in book form. This story made Dickens famous, and he was asked to write more stories. A new class of characters representing certain odd phases of life became well known to the public. Mr. Pickwick, Sam Weller, Mr. Winkle, and others were made familiar to all peoples. There was an enormous demand for copies of these stories. Dickens remained just as popular to the day of his death. In England alone, during the twelve years succeeding his death, more than 4,239,000 volumes were sold. Before he had finished *Pickwick*, he began work on *Oliver Twist*, and the two were running in monthly installments at the same time.

He made his characters, who were almost always poor and humble people, enormously popular; and he did a great deal

toward making their lot an easier one. In *Oliver Twist* he denounced the wretched way in which poorhouses cared for their dependents. In *Nicholas Nickleby* he described Mr. Squeers's school so vividly that several masters threatened to sue him for describing a school which their guilty consciences recognized as their own. In *Bleak House* he satirized the slow and expensive procedure of the courts.

### DICKENS IN AMERICA

It was a great test of his strength of character when he visited America in 1842, for the Americans were so glad to see him that he was treated much as Lindbergh was treated when he landed in Paris. There was one continuous joyful celebration and a most tremendous desire to see him all the time he was in America. Describing that time in some of his letters, he said: "How can I give you the faintest notion of my reception here; of the crowds that pour in and out the whole day; of the people that line the streets when I go out; of the cheering when I went to the theater; of the copies of verses of congratulation, welcomes of all kinds, balls, dinners, assemblies without end? . . . What can I tell you about any of these things which will give you the slightest notion of the enthusiastic greeting they give me, or the cry that runs through the whole country!"

The public did not give him any rest day or night. When he went through New England, his journey was like that of a president of the United States. At some of the smaller cities through which he passed, almost the entire population turned out, and the train was stopped to give the people a chance to see him. In the larger cities where he spoke there were gigantic receptions before and after the lecture. Regarding more of his visit he said: "Dana, the author of *Two Years Before the Mast*, is a very nice fellow indeed; and in appearance not at all the man you would expect. He is short, mild looking, and has a care worn face. The professors at the Cambridge University, Longfellow, Felton, Jared Sparks, are noble fellows. Bancroft is a famous man;



a straightforward, manly, earnest heart. Dr. Channing I will tell you more of, after I have breakfasted with him. We leave here next Saturday. We go to a town called Worcester, about seventy-five miles off, to the house of the governor of this place; and stay with him all Sunday. On Monday we go on by railroad about fifty miles farther to a town called Springfield, where I am met by a 'reception committee' from Hartford twenty miles farther, and carried on by the multitude. On Wednesday I have a public dinner there. On Friday I shall be obliged to present myself in public again, at a place called New Haven, about thirty miles farther. On Saturday evening I hope to be in New York." In this place he met Washington Irving for whom he had much admiration. His stay in Washington is described in his own words: "I have the privilege of appearing on the floor of both houses here, and go to them every day. They are very handsome and commodious. There is a great deal of bad speaking, but there are a very great many remarkable men, in the legislature; such as John Quincy Adams, Clay, Preston, Calhoun, and others: with whom I need scarcely add I have been placed in the friendliest relations. Adams is a fine old fellow — seventy-six years old, but with the most surprising vigor, memory, readiness and pluck. Clay is perfectly enchanting; an irresistible man. There are some very noble specimens, too, out of the West. Splendid men to look at, hard to deceive, prompt to act, lions in energy, Indians in quickness of eye and gesture, Americans in affectionate and generous impulse."

But all this admiration and love for Dickens by the Americans did not blind him to their faults any more than the affection of his own people blinded him to the faults of the English nation. When he reached home after his visit Dickens published a volume called *American Notes*, in which he gave some fine descriptions of his visits and criticized favorably and unfavorably. It is interesting to know that this book was the means of Helen Keller's beginning her education. As she was deaf and blind since she was a little more than a year old, her future seemed hopeless.

One day when she was six her mother remembered reading in Dickens's *American Notes* the description of the marvelous achievements of the deaf and blind girl Laura Bridgman, who was educated in a school in Boston which Dickens had praised very highly. Mrs. Keller sent to this school for a teacher for Helen, and Miss Anne Sullivan (Mrs. Macey) was sent, one of the most wonderful teachers the world has ever known. The miraculous attainments of Helen Keller are known to all peoples at the present time. (Mark Twain said that Helen Keller and Napoleon were the two most interesting characters of the nineteenth century.)

As the years went by, novels followed one another in rapid succession. After *American Notes* came *Martin Chuzzlewit*, also containing descriptions of American life. Then, after a trip abroad during which he still wrote, Dickens became manager of a group of amateur actors at Manchester. They called themselves the "Splendid Strollers" and under Dickens's direction became quite famous. They played the rollicking comedy of Ben Jonson, *Every Man in His Humour*. In 1852 they presented a farce entitled *Mr. Nightingale* before Queen Victoria.

The greatest novel of all came out in 1850. *David Copperfield* contains the humor and pathos of his earlier works with his ability at character drawing finally developing into character building, which most critics consider a still higher and more difficult form of art.

## THE HEIGHT OF FAME

During the last years of his life, when he was about fifty-eight, Dickens gave readings from his own books. From the favorable position in which the public held him Dickens felt sure that he would be well received, and he was not at all disappointed. In fact, he was more successful than he had imagined he could be. This was due to his dramatic ability as well as to his interesting readings and his popularity with people in general. He soon began to memorize all his selections for his readings which made him still more entertain-

ing. After traveling over the British Isles, he visited the United States for the second time to give readings in this country also. Here he was again received with wild enthusiasm and his readings were wonderfully popular. He said, regarding this time: "It is really impossible to exaggerate the magnificence of the reception or the effect of the reading. The whole city will talk of nothing else to-day. Every ticket for those announced here [Boston] and in New York, is sold." Dickens gave readings in Philadelphia, Washington, Baltimore, Buffalo, Albany, Springfield, Portland, Maine, and in every place he went he was given the same ovation. But his health began to decline before he left this country. Such hard and constant work for so many years showed its effect in a weakened constitution.

When he returned to England, however, he wished to make one more series of readings. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* was the subject which was appearing in the magazine *All the Year Round*. This story gave promise of being the best of any of the previous novels. But it was never finished. The mystery was never solved. Dickens died very suddenly at his home, Gadshill Place, near Rochester, on June 9, 1870. He was buried in Westminster Abbey. Almost the whole world mourned the loss of this greatest writer of the nineteenth century. In his will he said regarding his funeral: "I emphatically direct that I be buried in an inexpensive, unostentatious, and strictly private manner; that no public announcement be made of the time or place of my burial; that at the utmost not more than three plain mourning coaches be employed, and that those who attend my funeral wear no scarf, cloak, black bow, long hat band, or other such revolting absurdity. I direct that my name be inscribed in plain English letters on my tomb without the addition of 'Mr.' or 'Esquire.' I conjure my friends on no account to make me the subject of any monument, memorial, or testimonial whatever. I rest my claims to the remembrance of my country upon my published works, and to the remembrance of my friends upon their experience of me in addition thereto." Everything was done that could



possibly be done to carry out these wishes, but no one could have prevented the great display of grief in nearly every country and the many testimonials to his memory. Dickens had ten children, seven of whom were living at the time of his death.

Carlyle described the appearance of Dickens in a letter to John Carlyle in 1840. "He is a fine little fellow — Boz, I think. Clear blue, intelligent eyes, eyebrows that he arches amazingly. Large, protrusive, rather loose mouth, a face of most extreme mobility, which he shuttles about — eyebrows, eyes, mouth and all — in a very singular manner while speaking . . . a quiet, shrewd-looking little fellow, who seems to guess pretty well that he is and what others are."

Daniel Webster said that Dickens had done more to better the condition of the English poor than all the statesmen Great Britain had sent into Parliament.

Of all the works of Charles Dickens *Nicholas Nickleby* is perhaps the most entertaining. One source of our entertainment in stories is in seeing others engaged in a struggle which oftentimes is greater than the one we are making with life. Practically all games and all recreations involve a struggle, just as life does. So all literature which represents life truly must show some contest or struggle. Because *Nicholas Nickleby* is in such a contest and because he is such a good fighter, we like his character and enjoy his story.

There is a great deal of action in this narrative, for events crowd on one another, and the enemies of Nicholas are strong with wealth and power. Nicholas is the leader of one side, of course, with about eight who sympathize with him. His uncle leads the enemy, with perhaps sixteen strong allies. Smike, Madeline, and Brooker belong to neither side at first, but their final decision and sympathy determine the victory.

Dickens's idea for his novel of *Nicholas Nickleby* grew out of real life. The cruel treatment of boys in Yorkshire schools came to the attention of the author, and his indignation was strongly aroused. He decided to strike these schools a hard blow — with the weapon of public ridicule. He was so successful that several Yorkshire schoolmasters threatened to

sue him for libel, saying that he was describing their own institutions. The picture of Wackford Squeers and Dotheboys Hall caused a sweeping reform.

Like all the works of this author, the characters and conditions described are founded on facts. Two characters were taken from real life. These were the two Cheeryble brothers, two of the best people ever portrayed in or out of fiction. They were greatly beloved by Charles Dickens, who was well acquainted with these German merchants.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR THEMES AND PRÉCIS WRITING

1. Write one paragraph on the life of Charles Dickens, of two hundred words, describing his home life, education, work, and books in general.
2. Prepare an oral composition on three events during the time of Dickens.
3. Prepare an oral composition on three contemporaries of Dickens, telling for what reason each one is well remembered.



## PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

KATE NICKLEBY, his sister

MRS. NICKLEBY, his mother

RALPH NICKLEBY, his uncle

MISS LA CREEVY, landlady to the Nicklebys and a miniature painter

WACKFORD SQUEERS, Headmaster and owner of Dotheboys Hall

MRS. SQUEERS, his wife

MASTER WACKFORD SQUEERS, his son

FANNIE SQUEERS, his daughter

SMIKE

MATILDA PRICE, friend of Fannie

JOHN BROWDIE, fiancé of Matilda

NEWMAN NOGGS, clerk to Ralph Nickleby

MR. VINCENT CRUMMLES, actor-manager

MR. SNAWLEY

SIR MULBERRY HAWK, LORD VERISOPHT, MR. PYKE, MR. PLUCK

CHARLES CHEERYBLE, NED CHEERYBLE, FRANK CHEERYBLE

TIM LINKINWATER, clerk to Cheeryble Brothers

MADELINE BRAY, MR. BRAY

ARTHUR GRIDE

PEG SLIDERSKEW

MR. MANTALINI, MADAME MANTALINI

MRS. WITTERLY, MR. WITTERLY

MISS KNAG, employed by Madame Mantalini

MR. BROOKER

THE MAD GENTLEMAN

*The Mad Gentleman*



# NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

## CHAPTER I

MR. RALPH NICKLEBY took a cordial farewell of his fellow speculators and bent his steps homeward in unwonted good humour. As he passed Saint Paul's he stepped aside into a doorway to set his watch, and with his hand on the key and his eye on the cathedral dial, was intent upon so doing, when a man suddenly stopped before him. It was Newman Noggs, his clerk.

"Ah, Newman," said Mr. Nickleby, looking up, "the letter about the mortgage has come, has it? I thought it would."

"Wrong."

"What! And nobody called respecting it?"

Noggs shook his head.

"What has come, then?"

"I have."

"What else?" demanded his master, sternly.

"This," said Newman, drawing a sealed letter slowly from his pocket.

"Black wax, black border; I know something of that writing, too. Newman, I shouldn't be surprised if my brother were dead."

"I don't think you would," said Newman, quietly.

"Why not, sir?"

"You never are surprised — that's all."

Mr. Nickleby snatched the letter from his assistant, and fixing a cold look upon him, opened, read it, put it in his pocket, and having set his watch correctly to a second, began winding it up.

“It is as I expected, Newman. He is dead. Dear me. Well, that’s a sudden thing. I shouldn’t have thought it, really.” With these touching expressions of sorrow, Mr. Nickleby put his watch into his pocket, and fitting on his gloves to a nicety, turned upon his way, and walked slowly along with his hands behind him.

“Children alive?” inquired Newman, stepping up to him.

“Why, that’s the very thing,” replied Mr. Nickleby, as though his thoughts were about them at that moment. “They are both alive.”

“Both!” repeated Newman Noggs, in a low voice.

“And the widow, too,” added Mr. Nickleby, “and all three in London, confound them — all three here, Newman.”

Newman fell a little behind his master, and his face was curiously twisted as by a spasm; but whether of grief or inward laughter, nobody but himself could possibly explain.

“Go home!” said Mr. Nickleby, after they had walked a few paces, looking round at the clerk as if he were his dog. The words were scarcely uttered when Newman darted across the road, slunk among the crowd, and disappeared in an instant.

“Reasonable, certainly!” muttered Mr. Nickleby to himself, as he walked on, “very reasonable! My brother never did anything for me, and I never expected it. The breath is no sooner out of his body than I am to be looked to as the support of a great hearty woman and a grown boy and girl. What are they to me! I never saw them.”

Full of these reflections Mr. Nickleby went to that part of London where these relatives were staying and stopped at a private dwelling in a crowded thoroughfare.

A miniature painter lived in this place, for there was a large gilt frame screwed upon the street door, in which were displayed, upon black velvet, many kinds of small hand-painted portraits. Mr. Nickleby glanced at these with great contempt and gave a double knock, which, having been three times repeated, was answered by a servant girl.

“Is Mrs. Nickleby at home?” demanded Ralph, sharply.

“Her name ain’t Nickleby,” said the girl, “La Creevy, you mean.”

“Who is wanted, Hannah?” asked a female voice, at the end of the hall.

“Mrs. Nickleby,” said Ralph.

“It’s the second floor, Hannah,” said the same voice, “what a stupid thing you are! Is the second floor at home, Hannah?”

“Somebody went out just now, but I think it was the attic which had been a cleaning of himself,” replied the girl.

“You had better see,” said the invisible female. “Show the gentleman where the bell is, and tell him he mustn’t knock double knocks for the second floor.”

“Here,” said Ralph, walking in, “I beg your pardon; is that Mrs. La what’s-her-name?”

“Creevy — La Creevy,” replied the voice, as a yellow headdress bobbed over the banisters.

“I’ll speak to you a moment, ma’am, with your leave,” said Ralph.

The voice replied that the gentleman was to walk up; but he had walked up before it spoke, and was received by the wearer of the yellow headdress, who had a gown to correspond and was of much the same color herself. Miss La Creevy was a mincing young lady of fifty, and Miss La Creevy’s apartment looked like the gilt frame downstairs on a larger scale.

“I infer from what you said to your servant that the floor above belongs to you, ma’am?” said Mr. Ralph Nickleby.



“Yes. The upper part of the house belongs to me. There is a lady from the country and her two children in them at present.”

“A widow, ma’am?”

“Yes, she is a widow,” replied the lady.

“A *poor* widow, ma’am,” said Ralph.

“Well, I am afraid she *is* poor.”

“I happen to know that she is. Now, what business has a poor widow in such a house as this? I know her circumstances intimately, ma’am; in fact I am a relation of the family, and I should recommend you not to keep them here.”

“I should hope, if there was any inability to meet the expense, the lady’s family would ——”

“No, they wouldn’t,” interrupted Ralph, hastily. “Don’t think it. *I* am the family, ma’am, — at least, I believe I am the only relation they have, and I think it right that you should know I can’t support them in their extravagances. How long have they taken these lodgings for?”

“Only from week to week. Mrs. Nickleby paid the first week in advance.”

“Then you had better get them out at the end of it; they can’t do better than go back to the country, ma’am; they are in everybody’s way here.”

“Yet I have nothing whatever to say against the lady,” said Miss La Creevy. “She seems extremely pleasant, though, poor thing, terribly low in her spirits; nor against the young people either, for nicer or better behaved young people cannot be.”

“Very well, ma’am,” said Ralph, turning to the door, “I have done my duty, and perhaps more than I ought. Good morning.”

He began to climb another flight of stairs, saying to himself, “Now for my sister-in-law. Bah.” He stopped on a landing to take breath when he was overtaken by Miss La

Creevy's servant girl, who came up to announce him to his relatives.

"What name?" said the girl.

"Nickleby."

"Oh! Mrs. Nickleby," said the girl, throwing open the door, "here's Mr. Nickleby."

A lady in deep mourning rose as Mr. Ralph Nickleby entered, but appeared incapable of advancing to meet him, and leaned upon the arm of a slight but very beautiful girl of about seventeen, who had been sitting by her. A youth, who appeared a year or two older, stepped forward and saluted Ralph as his uncle.

"Oh," growled Ralph, "you are Nicholas, I suppose."

"That is my name, sir."

"Put my hat down," said Ralph imperiously. "Well, ma'am, how do you do? You must bear up against sorrow. I always do."

"Mine was no common loss!" said Mrs. Nickleby, applying her handkerchief to her eyes.

"It was no uncommon loss," returned Ralph, as he coolly unbuttoned his overcoat. "Husbands die every day, ma'am, and wives too."

"And brothers, also, sir," said Nicholas, with a glance of indignation.

"Yes, sir, and puppies, and pupdogs likewise," replied his uncle, taking a chair. "You didn't mention in your letter what my brother's complaint was, ma'am."

"The doctors could attribute it to no particular disease," said Mrs. Nickleby, shedding tears. "But on account of losing our home and all our fortune, we have too much reason to fear that he died of a broken heart."

"Pooh!" said Ralph, "there's no such thing. I can understand a man's dying of a broken neck, or suffering from a broken arm, or a broken head, or a broken leg, or a broken

nose; but a broken heart! nonsense, it's the cant of the day. If a man can't pay his debts, he dies of a broken heart, and his widow's a martyr."

"Some people, I believe, have no hearts to break," observed Nicholas.

"How old is this boy, for God's sake?" inquired Ralph, wheeling back his chair, and surveying his nephew from head to foot with intense scorn.

"Nicholas is nearly nineteen," replied his mother.

"Nineteen, eh! And what do you mean to do for your bread, sir?"

"Not to live upon my mother," replied Nicholas, his heart swelling as he spoke.

"You'd have little enough to live upon, if you did," retorted his uncle, eyeing him contemptuously.

"Whatever it be, I shall not look to you to make it more," said Nicholas, flushed with anger.

"Nicholas, my dear, recollect yourself," remonstrated Mrs. Nickleby.

"Dear Nicholas, please," urged the young lady.

"Keep still, sir," said Ralph. "Upon my word! Fine beginnings, Mrs. Nickleby — fine beginnings!"

Mrs. Nickleby made no other reply than entreating Nicholas, by a gesture, to keep silent; and the uncle and nephew looked at each other for some seconds without speaking.

"Well, ma'am," said Ralph, impatiently, "the creditors have administered, you tell me, and there's nothing left for you?"

"Nothing," replied Mrs. Nickleby.

"And you spent what little money you had in coming all the way to London, to see what I could do for you?" pursued Ralph.

"I hoped," faltered Mrs. Nickleby, "that you might have an opportunity of doing something for your brother's chil-

dren. It was his dying wish that I should appeal to you in their behalf."

"I don't know how it is," muttered Ralph, walking up and down the room; "but whenever a man dies without any property of his own, he always seems to think he has a right to dispose of other people's. What is your daughter fit for, ma'am?"

"Kate has been well educated," sobbed Mrs. Nickleby. "Tell your uncle, my dear, how far you went in French and extras."

The poor girl was about to murmur something, when her uncle stopped her.

"We must try to get you apprenticed at some boarding school. You have not been brought up too delicately for that, I hope?"

"No, indeed, uncle," replied the weeping girl. "I will try to do anything that will gain me a home and bread."

"Well, well," said Ralph, a little softened, either by his niece's beauty or her distress. "You must try it, and if the life is too hard, perhaps dressmaking or tambour work will come lighter. Have *you* ever done anything, sir?" (turning to his nephew).

"No," replied Nicholas, bluntly.

"No, I thought not!" said Ralph. "This is the way my brother brought up his children, ma'am."

"Nicholas has not long completed such education as his poor father could give him," rejoined Mrs. Nickleby, "and he was thinking of ——"

"Of making something of him some day," said Ralph. "The old story; always thinking, and never doing. If my brother had been a man of activity and prudence, he might have left you a rich woman, ma'am: and if he had turned his son into the world, as my father turned me, when I wasn't as old as that boy by a year and a half, he would have been



in a situation to help you. My brother was a thoughtless, inconsiderate man, Mrs. Nickleby, and nobody, I am sure, can have better reason to feel that than you."

Mrs. Nickleby was not able to answer, so Ralph went on.

"Are you willing to work, sir?" he inquired, frowning on his nephew.

"Of course I am," replied Nicholas haughtily.

"Then see here," said his uncle. "This caught my eye this morning, and you may thank your stars for it."

Mr. Ralph Nickleby took a newspaper from his pocket, and looking for a short time among the advertisements, read as follows:

"Education.—At Mr. Wackford Squeers's Academy, Dotheboys Hall, at the delightful village of Dotheboys, near Greta Bridge in Yorkshire, Youth are boarded, clothed, booked, furnished with pocket money, provided with all necessaries, instructed in all languages, living and dead, mathematics, orthography, geometry, astronomy, trigonometry, the use of the globes, algebra, writing, arithmetic, and every other branch of classical literature. Terms, twenty guineas per annum. No extras, no vacations, and diet unparalleled. Mr. Squeers is in town, and attends daily, from one till four, at the Saracen's Head Hotel, Snow Hill. N. B. An able assistant wanted. Annual salary £5. A master of arts would be preferred.'

"There!" said Ralph, folding the paper again. "Let him get that situation, and his fortune is made."

"But he is not a master of arts," said Mrs. Nickleby.

"That," replied Ralph, "that, I think, can be got over."

"But the salary is so small, and it is such a long way off, uncle!" faltered Kate.

"Hush, Kate, my dear," interposed Mrs. Nickleby; "your uncle must know best."

"I say," repeated Ralph, tartly, "let him get that situa-

tion, and his fortune is made. If he don't like that, let him get one for himself. Without friends, money, recommendation, or knowledge of business of any kind, let him find honest employment in London which will keep him in shoe leather, and I'll give him a thousand pounds. At least," said Mr. Ralph Nickleby, checking himself, "I would if I had it."

"Poor fellow!" said the young lady. "Oh! uncle, must we be separated so soon!"

"Don't tease your uncle with questions when he is thinking only for our good, my love," said Mrs. Nickleby. "Nicholas, my dear, I wish you would say something."

"Yes, mother, yes," said Nicholas, who had remained silent. "If I am fortunate enough to be appointed to this post, sir, what will become of those I leave behind?"

"Your mother and sister will be provided for, in that case (not otherwise), by me, and placed in some sphere of life in which they will be able to be independent. That will be my immediate care; they will not remain as they are, one week after your departure, I will undertake."

"Then," said Nicholas, starting gaily up, and wringing his uncle's hand, "I am ready to do anything you wish. Let us try our fortune with Mr. Squeers at once; he can but refuse."

"He won't do that. He will be glad to have you on my recommendation. Make yourself of use to him, and you'll rise to be a partner in the establishment in no time. Bless me, only think! if he were to die, why, your fortune's made at once."

"To be sure, I see it all," said poor Nicholas, delighted with a thousand visionary ideas that his good spirits and his inexperience were conjuring up before him. "Or suppose some young nobleman who is being educated at the Hall were to take a fancy to me, and get his father to appoint me his travelling tutor when he left, and when we came back

from the continent, procured me some fine position. Eh! uncle? ”

“ Ah, to be sure! ” sneered Ralph.

“ And who knows, but when he came to see me when I was settled (as he would of course), he might fall in love with Kate, who would be keeping my house, and — and — marry her, eh! uncle? Who knows? ”

“ Who, indeed! ” snarled Ralph.

“ How happy we should be! ” cried Nicholas with enthusiasm. “ The pain of parting is nothing to the joy of meeting again. Kate will be a beautiful woman, and I so proud to hear them say so, and mother so happy to be with us once again, and all these sad times forgotten, and —— ” The picture was too bright a one to bear; and Nicholas, fairly overpowered by it, smiled faintly, with his eyes full of tears and his lips trembling so that he could not speak.

This simple family, born and bred in retirement and wholly unacquainted with what is called “ the world ” (a conventional phrase which often means all the rascals in it) mingled their tears together at the thought of their first separation.

## CHAPTER II

**A**T the very core of London, in the heart of its business and animation, in the midst of a whirl of noise and motion, is the coachyard of the Saracen’s Head Inn, its portal guarded by two Saracen’s heads and shoulders. When you walk up the yard you will observe a long window with the words “ Coffee Room ” legibly painted above it. Looking out of that window, you would have seen, if you had gone at the right time, Mr. Wackford Squeers, with his hands in his pockets.

Mr. Squeers's appearance was not prepossessing. He had but one eye, which was useful but decidedly not ornamental, being of a greenish grey, and in shape resembling the fanlight of a street door. The blank side of his face was much wrinkled and puckered up, which gave him a very sinister appearance, especially when he smiled, at which times his expression bordered closely on the villainous. His hair was very flat and shiny, save at the ends, where it was brushed stiffly up from a low protruding forehead, which assorted well with his harsh voice and coarse manner. He was about two or three and fifty, and a trifle below the average size. He wore a white neckerchief with long ends and a suit of scholastic black; but his coat sleeves being a great deal too long, and his trousers a great deal too short, he appeared ill at ease in his clothes, as if he were in a perpetual state of astonishment at finding himself so respectable.

Mr. Squeers was standing in a small compartment called a "box," by one of the coffee-room fireplaces. In a corner was a very small deal trunk, tied round with a scanty piece of cord; and on the trunk was perched a diminutive boy, with his shoulders drawn up to his ears, and his hands planted on his knees, who glanced timidly at the schoolmaster from time to time, with evident dread and apprehension.

"Half-past three," muttered Mr. Squeers, turning from the window, and looking sulkily at the coffee-room clock. "There will be nobody here today."

Much vexed by this reflection, Mr. Squeers looked at the little boy to see whether he was doing anything he could beat him for. As he happened not to be doing anything at all, he merely boxed his ears, and told him not to do it again.

"At midsummer," muttered Mr. Squeers, "I took down ten boys; ten twenties is two hundred pound. I go back at eight o'clock tomorrow morning, and have got only three



— three oughts is ought — three twos is six — Sixty pound. What's come of all the boys? What's parents got in their heads? What does it all mean?"

Here the little boy on the top of the trunk gave a violent sneeze.

"Halloa, sir!" growled the schoolmaster, turning round. "What's that, sir?"

"Nothing, please sir," said the little boy.

"Nothing, sir!" exclaimed Mr. Squeers.

"Please, sir, I sneezed," rejoined the boy, trembling till the trunk shook under him.

"Oh! sneezed, did you?" retorted Mr. Squeers. "Then what did you say 'nothing' for, sir?"

In default of a better answer to this question, the little boy screwed a couple of knuckles into each of his eyes and began to cry, wherefore Mr. Squeers knocked him off the trunk with a blow on one side of his face, and knocked him on again with a blow on the other.

"Wait till I get you down into Yorkshire, my young gentleman," said Mr. Squeers, "and then I'll give you the rest. — Will you hold that noise, sir?"

"Ye-ye-yes," sobbed the little boy, rubbing his face.

"Then do so at once, sir, do you hear?"

As this admonition was accompanied with a threatening gesture and uttered with a savage aspect, the little boy rubbed his face harder, as if to keep the tears back; and, beyond alternately sniffing and choking, gave no further vent to his emotions.

"Mr. Squeers," said the waiter, looking in at this juncture; "here's a gentleman asking for you at the bar."

"Show the gentleman in, Richard," replied Mr. Squeers, in a soft voice. "Put your handkerchief in your pocket, you little scoundrel, or I'll murder you when the gentleman goes."

The schoolmaster had scarcely uttered these words in a fierce whisper, when the stranger entered. Affecting not to see him, Mr. Squeers feigned to be intent upon mending a pen and offering benevolent advice to his youthful pupil.

“My dear child,” said Mr. Squeers, “all people have their trials. This early trial of yours that is fit to make your little heart burst, and your very eyes come out of your head with crying, what is it? Nothing; less than nothing. You are leaving your friends, but you will have a father in me, my dear, and a mother in Mrs. Squeers. At the delightful village of Dotheboys, near Greta Bridge in Yorkshire, where youth are boarded, clothed, booked, washed, furnished with pocket money, provided with all necessaries ——”

“It is the gentleman,” observed the stranger, stopping the schoolmaster in the rehearsal of his advertisement. “Mr. Squeers, I believe, sir?”

“The same, sir,” said Mr. Squeers, with an assumption of surprise.

“The gentleman,” said the stranger, “that advertised in the *Times*?”

“— *Morning Post, Chronicle, Herald, and Advertiser*, regarding the academy called Dotheboys Hall at the delightful village of Dotheboys, near Greta Bridge in Yorkshire,” added Mr. Squeers. “You come on business, sir, I see by my young friends. How do you do, my little gentlemen? And how do you do, sir?” With this salutation Mr. Squeers patted the heads of two hollow-eyed, small-boned little boys, whom the applicant had brought with him, and waited for further communications.

“I am in the oil and color way. My name is Snawley, sir.”

Squeers inclined his head as much as to say, “And a remarkably pretty name, too.”

The stranger continued. "I have been thinking, Mr. Squeers, of placing my two boys at your school."

"It is not for me to say so, sir, but I don't think you could possibly do a better thing."

"Hem!" said the other. "Twenty pounds per annum, I believe, Mr. Squeers?"

"Guineas,"<sup>1</sup> rejoined the schoolmaster, with a persuasive smile.

"Pounds for two, I think, Mr. Squeers," said Mr. Snawley, solemnly.

"I don't think it could be done, sir," replied Squeers, as if he had never considered the proposition before. "Let me see; four fives is twenty, double that, and deduct the — well, a pound either way shall not stand betwixt us. You must recommend me, and make it up that way."

"They are not great eaters," said Mr. Snawley.

"Oh! that doesn't matter at all. We don't consider the boys' appetites at our establishment." This was strictly true; they did not.

"Every wholesome luxury that Yorkshire can afford," continued Squeers; "every — in short, every comfort of a home that a boy could wish for will be theirs, Mr. Snawley."

"I should wish their morals to be particularly attended to," said Mr. Snawley.

"I am glad of that, sir," replied the schoolmaster, drawing himself up. "They have come to the right shop for morals, sir."

"You are a moral man yourself," said Mr. Snawley.

"I rather believe I am, sir," replied Squeers.

"I have the satisfaction to know you are, sir," said Mr. Snawley. "I asked one of your references, and he said you were religious."

"Well, sir, I hope I am a little in that line," replied Squeers.

<sup>1</sup> A guinea is \$5.11.

“I hope I am also,” rejoined the other. “Could I say a few words with you in the next box?”

“By all means,” rejoined Squeers with a grin. “My dears, will you speak to your new playfellow a minute or two? That is one of my boys, sir. Belling his name is ——”

“Oh, indeed?” rejoined Mr. Snawley, looking at the poor little urchin as if he were some extraordinary natural curiosity.

“He goes down with me tomorrow, sir,” said Squeers. “That’s his luggage that he is sitting upon now. Each boy is required to bring two suits of clothes, six shirts, six pairs of stockings, two nightcaps, two pocket handkerchiefs, two pairs of shoes, two hats, and a razor.”

“A razor!” exclaimed Mr. Snawley, as they walked into the next box. “What for?”

“To shave with,” replied Squeers, in a slow and measured tone.

There was not much in these three words, but there must have been something in the manner in which they were said to attract attention; for the schoolmaster and his companion looked steadily at each other for a few seconds, and then exchanged a very meaning smile. Snawley was a sleek, flat-nosed man, clad in sombre garments, and long black gaiters.

“Up to what age do you keep boys at your school then?” he asked at length.

“Just as long as their friends make the quarterly payments to my agent in town, or until such time as they run away,” replied Squeers. “Let us understand each other; I see we may safely do so.”

“Yes,” replied Snawley. “The fact is, I am not their father, Mr. Squeers. I’m only their stepfather. You see I have married the mother. It’s expensive keeping boys at home, and as she has a little money in her own right, I am



afraid (women are so very foolish, Mr. Squeers) that she might be led to squander it on them, which would be their ruin, you know."

"I see," returned Squeers, throwing himself back in his chair, and waving his hand.

"And this," resumed Snawley, "has made me anxious to put them to some school a good distance off, where there are no holidays — none of those ill-judged comings home twice a year that unsettle children's minds so — and where they may rough it a little — you comprehend?"

"The payments regular, and no questions asked," said Squeers, nodding his head.

"That's it, exactly," rejoined the other. "Morals strictly attended to, though."

"Strictly," said Squeers.

"Not too much writing home allowed, I suppose?" said the stepfather, hesitating.

"None, except a circular at Christmas, to say they never were so happy, and hope they may never be sent for," rejoined Squeers.

"Nothing could be better," said the stepfather, rubbing his hands.

"Then as we understand each other," said Squeers, "will you allow me to ask you whether you consider me a highly virtuous, exemplary, and well-conducted man in private life; and whether you place the strongest confidence in my integrity, liberality, religious principles, and ability?"

"Certainly I do," replied the stepfather, reciprocating the schoolmaster's grin.

"Perhaps you won't object to say that, if I make you a reference?"

"Not the least in the world."

"That's your sort!" said Squeers, taking up a pen; "this is doing business, and that's what I like."

Having entered Mr. Snawley's address, the schoolmaster had next to perform the still more agreeable office of entering the receipt of the first quarter's payment in advance, which he had scarcely completed when another voice was heard inquiring for Mr. Squeers.

"Here he is," replied the schoolmaster; "what is it?"

"Only a matter of business, sir," said Ralph Nickleby, presenting himself, closely followed by Nicholas. "There was an advertisement of yours in the papers this morning?"

"There was, sir. This way, if you please," said Squeers, who had by this time got back to the box by the fireplace. "Won't you be seated?"

"Why, I think I will," replied Ralph, suiting the action to the word, and placing his hat on the table before him. "This is my nephew, sir, Mr. Nicholas Nickleby."

"How do you do, sir?" said Squeers.

Nicholas bowed, said he was very well, and seemed very much astonished at the outward appearance of the proprietor of Dotheboys Hall.

"Perhaps you recollect me?" said Ralph, looking narrowly at Squeers.

"You paid me a small account at each of my half-yearly visits to town for some years, I think, sir," said Squeers.

"I did."

"For the parents of a boy named Dorker, who unfortunately ——"

"—— unfortunately died at Dotheboys Hall," said Ralph, finishing the sentence.

"I remember very well, sir," rejoined Squeers. "Ah! Mrs. Squeers, sir, was as partial to that lad as if he had been her own; the attention, sir, that was bestowed upon that boy in his illness! Dry toast and warm tea offered him every night and morning when he couldn't swallow anything — a candle in his bedroom on the very night he died — the best

dictionary sent up for him to lay his head upon — I don't regret it though. It is a pleasant thing to reflect that one did one's duty by him."

Ralph smiled, as if he meant anything but smiling, and looked round at the strangers present.

"These are only some pupils of mine," said Wackford Squeers, pointing to the little boy on the trunk and the two little boys on the floor, who had been staring at each other without uttering a word and writhing their bodies into most remarkable contortions, according to the custom of little boys when they first become acquainted. "This gentleman, sir, is a parent who is kind enough to compliment me upon the course of education adopted at Dotheboys Hall, which is situated, sir, at the delightful village of Dotheboys, near Greta Bridge in Yorkshire, where youth are boarded, clothed, booked, washed, furnished with pocket money ——"

"Yes, we know all about that, sir," interrupted Ralph; "it's in the advertisement."

"You are very right, sir; it is in the advertisement," replied Squeers.

"And in the matter of fact beside," interrupted Mr. Snawley, "I feel bound to assure you, sir, and I am proud to have this opportunity of assuring you, that I consider Mr. Squeers a gentleman highly virtuous, exemplary, well conducted, and ——"

"I make no doubt of it, sir," interrupted Ralph, checking the torrent of recommendation; "no doubt of it at all. Suppose we come to business?"

"With all my heart, sir," rejoined Squeers. "'Never postpone business,' is the very first lesson we instill into our commercial pupils. Master Belling, my dear, always remember that; do you hear?"

"Yes, sir," repeated Master Belling.

"He recollects what it is, does he?" said Ralph.

“Tell the gentleman,” said Squeers.

“Never,” repeated Master Belling.

“Very good,” said Squeers; “go on.”

“Never,” repeated Master Belling again.

“Very good indeed,” said Squeers. “Yes.”

“P,” suggested Nicholas, good-naturedly, giving the first letter of the word.

“Perform — business!” said Master Belling. “Never — perform — business!”

“Very well, sir,” said Squeers, darting a withering look at the culprit. “You and I will perform a little business on our private account by and by.”

“And just now,” said Ralph, “we had better transact our own, perhaps.”

“If you please,” said Squeers.

“Well,” resumed Ralph, “it’s brief enough; soon broached; and I hope easily concluded. You have advertised for an able assistant, sir?”

“Precisely so,” said Squeers.

“And you really want one?”

“Certainly,” answered Squeers.

“Here he is! My nephew Nicholas, hot from school, with everything he learnt there fermenting in his head, and nothing fermenting in his pocket, is just the man you want.”

“I am afraid,” said Squeers, perplexed with such an application from a youth of Nicholas’s figure, “I am afraid the young man won’t suit me.”

“Yes, he will,” said Ralph; “I know better. Don’t be cast down, sir; you will be teaching all the young noblemen in Dotheboys Hall in less than a week’s time, unless this gentleman is more obstinate than I take him to be.”

“I fear, sir, that you object to my youth, and to my not being a master of arts?” said Nicholas, addressing Mr. Squeers.



"The absence of a college degree is an objection," said Squeers.

"Look here," said Ralph; "I'll put this matter in its true light in two seconds."

"If you'll have the goodness," rejoined Squeers.

"This is a boy, or a youth, or a lad, or a young man, or a hobbledehoy, or whatever you like to call him, of eighteen or nineteen," said Ralph.

"That I see," observed the schoolmaster.

"So do I," said Mr. Snawley, thinking it well to back his new friend.

"His father is dead, he is wholly ignorant of the world, has no resources whatever, and wants something to do. I recommend him to this splendid establishment of yours as an opening which will lead him to fortune if he turns it to proper account. Do you see that?"

"Everybody must see that," replied Squeers.

"I do, of course," said Nicholas, eagerly.

"He does, of course, you observe. If any caprice of temper should induce him to cast aside this golden opportunity at any time, I shall not give any help to his mother or sister. Look at him, and think of the use he may be to you in half a dozen ways. Now the question is whether, for some time to come at all events, he won't serve your purpose better than twenty of the kind of people you would get under ordinary circumstances. Isn't that a question for consideration?"

"Yes, it is," said Squeers, answering a nod of Ralph's head with a nod of his own.

"Good," rejoined Ralph. "Let me have two words with you."

The two words were had apart. In a couple of minutes Mr. Wackford Squeers announced that Mr. Nicholas Nickleby was, from that moment, thoroughly nominated to, and in-

stalled in, the office of first assistant master at Dotheboys Hall.

“Your uncle’s recommendation has done it, Mr. Nickleby,” said Wackford Squeers.

Nicholas, overjoyed at his success, shook his uncle’s hand warmly and could almost have worshipped Squeers upon the spot.

“He is an odd-looking man,” thought Nicholas. “What of that? Porson was an odd-looking man, and so was Doctor Johnson; all these bookworms are.”

“At eight o’clock tomorrow morning, Mr. Nickleby,” said Squeers, “the coach starts. You must be here at a quarter before, as we take these boys with us.”

“Certainly, sir,” said Nicholas.

“And your fare down, I have paid,” growled Ralph. “So you’ll have nothing to do but keep yourself warm.”

Here was another instance of his uncle’s generosity! Nicholas felt his unexpected kindness so much that he could scarcely find words to thank him; indeed, he had not found half enough when they took leave of the schoolmaster and emerged from the Saracen’s Head gateway.

“I shall be here in the morning to see you fairly off,” said Ralph. “No skulking!”

“Thank you, sir, I never shall forget this kindness.”

“Take care you don’t. You had better go home now and pack up what you have got to pack. Do you think you could find your way to Golden Square first?”

“Certainly, I can easily inquire.”

“Leave these papers with my clerk, then,” said Ralph, producing a small parcel, “and tell him to wait till I come home.”

Nicholas cheerfully undertook the errand, and bidding his worthy uncle an affectionate farewell, which that warm-hearted old gentleman acknowledged by a growl, hastened away to execute his commission.

He found Golden Square in due course. Mr. Noggs, who had stepped out for a minute or so to the public house, was opening the door with a latch key as he reached the steps.

"What's that?" inquired Noggs, pointing to the parcel.

"Papers from my uncle, and you're to have the goodness to wait till he comes home, if you please."

"Uncle!"

"Mr. Nickleby," said Nicholas in explanation.

"Come in," said Newman.

Without another word he led Nicholas into the passage and thence into the official pantry at the end of it, where he thrust him into a chair; and mounting upon his high stool, he sat, with his arms hanging straight down by his sides, gazing fixedly upon him, as from a tower of observation.

"There is no answer," said Nicholas, laying the parcel on a table beside him.

Newman said nothing, but folding his arms and thrusting his head forward so as to obtain a nearer view of Nicholas's face, scanned his features closely.

"No answer," said Nicholas, speaking very loud, under the impression that Newman Noggs was deaf.

Newman placed his hands upon his knees, and without uttering a syllable, continued the same close scrutiny of his companion's face.

This was such a very singular proceeding on the part of an utter stranger, and his appearance was so extremely peculiar that Nicholas, who had a keen sense of the ridiculous, could not refrain from breaking into a smile as he inquired whether Mr. Noggs had any commands for him.

Noggs shook his head and sighed, upon which Nicholas rose and, remarking that he required no rest, bade him good morning.

It was a great exertion for Newman Noggs, and nobody knows to this day how he ever came to make it, the other



party being wholly unknown to him, but he drew a long breath and actually said, out loud, without once stopping, that if the young gentleman did not object to tell, he should like to know what his uncle was going to do for him.

Nicholas had not the least objection in the world, but on the contrary was rather pleased to have an opportunity of talking on the subject which occupied his thoughts; so he sat down again and entered into a fervent and glowing description of all the honours and advantages to be derived from his appointment at the seat of learning, Dotheboys Hall.

“But, what’s the matter — are you ill?” said Nicholas, suddenly breaking off, as his companion, after throwing himself into a variety of uncouth attitudes, thrust his hands under the stool and cracked his finger joints as if he were snapping all the bones in his hands.

Newman Noggs made no reply, but went on shrugging his shoulders and cracking his finger joints; smiling horribly all the time and looking steadfastly at nothing out of the tops of his eyes, in a most ghastly manner.

At first, Nicholas thought the mysterious man was in a fit, but on further consideration, decided that he was in liquor, under which circumstances he deemed it prudent to make off at once. He looked back when he had got the street door open. Newman Noggs was still indulging in the same extraordinary gestures, and the cracking of his fingers sounded louder than ever.

### CHAPTER III

NICHOLAS slept till six next morning; dreamed of home, or of what was home once — no matter which, for things that are changed or gone will come back as they used to be, thank God! in sleep — and rose quite brisk and gay. He wrote a few lines to say the good bye which he



was afraid to pronounce himself, and laying them, with half his scanty stock of money, at his sister's door, shouldered his box and crept softly downstairs.

"Is that you, Hannah?" cried a voice from Miss La Creevy's sitting room, whence shone the light of a feeble candle.

"It is I, Miss La Creevy," said Nicholas, putting down the box and looking in.

"Bless us!" exclaimed Miss La Creevy, starting, and putting her hand to her curl papers. "You're up very early, Mr. Nickleby."

"So are you."

"It's the fine arts that bring me out of bed, Mr. Nickleby."

Miss La Creevy had got up early to put a fancy nose into a picture of a little boy, destined for his grandmother in the country, who was expected to bequeath him property if he was like the family.

"You don't mean to say that you are really going all the way down into Yorkshire this cold winter's weather, Mr. Nickleby? I heard something of it last night."

"I do, indeed. Necessity is my driver."

"Well, I am very sorry for it — that's all I can say — as much on your mother's and sister's account as on yours. Your sister is a very pretty young lady, Mr. Nickleby, and that is an additional reason why she should have somebody to protect her. I persuaded her to give me a sitting or two for the street-door case. Ah! she'll make a sweet miniature." As Miss La Creevy spoke, she held up an ivory countenance interlaced with very perceptible sky-blue veins, and regarded it with so much complacency that Nicholas quite envied her.

"If you ever have an opportunity of showing Kate some little kindness," said Nicholas, presenting his hand, "I think you will."

“Depend upon that,” said the good-natured miniature painter; “and God bless you, Mr. Nickleby, and I wish you well.”

By the time he had found a man to carry his box, it was seven o'clock. He walked slowly on, a little in advance of the porter, and very probably with not half so light a heart as the man had, although he had no waistcoat to cover it with and had evidently been spending the night in a stable, and taking his breakfast at a pump.

Nicholas regarded with curiosity and interest all the busy preparations for the coming day which every street and almost every house displayed. Thinking now and then that it seemed rather hard that so many people of all ranks and stations could earn a living in London when he should be compelled to journey so far away, he speedily arrived at the Saracen's Head Inn. Having dismissed his attendant and seen his box safely deposited in the coach office, he looked into the coffee room in search of Mr. Squeers.

That learned gentleman was found sitting at breakfast, with the three little boys before noticed, and two others, who had turned up by some lucky chance since the interview of the previous day, ranged in a row on the opposite seat. Mr. Squeers had before him a small measure of coffee, a plate of hot toast, and a cold round of beef; but he was at that moment intent on preparing breakfast for the five little boys.

“This is two penn'orth of milk, is it, waiter?” said Mr. Squeers, looking down into a large blue mug and slanting it gently, so as to get an accurate view of the quantity of liquid contained in it.

“That's two penn'orth, sir,” replied the waiter.

“What a rare article milk is, to be sure, in London!” said Mr. Squeers, with a sigh. “Just fill that mug up with lukewarm water, William, will you?”

“To the werry top, sir? Why, the milk will be drowned.”

“Never you mind that; serve it right for being so dear. You ordered that thick bread and butter for three, did you?”

“Coming directly, sir.”

“You needn’t hurry yourself; there’s plenty of time. Conquer your passions, boys, and don’t be eager after wittles.” As he uttered this moral precept, Mr. Squeers took a large bite out of the cold beef, and recognized Nicholas.

“Sit down, Mr. Nickleby; here we are, abreakfasting, you see!”

Nicholas did *not* see that anybody was breakfasting except Mr. Squeers, but he bowed with all becoming reverence and looked as cheerful as he could.

“Oh! that’s the milk and water, is it, William? Very good; don’t forget the bread and butter presently.”

At this fresh mention of the bread and butter the five little boys looked very eager, and followed the waiter out with their eyes; meanwhile Mr. Squeers tasted the milk and water.

“Ah!” said that gentleman, smacking his lips, “here’s richness! Think of the many beggars and orphans in the streets that would be glad of this, little boys. A shocking thing hunger is, isn’t it, Mr. Nickleby?”

“Very shocking, sir.”

“When I say number one,” pursued Mr. Squeers, putting the mug before the children, “the boy on the left hand nearest the window may take a drink; and when I say number two, the boy next him will go in, and so till we come to number five, which is the last boy. Are you ready?”

“Yes, sir,” cried all the little boys with great eagerness.

“That’s right,” said Squeers, calmly getting on with his breakfast, “Keep ready till I tell you to begin. Subdue your appetites, my dears, and you’ve conquered human natur’. This is the way we inculcate strength of mind, Mr. Nickleby,”



said the schoolmaster, turning to Nicholas, and speaking with his mouth very full of beef and toast.

Nicholas murmured something — he knew not what — in reply; and the little boys, dividing their gaze between the mug, the bread and butter (which had by this time arrived), and every morsel which Mr. Squeers took into his mouth, remained with strained eyes in torments of expectation.

“Thank God for a good breakfast,” said Squeers when he had finished. “Number one may take a drink.”

Number one seized the mug ravenously, and had just drunk enough to make him wish for more when Mr. Squeers gave the signal for number two, who gave up at the same interesting moment to number three; and the process was repeated until the milk and water terminated with number five.

“And now,” said the schoolmaster, dividing the bread and butter for three into five portions, “you had better look sharp with your breakfast, for the horn will blow in a minute or two, and then every boy leaves off.”

Permission being thus given to fall to, the boys began to eat voraciously and in desperate haste, while the schoolmaster picked his teeth with a fork and looked smilingly on. In a very short time, the horn was heard.

“I thought it wouldn’t be long,” said Squeers, jumping up and producing a little basket from under the seat; “put what you haven’t had time to eat in here, boys! You’ll want it on the road!”

Nicholas was considerably startled by these very economical arrangements; but he had no time to reflect upon them, for the little boys had to be got up to the top of the coach, and their boxes had to be brought out and put in, and Mr. Squeers’s luggage was to be seen carefully deposited in the boot,<sup>1</sup> and all these offices were in his department.

<sup>1</sup> A box where baggage was carried.



He was in the full heat and bustle of concluding these operations, when his uncle, Mr. Ralph Nickleby, accosted him.

“Oh! here you are, sir!” said Ralph. “Here are your mother and sister, sir.”

“Where?” cried Nicholas, looking hastily round.

“Here!” replied his uncle. “Having too much money and nothing at all to do with it, they were paying a hackney coach as I came up, sir.”

“We were afraid of being too late to see him before he went away from us,” said Mrs. Nickleby, embracing her son, heedless of the unconcerned lookers-on in the coachyard.

“Very good, ma’am,” returned Ralph; “you’re the best judge, of course. I merely said that you were paying a hackney coach. I never pay a hackney coach, ma’am. I never hire one. I haven’t been in a hackney coach of my own hiring for thirty years, and I hope I shan’t be for thirty more, if I live as long.”

“I should never have forgiven myself if I had not seen him,” said Mrs. Nickleby. “Poor dear boy — going away without his breakfast, too, because he feared to distress us!”

“Mighty fine certainly,” said Ralph, with great testiness. “When I first went to business, ma’am, I took a penny loaf and a ha’porth of milk for my breakfast as I walked to the city every morning. What do you say to that, ma’am? Breakfast! Bah!”

“Now, Nickleby,” said Squeers, coming up at the moment buttoning his greatcoat; “I think you’d better get up behind. I’m afraid of one of them boys falling off, and then there’s twenty pound a year gone.”

“Dear Nicholas,” whispered Kate, touching her brother’s arm, “who is that vulgar man?”

“Eh!” growled Ralph, whose quick ears had caught the inquiry. “Do you wish to be introduced to Mr. Squeers, my dear?”

“That the schoolmaster! No, uncle. Oh no!” replied Kate, shrinking back.

“I’m sure I heard you say as much, my dear,” retorted Ralph in his cold, sarcastic manner. “Mr. Squeers, here’s my niece, Nicholas’s sister!”

“Very glad to make your acquaintance, miss,” said Squeers, raising his hat an inch or two. “I wish Mrs. Squeers took gals, and we had you for a teacher. I don’t know, though, whether she mightn’t grow jealous if we had. Ha! ha! ha!”

If the proprietor of Dotheboys Hall could have known what was passing in his assistant’s breast at that moment, he would have discovered, with some surprise, that he was as near being soundly pummelled as he had ever been in his life. Kate Nickleby, having a quicker perception of her brother’s emotions, led him gently aside.

“My dear Nicholas,” said the young lady, “who is this man? What kind of place can it be that you are going to?”

“I hardly know, Kate,” replied Nicholas, pressing his sister’s hand. “I suppose the Yorkshire folks are rather rough and uncultivated, that’s all.”

“But this person,” urged Kate.

“Is my employer, or master, or whatever the proper name may be,” replied Nicholas quickly, “and I was an ass to take his coarseness ill. They are looking this way, and it is time I was in my place. Bless you, love, and good bye! Mother, look to our meeting again some day! Uncle, farewell! Thank you heartily for all you have done and all you mean to do. Quite ready, sir!”

With these hasty adieux, Nicholas mounted nimbly to his seat, and waved his hand as gallantly as if his heart went with it.

At this moment, when the coachman and guard were comparing notes for the last time before starting on the subject

of the waybill, when porters were screwing out the last reluctant sixpences, itinerant newsmen making the last offer of a morning paper, and the horses giving the last impatient rattle to their harness, Nicholas felt somebody pulling softly at his leg. He looked down, and there stood Newman Noggs, who pushed up into his hand a dirty letter.

“What’s this?” inquired Nicholas.

“Hush!” rejoined Noggs, pointing to Mr. Ralph Nickleby, who was saying a few earnest words to Squeers, a short distance off. “Take it. Read it. Nobody knows. That’s all.”

“Stop!” cried Nicholas.

“No,” replied Noggs.

Nicholas cried “Stop,” again, but Newman Noggs was gone.

A minute’s bustle, a banging of the coach doors, a swaying of the vehicle to one side, as the heavy coachman, and still heavier guard, climbed into their seats; a cry of all right, a few notes from the horn, a hasty glance of two sorrowful faces below, and the hard features of Mr. Ralph Nickleby — and the coach was gone.

The little boys’ legs being too short to admit of their feet resting upon anything as they sat and the little boys’ bodies being consequently in imminent hazard of being jerked off the coach, Nicholas had enough to do, over the stones, to hold them on.

The weather was intensely and bitterly cold; a great deal of snow fell from time to time; and the wind was intolerably keen. Mr. Squeers got down at almost every stage (wherever there was a bar) — to stretch his legs as he said. Since he always came back from such excursions with a very red nose and a hiccup, and composed himself to sleep directly, there is reason to suppose that he derived great benefit from the process. The little pupils having been stimulated with the

remains of their breakfast and further invigorated by sundry small cups of a curious cordial carried by Mr. Squeers, which tasted very like toast-and-water put into a brandy bottle by mistake, went to sleep, woke, shivered, and cried as their feelings prompted.

So the time went on for two days, until, about six o'clock on the evening of the second day, they arrived at the little settlement of Greta Bridge in Yorkshire.

#### CHAPTER IV

NICHOLAS and the boys were left standing with the luggage in the road, to amuse themselves by looking at the coach as it changed horses, while Squeers ran into the tavern and went through the leg-stretching process at the bar. After some minutes, he returned, with his legs thoroughly stretched, if the hue of his nose and an unusually short hiccup afforded any criterion. At the same time there came out of the yard a rusty pony chaise, and a cart, driven by two labouring men.

“Put the boys and the boxes into the cart,” said Squeers, rubbing his hands; “and this young man and me will go on in the chaise. Get in, Nickleby.”

Nicholas obeyed. Mr. Squeers with some difficulty inducing the pony to obey also, they started off, leaving the cart-load of infant misery to follow at leisure.

“Are you cold, Nickleby?” inquired Squeers, after they had travelled some distance in silence.

“Rather, sir, I must say.”

“Well, I don't find fault with that; it's a long journey this weather.”

“Is it much farther to Dotheboys Hall, sir?”



"About three miles from here," replied Squeers. "But you needn't call it a hall down here."

Nicholas coughed, as if he would like to know why.

"The fact is, it ain't a hall," observed Squeers drily.

"Oh, indeed!" said Nicholas, whom this piece of intelligence much astonished.

"No," replied Squeers. "We call it a hall up in London, because it sounds better, but they don't know it by that name in these parts. A man may call his house an island if he likes; there's no act of Parliament against that, I believe?"

"I believe not, sir," rejoined Nicholas.

Squeers eyed his companion slyly at the conclusion of this little dialogue, and finding that he had grown thoughtful and appeared in nowise disposed to volunteer any observations, contented himself with lashing the pony until they reached their journey's end.

"Jump out," said Squeers. "Hallo there! Come and put this horse up. Be quick, will you!"

While the schoolmaster was uttering these and other impatient cries, Nicholas had time to observe that the school was a long, cold-looking house, one story high, with a few straggling outbuildings behind and a barn and stable adjoining. After the lapse of a minute or two, the noise of somebody unlocking the yard gate was heard, and presently a tall lean boy with a lantern in his hand issued forth.

"Is that you, Smike?" cried Squeers.

"Yes, sir."

"Then why the devil didn't you come before?"

"Please, sir, I fell asleep over the fire."

"Fire! what fire? Where's there a fire?"

"Only in the kitchen, sir. Missus said, as I was sitting up, I might go in there for a warm."

"Your Missus is a fool. You'd have been a deuced deal more wakeful in the cold, I'll engage."

By this time Mr. Squeers had dismounted; and after ordering the boy to see to the pony and to take care that he hadn't any more corn that night, he told Nicholas to wait at the front door a minute, while he went round and let him in.

A host of unpleasant misgivings which had been crowding upon Nicholas during the whole journey thronged into his mind with redoubled force when he was left alone. His great distance from home and the impossibility of reaching it, except on foot, should he feel ever so anxious to return, presented itself to him in most alarming colours; and as he looked up at the dreary house and dark windows, and upon the wild country round, covered with snow, he felt a depression of heart and spirit which he had never experienced before.

"Now then!" cried Squeers, poking his head out at the front door. "Where are you, Nickleby?"

"Here, sir."

"Come in. The wind blows in at this door fit to knock a man off his legs."

Nicholas sighed, and hurried in. Mr. Squeers, having bolted the door to keep it shut, ushered him into a small parlour scantily furnished with a few chairs, a yellow map hung up against the wall, and a couple of tables, one of which bore some preparations for supper.

They had not been in this apartment a couple of minutes when a female bounced into the room and, seizing Mr. Squeers by the throat, gave him two loud kisses; one close after the other, like a postman's knock. The lady, who was of a large raw-boned figure, was about half a head taller than Mr. Squeers and was dressed in a dimity night jacket, with her hair in papers; she had also a dirty nightcap on, relieved by a yellow cotton handkerchief which tied it under the chin.

"How is my Squeery?" said the lady in a playful manner, and a very hoarse voice.

“Quite well, my love, how’s the cows?”

“All right, every one of ’em.”

“And the pigs?”

“As well as they were when you went away.”

“Come; that’s a blessing,” said Squeers, pulling off his greatcoat. “The boys are all as they were, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes, they’re well enough,” replied Mrs. Squeers, snappishly. “That young Pitcher’s had a fever.”

“No! Darn that boy, he’s always at something of that sort.”

“Never was such a boy, I do believe. Whatever he has is always catching too. I say it’s obstinacy, and nothing shall ever convince me that it isn’t. I’d beat it out of him, and I told you that, six months ago.”

“So you did, my love. We’ll try what can be done.”

Pending these little endearments, Nicholas had stood, awkwardly enough, in the middle of the room, not very well knowing whether he was expected to retire into the passage or to remain where he was. He was now relieved from his perplexity by Mr. Squeers.

“This is the new young man, my dear,” said that gentleman.

“Oh,” replied Mrs. Squeers, nodding her head at Nicholas and eyeing him coldly from top to toe.

“He’ll take a meal with us tonight,” said Squeers, “and go among the boys tomorrow morning. You can give him a shakedown here tonight, can’t you?”

“We must manage it somehow; you don’t much mind how you sleep, I suppose, sir?”

“No, indeed, I am not particular.”

“That’s lucky,” said Mrs. Squeers. And as the lady’s humour was considered to lie chiefly in retort, Mr. Squeers laughed heartily, and seemed to expect that Nicholas should do the same.



After some further conversation between the master and mistress relative to the success of Mr. Squeers's trip, and the people who had paid, and the people who had made default in payment, a young servant girl brought in a Yorkshire pie and some cold beef, which being set upon the table, the boy Smike appeared with a jug of ale.

Mr. Squeers was emptying his greatcoat pockets of letters to different boys and other small documents which he had brought down in them. The boy glanced, with an anxious and timid expression, at the papers, as if with a sickly hope that one among them might relate to him. The look was a very painful one and went to Nicholas's heart at once, for it told a long and very sad history.

It induced him to consider the boy more attentively, and he was surprised to observe the extraordinary mixture of garments which formed his dress. Although he could not have been less than eighteen or nineteen years old and was tall for that age, he wore a suit such as is usually put upon very little boys and which, though most absurdly short in the arms and legs, was quite wide enough for his very thin body. He had on a very large pair of boots, which might have been once worn by some stout farmer, but were now too patched and tattered for a beggar. Heaven knows how long he had been there, but he still wore the same linen which he had first taken down; for round his neck was a tattered child's frill, only half concealed by a coarse, man's neckerchief. He was lame; and as he feigned to be busy in arranging the table, glanced at the letters with a look so keen, and yet so dispirited and hopeless, that Nicholas could hardly bear to watch him.

"What are you bothering about there, Smike?" cried Mrs. Squeers; "let the things alone, can't you?"

"Eh!" said Squeers, looking up. "Oh! it's you, is it?"

"Yes, sir," replied the youth, pressing his hands together,



as though to control, by force, the nervous wandering of his fingers; "is there ——"

"Well!" said Squeers.

"Have you — did anybody — has nothing been heard — about me?"

"Devil a bit," replied Squeers testily.

The lad withdrew his eyes and, putting his hand to his face, moved towards the door.

"Not a word," resumed Squeers, "and never will be. Now this is a pretty sort of thing, isn't it, that you should have been left here, all these years, and no money paid after the first six — nor no notice taken, nor no clue to be got who you belong to? It's a pretty sort of thing that I should have to feed a great fellow like you and never hope to get one penny for it, isn't it?"

The boy put his hand to his head as if he were making an effort to recollect something and then, looking vacantly at his questioner, gradually broke into a smile, and limped away.

"I'll tell you what, Squeers," remarked his wife as the door closed, "I think that young chap's turning silly."

"I hope not, for he's a handy fellow out of doors, and worth his meat and drink, anyway. I should think he'd have wit enough for us, though, if he was. But come; let's have supper, for I am hungry and tired, and want to go to bed."

This reminder brought in an exclusive steak for Mr. Squeers, who speedily proceeded to do it ample justice. Nicholas drew up his chair, but his appetite was effectually taken away.

"How's the steak, Squeers?" said Mrs. S.

"Tender as a lamb. Have a bit."

"I couldn't eat a morsel. What'll the young man take, my dear?"

"Whatever he likes that's present," rejoined Squeers, in a most unusual burst of generosity.

“What do you say, Mr. Knuckleby?” inquired Mrs. Squeers.

“I’ll take a little of the pie, if you please, a very little, for I’m not hungry.”

“Well, it’s a pity to cut the pie if you’re not hungry, isn’t it?” said Mrs. Squeers. “Will you try a bit of the beef?”

“Whatever you please,” replied Nicholas, abstractedly; “it’s all the same to me.”

Mrs. Squeers looked vastly gracious on receiving this reply, and nodding to Squeers, as much as to say that she was glad to find the young man knew his station, assisted Nicholas to a slice of meat with her own fair hands.

“Uncommon juicy steak that,” said Squeers, as he laid down his knife and fork, after plying it, in silence, for some time.

“It’s prime meat,” rejoined his lady, “I bought a good large piece of it myself on purpose for ——”

“For what!” exclaimed Squeers hastily. “Not for the — boys?”

“No, no; not for *them*,” rejoined Mrs. Squeers; “on purpose for you against you came home. Lor! you didn’t think I could have made such a mistake as that.”

“Upon my word, my dear, I didn’t know what you were going to say,” said Squeers, who had turned pale.

“You needn’t make yourself uncomfortable,” remarked his wife, laughing heartily. “To think that I should be such a noddy! Well!”

This part of the conversation was unintelligible to Nicholas, but Squeers frequently purchased, for the boys to eat, the bodies of cattle who had died from sickness, and he was afraid of having unintentionally devoured some choice morsel intended for the young gentlemen.

Supper being over and removed by a small servant girl with a hungry eye, Mrs. Squeers retired to lock it up, and

also to take into safe custody the clothes of the five boys who had just arrived and who were half-way up the troublesome flight of steps which leads to death's door, in consequence of exposure to the cold. They were then regaled with a light supper of porridge and stowed away, side by side, in a small bedstead, to warm each other, and dream of a substantial meal with something hot after it, if their fancies set that way, which it is not at all improbable they did.

At length, Mr. Squeers yawned fearfully and said that it was high time to go to bed; upon which signal, Mrs. Squeers and the girl dragged in a small straw mattress and a couple of blankets, and arranged them into a couch for Nicholas.

"We'll put you into your regular bedroom tomorrow, Nickleby," said Squeers. "Let me see! Who sleeps in Brooks's bed, my dear?"

"In Brooks's," said Mrs. Squeers, pondering. "There's Jennings, little Bolder, Graymarsh, and what's his name."

"So there is," rejoined Squeers. "Yes! Brooks is full."

"Full!" thought Nicholas. "I should think he was."

"There's a place somewhere, I know," said Squeers; "but I can't at this moment call to mind where it is. However, we'll have that all settled tomorrow. Good night, Nickleby. Seven o'clock in the morning, mind."

"I shall be ready, sir, good night."

"I'll come in myself and show you where the well is," said Squeers. "You'll always find a little bit of soap in the kitchen window; that belongs to you."

Nicholas opened his eyes, but not his mouth; and Squeers was again going away, when he once more turned back.

"I don't know, I am sure, whose towel to put you on; but if you'll make shift with something tomorrow morning, Mrs. Squeers will arrange that, in the course of the day. My dear, don't forget."

"I'll take care, and mind you take care, young man, and

get first wash. The teacher ought always to have it; but they get the better of him if they can," said Mrs. Squeers.

Nicholas, being left alone, took half a dozen turns up and down the room in a condition of much agitation and excitement; but growing gradually calmer, sat down in a chair and resolved that, come what might, he would endeavour, for a time, to bear whatever wretchedness might be in store for him, and that remembering the helplessness of his mother and sister, he would give his uncle no plea for deserting them in their need. Good resolutions seldom fail of producing some good effect in the mind from which they spring. He grew less desponding, and — so sanguine and buoyant is youth — even hoped that affairs at Dotheboys Hall might yet prove better than they promised.

He was preparing for bed, with something like renewed cheerfulness, when a sealed letter fell from his coat pocket. In the hurry of leaving London, it had escaped his attention, and had not occurred to him since, but it at once brought back to him the recollection of the mysterious behaviour of Newman Noggs.

"Dear me!" said Nicholas; "what an extraordinary hand!" It was directed to himself, was written upon very dirty paper, and in such cramped and crippled writing as to be almost illegible. After great difficulty and much puzzling, he contrived to read as follows:

MY DEAR YOUNG MAN:

"I know the world. Your father did not, or he would not have done me a kindness when there was no hope of return. You do not, or you would not be bound on such a journey.

If ever you want a shelter in London (don't be angry at this, I once thought I never should), they know where I live, at the sign of the Crown, in Silver Street, Golden Square. It is at the corner of Silver Street and James



Street, with a bar door both ways. You can come at night. Once, nobody was ashamed—never mind that. It's all over.

Excuse errors. I should forget how to wear a whole coat now. I have forgotten all my old ways. My spelling may have gone with them.

NEWMAN NOGGS.

It may be a very undignified circumstance to record, but after he had folded this letter and placed it in his pocket-book, Nicholas Nickleby's eyes were dimmed with a moisture that might have been taken for tears.

## CHAPTER V

A RIDE of two hundred miles in severe weather is one of the best softeners of a hard bed. Perhaps it is even a sweetener of dreams, for those which hovered over the rough couch of Nicholas and whispered their airy nothings in his ear were of an agreeable and happy kind. He was making his fortune very fast indeed, when the faint glimmer of a candle shone before his eyes, and a voice he had no difficulty in recognizing as Mr. Squeers's, admonished him that it was time to rise.

“Past seven, Nickleby.”

“Has morning come already?” asked Nicholas, sitting up in bed.

“Ah! that has it, and ready iced, too. Now, Nickleby, come; tumble up, will you?”

Nicholas needed no further admonition, but tumbled up at once, and proceeded to dress himself by the light of the taper which Mr. Squeers carried in his hand.

“Here's a pretty go,” said that gentleman; “the pump's froze.”

“Indeed!” said Nicholas, not much interested in the intelligence.

“Yes, you can’t wash yourself this morning.”

“Not wash myself!”

“No, not a bit of it, so you must be content with giving yourself a dry polish, till we break the ice in the well, and can get a bucket out for the boys. Don’t stand staring at me, but look sharp, will you?”

Offering no further observation, Nicholas huddled on his clothes. Squeers meanwhile opened the shutters and blew the candle out, when the voice of his amiable wife was heard in the passage, demanding admittance.

“Come in, my love,” said Squeers.

Mrs. Squeers came in, still habited in the night jacket which had displayed the symmetry of her figure on the previous night, and further ornamented with a beaver bonnet of some antiquity, which she wore on top of the nightcap.

“Drat the things,” said the lady, opening the cupboard; “I can’t find the school spoon anywhere.”

“Never mind it, my dear,” observed Squeers in a soothing manner; “it’s of no consequence.”

“No consequence, why how you talk! Isn’t it brimstone morning?”

“I forgot, my dear,” rejoined Squeers; “yes, it certainly is. We purify the boys’ blood now and then, Nickleby.”

“Purify fiddlesticks’ ends,” said his lady. “Don’t think, young man, that we go to expense of flowers of brimstone and molasses just to purify them, because, if you think we carry on the business in that way, you’ll find yourself mistaken, and so I tell you plainly.”

“My dear,” said Squeers frowning.

“Oh! nonsense,” rejoined Mrs. Squeers. “If the young man comes to be a teacher here, let him understand at once that we don’t want any foolery about the boys. They have

the brimstone and molasses partly because, if they hadn't something or other in the way of medicine they'd be always ailing and giving a world of trouble, and partly because it spoils their appetites and comes cheaper than breakfast and dinner. So it does them good and us good at the same time, and that's fair enough, I'm sure."

Having given this explanation, Mrs. Squeers put her hand into the closet and instituted a stricter search after the spoon, in which Mr. Squeers assisted.

A vast deal of searching and rummaging ensued. This proving fruitless, Smike was called in. He was pushed by Mrs. Squeers and boxed by Mr. Squeers, which course of treatment, brightening his intellect, enabled him to suggest that possibly Mrs. Squeers might have the spoon in her pocket, which turned out to be the case. As Mrs. Squeers had previously protested, however, that she was quite certain she had not got it, Smike received another box on the ear for presuming to contradict his mistress, together with a promise of a sound thrashing if he were not more respectful in future.

"A most invaluable woman, that, Nickleby," said Squeers when his wife had hurried away, pushing the drudge before her.

"Indeed, sir!" observed Nicholas.

"I don't know her equal," said Squeers; "I do not know her equal. That woman, Nickleby, is always the same — always the same bustling, lively, saving creetur that you see her now."

Nicholas sighed involuntarily at the thought of the agreeable domestic prospect thus opened to him, but Squeers was fortunately too much occupied with his own reflections to perceive it.

"It's my way to say, when I am up in London," continued Squeers, "that to them boys she is a mother. But she is

more than a mother to them — ten times more. She does things for them boys, Nickleby, that I don't believe half the mothers going would do for their own sons."

"I should think they would not, sir."

"But come," said Squeers, interrupting the progress of some thoughts to this effect in the mind of his usher, "let's go to the schoolroom; and lend me a hand with my school coat, will you?"

Nicholas assisted his master to put on an old jacket, which he took down from a peg in the passage; and Squeers, arming himself with his cane, led the way across a yard to a door in the rear of the house.

"There," said the schoolmaster as they stepped in together, "this is our shop, Nickleby!"

It was such a crowded scene, and there were so many objects to attract attention that, at first, Nicholas stared about him, really without seeing anything at all. By degrees, however, the place resolved itself into a bare and dirty room, with a couple of windows, whereof a tenth part might be of glass, the remainder being stopped up with old copybooks and paper. There were a couple of long old rickety desks, cut and notched, and inked, and damaged in every possible way; two or three benches, a detached desk for Squeers, and another for his assistant. The ceiling was supported, like that of a barn, by crossbeams and rafters; and the walls were so stained and discoloured that it was impossible to tell whether they had ever been touched with paint or white-wash.

But the pupils — the young noblemen! How the last faint traces of hope, the remotest glimmering of any good to be derived from his efforts in this den, faded from the mind of Nicholas as he looked in dismay around! Pale and haggard faces, lank and bony figures, children with the countenances of old men, deformities with irons upon their



limbs, boys of stunted growth, and others whose long meagre legs would hardly bear their stooping bodies, all crowded on the view together. With every kindly sympathy and affection blasted at its birth, with every young and healthy feeling flogged and starved down, with every revengeful passion that can fester in swollen hearts eating its evil way to their core in silence, what an incipient hell was breeding here!

And yet this scene, painful as it was, had its grotesque features, which, in a less interested observer than Nicholas might have provoked a smile. Mrs. Squeers stood at one of the desks, presiding over an immense basin of sulphur and molasses of which delicious compound she administered a large installment to each boy in succession. She was using for the purpose a common wooden spoon, which might have been originally manufactured for some gigantic top, and which widened every young gentleman's mouth considerably; they being all obliged, under heavy corporal penalties, to take in the whole of the bowl at a gasp. In another corner, huddled together for companionship, were the little boys who had arrived on the preceding night, three of them in very large leather breeches and two in old trousers, a something tighter fit than drawers are usually worn. At no great distance from these was seated the juvenile son and heir of Mr. Squeers — a striking likeness of his father — kicking, with great vigour, under the hands of Smike, who was fitting upon him a pair of new boots that bore a most suspicious resemblance to those which the least of the little boys had worn on the journey down — as the little boy himself seemed to think, for he was regarding the appropriation with a look of most rueful amazement. Besides these, there was a long row of boys waiting, with countenances of no pleasant anticipation, to be treaced; and another file, who had just escaped from the infliction, making a variety of wry mouths indicative of anything but satisfaction. The whole were attired in such



Of which delicious compound she administered a large installment to each boy in succession.



motley, ill-sorted, extraordinary garments, as would have been irresistibly ridiculous, but for the foul appearance of dirt, disorder, and disease with which they were associated.

“ Now,” said Squeers, giving the desk a great rap with his cane, which made half the little boys nearly jump out of their boots, “ is that physicking over? ”

“ Just over!” said Mrs. Squeers, choking the last boy in her hurry, and tapping the crown of his head with the wooden spoon to restore him. “ Here, you Smike; take away now. Look sharp! ”

Smike shuffled out with the basin; and Mrs. Squeers, having called up a little boy with a curly head and wiped her hands upon it, hurried out after him into a species of wash-house, where there was a small fire and a large kettle, together with a number of little wooden bowls which were arranged upon a board.

Into these bowls, Mrs. Squeers, assisted by the hungry servant, poured a brown composition which looked like diluted pincushions without the covers, and was called porridge. A minute wedge of brown bread was inserted in each bowl; and when they had eaten their porridge by means of the bread, the boys ate the bread itself, and had finished their breakfast; whereupon Mr. Squeers said, in a solemn voice, “ For what we have received, may the Lord make us truly thankful! ” — and went away to his own.

Nicholas distended his stomach with a bowl of porridge, for much the same reason which induces some savages to swallow earth — lest they should be hungry when there is nothing to eat. Having further disposed of a slice of bread and butter, allotted to him in virtue of his office, he sat himself down to wait for school time.

He observed how silent and sad the boys all seemed to be. There was none of the noise and clamour of a schoolroom, none of its boisterous play or hearty mirth. The children sat

crouching and shivering together and seemed to lack the spirit to move about. The only pupil who evinced the slightest tendency towards locomotion or playfulness was Master Squeers; and since his chief amusement was to tread upon the other boys' toes in his new boots, his flow of spirits was rather disagreeable than otherwise.

After some half-hour's delay, Mr. Squeers reappeared, and the boys took their places and their books, of which the average might be about one to eight learners. A few minutes having elapsed, during which Mr. Squeers looked very profound, as if he had a perfect apprehension of what was inside all the books, and could say every word of their contents by heart if he only chose to take the trouble, that gentleman called up the first class.

Obedient to this summons there ranged themselves in front of the schoolmaster's desk, half a dozen scarecrows, out at knees and elbows, one of whom placed a torn and filthy book beneath his learned eye.

"This is the first class in English spelling and philosophy, Nickleby," said Squeers, beckoning Nicholas to stand beside him. "We'll get up a Latin one, and hand that over to you. Now, then, where's the first boy?"

"Please, sir, he's cleaning the back parlour window," said the temporary head of the philosophical class.

"So he is, to be sure," rejoined Squeers. "We go upon the practical mode of teaching, Nickleby; the regular education system. C-l-e-a-n, *clean*, verb active, to make bright, to scour. W-i-n, *win*, d-e-r, *der*, winder, a casement. When the boy knows this out of the book, he goes and does it. It's just the same principle as the use of the globes. Where's the second boy?"

"Please, sir, he's weeding the garden," replied a small voice.

"To be sure," said Squeers, by no means disconcerted. "So he is. B-o-t, *bot*, t-i-n, *tin*, bottin, n-e-y, *ney*, bottinney,



noun substantive, a knowledge of plants. When he has learned that bottinney means a knowledge of plants, he goes and knows 'em. That's our system, Nickleby; what do you think of it?"

"It's a very useful one, at any rate," answered Nicholas.

"I believe you," rejoined Squeers, not remarking the emphasis of his usher. "Third boy, what's a horse?"

"A beast, sir," replied the boy.

"So it is," said Squeers. "Ain't it, Nickleby?"

"I believe there is no doubt of that, sir," answered Nicholas.

"Of course there isn't," said Squeers. "A horse is a quadruped, and quadruped's Latin for beast, as everybody that's gone through the grammar knows, or else where's the use of having grammars at all?"

"Where, indeed!" said Nicholas abstractedly.

"As you're perfect in that," resumed Squeers, turning to the boy, "go and look after my horse, and rub him down well, or I'll rub you down. The rest of the class go and draw water up, till somebody tells you to leave off, for it's washing day tomorrow, and they want the boilers filled."

So saying, he dismissed the first class to their experiments in practical philosophy, and eyed Nicholas with a look, half-cunning and half-doubtful, as if he were not altogether certain what he might think of him by this time.

"That's the way we do it, Nickleby," he said, after a pause.

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders in a manner that was scarcely perceptible, and said he saw it was.

"And a very good way it is, too," said Squeers. "Now, just take them fourteen little boys and hear them some reading, because, you know, you must begin to be useful. Idling about here won't do."

Mr. Squeers said this, as if it had suddenly occurred to him, either that he must not say too much to his assistant, or that his assistant did not say enough to him in praise of the

establishment. The children were arranged in a semi-circle around the new master, and he was soon listening to their dull, drawling, hesitating recital of those stories of engrossing interest which are to be found in the more antiquated spelling books.

In this exciting occupation, the morning lagged heavily on. At one o'clock, the boys, having previously had their appetites thoroughly taken away by stir-about and potatoes, sat down in the kitchen to some hard salt beef, of which Nicholas was graciously permitted to take his portion to his own solitary desk, to eat it there in peace. After this, there was another hour of crouching in the schoolroom and shivering with cold, and then school began again.

It was Mr. Squeers's custom to call the boys together and make a sort of report, after every half-yearly visit to London, regarding the relations and friends he had seen, the news he had heard, the letters he had brought down, the bills which had been paid, the accounts which had been left unpaid, and so forth. This solemn proceeding always took place in the afternoon of the day succeeding his return; perhaps, because the boys acquired strength of mind from the suspense of the morning, or possibly, because Mr. Squeers himself acquired greater sternness and inflexibility from certain warm potations in which he was wont to indulge after his early dinner. Be this as it may, the boys were recalled from house window, garden, stable, and cow yard, and the school was assembled in full conclave, when Mr. Squeers, with a small bundle of papers in his hand, and Mrs. S. following with a pair of canes, entered the room and proclaimed silence.

"Let any boy speak a word without leave," said Mr. Squeers mildly, "and I'll take the skin off his back."

This special proclamation had the desired effect, and a deathlike silence immediately prevailed, in the midst of which Mr. Squeers went on to say:

“Boys, I’ve been to London, and have returned to my family and you, as strong and well as ever.”

According to half-yearly custom, the boys gave three feeble cheers at this refreshing intelligence. Such cheers! Sighs of extra strength with the chill on.

“I have seen the parents of some boys,” continued Squeers, turning over his papers, “and they’re so glad to hear how their sons are getting on that there’s no prospect at all of their going away, which of course is a very pleasant thing to reflect upon, for all parties.”

Two or three hands went to two or three eyes when Squeers said this, but the greater part of the young gentlemen, having no particular parents to speak of, were wholly uninterested in the thing one way or other.

“I have had disappointments to contend against,” said Squeers, looking very grim; “Bolder’s father was two pound ten short. Where is Bolder?”

“Here he is, please, sir,” rejoined twenty officious voices. Boys are very like men, to be sure.

“Come here, Bolder,” said Squeers.

An unhealthy-looking boy, with warts all over his hands, stepped from his place to the master’s desk, and raised his eyes imploringly to Squeer’s face, his own, quite white from the rapid beating of his heart.

“Bolder,” said Squeers, speaking very slowly, for he was considering, as the saying goes, where to have him. “Bolder, if your father thinks that because — why, what’s this, sir?”

As Squeers spoke, he caught up the boy’s hand by the cuff of his jacket, and surveyed it with an edifying aspect of horror and disgust.

“What do you call this, sir?” demanded the schoolmaster, administering a cut with the cane to expedite the reply.

“I can’t help it, indeed, sir,” rejoined the boy, crying.



“They will come; it’s the dirty work, I think, sir — at least I don’t know what it is, sir, but it’s not my fault.”

“Bolder,” said Squeers, tucking up his wristbands and moistening the palm of his right hand to get a good grip of the cane, “you are an incorrigible young scoundrel, and as the last thrashing did you no good, we must see what another will do towards beating it out of you.”

With this, and wholly disregarding a piteous cry for mercy, Mr. Squeers fell upon the boy and caned him soundly, not leaving off, indeed, until his arm was tired out.

“There,” said Squeers, when he had quite done; “rub away as hard as you like, you won’t rub that off in a hurry. Oh! you won’t hold that noise, won’t you? Put him out, Smike.”

The drudge knew better from long experience than to hesitate about obeying, so he bundled the victim out by a side door; and Mr. Squeers perched himself again on his own stool, supported by Mrs. Squeers, who occupied another at his side.

“Now let us see,” said Squeers, “a letter for Cobbey. Stand up, Cobbey.”

Another boy stood up and eyed the letter very hard while Squeers made a mental abstract of the same.

“Oh!” said Squeers: “Cobbey’s grandmother is dead, and his uncle John has took to drinking, which is all the news his sister sends, except eighteenpence, which will just pay for that broken square of glass. Mrs. Squeers, my dear, will you take the money?”

The worthy lady pocketed the eighteenpence with a most businesslike air, and Squeers passed on to the next boy, as coolly as possible.

“Graymarsh,” said Squeers. “He’s the next. Stand up, Graymarsh.”



Another boy stood up, and the schoolmaster looked over the letter as before.

“Graymarsh’s maternal aunt,” said Squeers, when he had possessed himself of the contents, “is very glad to hear he’s so well and happy, and sends her respectful compliments to Mrs. Squeers, and thinks she must be an angel. She likewise thinks Mr. Squeers is too good for this world, but hopes he may long be spared to carry on the business. Would have sent the two pairs of stockings as desired, but is short of money, so forwards a tract instead, and hopes Graymarsh will put his trust in Providence. Hopes, above all, that he will study in everything to please Mr. and Mrs. Squeers, and look upon them as his only friends; and that he will love Master Squeers; and not object to sleeping five in a bed, which no Christian should. Ah!” said Squeers, folding it up, “a delightful letter. Very affecting indeed.”

Squeers proceeded with the business by calling out “Mobbs,” whereupon another boy rose, and Graymarsh resumed his seat.

“Mobbs’s stepmother,” said Squeers, “took to her bed on hearing that he wouldn’t eat fat, and has been very ill ever since. She wishes to know, by an early post, where he expects to go if he quarrels with his vittles and with what feelings he could turn up his nose at the cow’s liver broth, after his good master had asked a blessing on it. This was told her in the London newspapers — not by Mr. Squeers, for he is too kind and too good to set anybody against anybody — and it has vexed her so much, Mobbs can’t think. She is sorry to find he is discontented, which is sinful and horrid, and hopes Mr. Squeers will flog him into a happier state of mind; with this view, she has also stopped his half-penny a week pocket money, and given a double-bladed knife with a corkscrew in it to the missionaries, which she had bought on purpose for him.”

“A sulky state of feeling,” said Squeers, after a terrible pause, during which he had moistened the palm of his right hand again, “won’t do. Cheerfulness and contentment must be kept up. Mobbs, come to me!”

Mobbs moved slowly towards the desk, rubbing his eyes in anticipation of good cause for doing so; and he soon afterwards retired by the side door, with as good cause as a boy need have.

Mr. Squeers then proceeded to open a miscellaneous collection of letters; some enclosing money, which Mrs. Squeers “took care of”; and others referring to small articles of apparel as caps and so forth, all of which the same lady stated to be too large or too small, and calculated for nobody but young Squeers, who would appear indeed to have had the most accommodating limbs, since everything that came into the school fitted him to a nicety. His head in particular must have been singularly elastic, for hats and caps of all dimensions were alike to him.

This business despatched, a few slovenly lessons were performed, and Squeers retired to his fireside, leaving Nicholas to take care of the boys in the schoolroom, which was very cold, and where a meal of bread and cheese was served out shortly after dark.

There was a small stove at that corner of the room which was nearest to the master’s desk, and by it Nicholas sat down, so depressed and self-degraded by the consciousness of his position that if death could have come upon him at that time he would have been almost happy to meet it. The cruelty, of which he had been an unwilling witness, the coarse and ruffianly behaviour of Squeers even in his best moods, the filthy place, the sights and sounds about him, all contributed to this state of feeling; but when he recollected that, being an assistant, he actually seemed — no matter what unhappy train of circumstances had brought him to that pass — to

be the aider and abettor of a system which filled him with honest disgust and indignation, he loathed himself and felt, for the moment, as though the mere consciousness of his present situation must, through all time to come, prevent his raising his head again.

But for the present his resolve was taken, and the resolution he had formed on the preceding night remained undisturbed. He had written to his mother and sister, announcing the safe conclusion of his journey and saying little about Dotheboys Hall, and saying that little as cheerfully as he possibly could. He hoped that by remaining where he was he might do some good, even there; at all events, others depended too much on his uncle's favour to admit of his awakening his wrath just then.

One reflection disturbed him far more than any selfish considerations arising out of his own position. This was the probable destination of his sister Kate. His uncle had deceived *him*, and might he not consign her to some miserable place where her youth and beauty would prove a far greater curse than ugliness and decrepitude? To a caged man, bound hand and foot, this was a terrible idea; — but no, he thought, his mother was by; there was the portrait painter, too — simple enough, but still living in the world, and of it. He was willing to believe that Ralph Nickleby had conceived a personal dislike to himself. Having pretty good reason, by this time, to reciprocate it, he had no great difficulty in arriving at this conclusion, and tried to persuade himself that the feeling extended no farther than between them.

As he was absorbed in these meditations, he all at once encountered the upturned face of Smike, who was on his knees before the stove, picking a few stray cinders from the hearth and planting them on the fire. He had paused to steal a look at Nicholas; and when he saw that he was observed, shrunk back, as if expecting a blow.



“ You need not fear me,” said Nicholas kindly. “ Are you cold? ”

“ N-o-o.”

“ You are shivering.”

“ I am not cold,” replied Smike. “ I am used to it.”

There was such an obvious fear of giving offense in his manner, and he was such a timid, broken-spirited creature that Nicholas could not help exclaiming, “ Poor fellow! ”

If he had struck the drudge, he would have slunk away without a word. But now he began to cry despairingly.

“ Oh dear, oh dear! ” he said, covering his face with his cracked and horny hands. “ My heart will break. It will, it will.”

“ Hush! ” said Nicholas, laying his hand upon his shoulder. “ Be a man; you are nearly one by years, God help you.”

“ By years! ” cried Smike. “ Oh dear, dear, how many of them! How many of them since I was a little child, younger than any that are here now! Where are they all? ”

“ Whom do you speak of? ” inquired Nicholas, wishing to rouse the poor half-witted creature to reason. “ Tell me.”

“ My friends,” he replied, “ myself — my — oh! what sufferings mine have been! ”

“ There is always hope,” said Nicholas; he knew not what to say.

“ No,” rejoined the other, “ no; none for me. Do you remember the boy that died here? ”

“ I was not here, you know,” said Nicholas gently; “ but what of him? ”

“ Why,” replied the youth, drawing closer to his questioner’s side, “ I was with him at night, and when it was all silent he cried no more for friends he wished to come and sit with him, but began to see faces around his bed that came from home; he said they smiled, and talked to him; and he died at last lifting his head to kiss them. Do you hear? ”



“ Yes, yes,” rejoined Nicholas.

“ What faces will smile on me when I die! ” cried his companion, shivering. “ Who will talk to me in those long nights! They cannot come from home; they would frighten me, if they did, for I don’t know what it is, and shouldn’t know them. Pain and fear, pain and fear for me, alive or dead. No hope, no hope! ”

The bell rang to bed; and the boy, subsiding at the sound into his usual listless state, crept away as if anxious to avoid notice. It was with a heavy heart that Nicholas soon afterwards followed — to his dirty and crowded dormitory.

## CHAPTER VI

WHEN Mr. Squeers left the schoolroom for the night, he went to his own fireside, which was situated — not in the room in which Nicholas had supped on the night of his arrival, but in a smaller apartment in the rear of the premises, where his lady wife, his amiable son, and accomplished daughter were in the full enjoyment of each other’s society. Mrs. Squeers was engaged in the matronly pursuit of stocking-darning; and the young lady and gentleman were occupied in the adjustment of some youthful difference, by means of a pugilistic contest across the table, which, on the approach of their honoured parent, subsided into a noiseless exchange of kicks beneath it.

In this place, it may be as well to apprise the reader, that Miss Fanny Squeers was in her three-and-twentieth year. She was not tall like her mother, but short like her father. From the former she inherited a voice of harsh quality; from the latter a remarkable expression of the right eye, something akin to having none at all.

Miss Squeers had been spending a few days with a neighbouring friend, and had only just returned to the parental roof. To this circumstance may be referred her having heard nothing of Nicholas until Mr. Squeers himself now made him the subject of conversation.

“Well, my dear,” said Squeers, drawing up his chair, “what do you think of him by this time?”

“Think of who?” inquired Mrs. Squeers; who (as she often remarked) was no grammarian, thank heaven.

“Of that young man — the new teacher — who else could I mean?”

“Oh! that Knuckleboy,” said Mrs. Squeers impatiently. “I hate him.”

“What do you hate him for, my dear?” asked Squeers.

“What’s that to you?” retorted Mrs. Squeers. “If I hate him, that’s enough, ain’t it?”

“Quite enough for him, my dear, and a great deal too much, I dare say, if he knew it,” replied Squeers in a pacific tone. “I only asked from curiosity, my dear.”

“Well, then, if you want to know, I’ll tell you. Because he’s a proud, haughty, consequential, turned-up-nosed peacock.”

“Hem!” said Squeers, “he is cheap, my dear; the young man is very cheap.”

“Not a bit of it.”

“Five pound a year.”

“What of that; it’s dear if you don’t want him, isn’t it?”

“But we do want him.”

“I don’t see that you want him any more than the dead. Don’t tell me. You can put on the cards and in the advertisements, ‘Education by Mr. Wackford Squeers and able assistants,’ without having any assistants, can’t you? I’ve no patience with you.”

“ Haven’t you! ” said Squeers, sternly. “ Now I’ll tell you what, Mrs. Squeers. In this matter of having a teacher, I’ll take my own way, if you please. A slave driver in the West Indies is allowed a man under him to see that his blacks don’t run away, or get up a rebellion; and I’ll have a man under me to do the same with our blacks, till such time as little Wackford is able to take charge of the school.”

“ Am I to take care of the school when I grow up a man, father? ” said Wackford junior, suspending, in the excess of his delight, a vicious kick which he was administering to his sister.

“ You are, my son.”

“ Oh my eye, won’t I give it to the boys! ” exclaimed the interesting child, grasping his father’s cane. “ Oh, father, won’t I make ’em squeak again! ”

It was a proud moment in Mr. Squeers’s life when he witnessed that burst of enthusiasm in his young child’s mind and saw in it a foreshadowing of his future eminence.

“ He’s a nasty stuck-up monkey — that’s what I consider him,” said Mrs. Squeers, reverting to Nicholas.

“ Supposing he is,” said Squeers, “ he is as well stuck up in our schoolroom as anywhere else, isn’t he? — especially as he don’t like it.”

“ Well, there’s something in that. I hope it’ll bring his pride down, and it shall be no fault of mine if it don’t.”

Now a proud usher in a Yorkshire school was such a very extraordinary and unaccountable thing to hear of — any usher at all being a novelty, but a proud one, a being of whose existence the wildest imagination could never have dreamed — that Miss Squeers, who seldom troubled herself with scholastic matters, inquired with much curiosity who this Knuckleboy was, that gave himself such airs.

“ Nickleby,” said Squeers, spelling the name according to some eccentric system which prevailed in his own mind;

“ your mother always calls things and people by their wrong names.”

“ No matter for that,” said Mrs. Squeers, “ I see them with right eyes, and that’s quite enough for me. I watched him when you were laying on to little Bolder, this afternoon. He looked as black as thunder all the while, and one time started up as if he had more than got it in his mind to make a rush at you, I saw him, though he thought I didn’t.”

“ Never mind that, father,” said Miss Squeers, as the head of the family was about to reply. “ Who is the man? ”

“ Why, your father has got some nonsense in his head that he’s the son of a poor gentleman that died the other day,” said Mrs. Squeers.

“ The son of a gentleman! ”

“ Yes, but I don’t believe a word of it. I say again, I hate him worse than poison,” said Mrs. Squeers, vehemently.

“ If you dislike him, my dear,” returned Squeers, “ I don’t know anybody who can show dislike better than you, and of course there’s no occasion, with him, to take the trouble to hide it.”

“ I don’t intend to, I assure you.”

“ That’s right, and if he has a touch of pride about him, as I think he has, I don’t believe there’s a woman in all England that can bring anybody’s spirit down as quick as you can, my love.”

Mrs. Squeers chuckled vastly on the receipt of these flattering compliments, and said she hoped she had tamed a high spirit or two in her day. It is but due to her character to say that, in conjunction with her estimable husband, she had broken many and many a one.

Miss Fanny Squeers carefully treasured up this, and much more conversation on the same subject, until she retired for the night, when she questioned the hungry servant minutely regarding the appearance of Nicholas; to which queries the



girl returned such enthusiastic replies, touching his beautiful dark eyes and his sweet smile and his straight legs — upon which last-named articles she laid particular stress, the general run of legs at Dotheboys Hall being crooked — that Miss Squeers was not long in arriving at the conclusion that the new usher must be a very remarkable person. And so Miss Squeers made up her mind that she would take a personal observation of Nicholas the very next day.

The young lady watched the opportunity of her mother being engaged, and her father absent, and went accidentally into the schoolroom to get a pen mended: where, seeing nobody but Nicholas presiding over the boys, she blushed very deeply, and exhibited great confusion.

“I beg your pardon,” faltered Miss Squeers; “I thought my father was — or might be — dear me, how very awkward!”

“Mr. Squeers is out,” said Nicholas, by no means overcome by the apparition, unexpected though it was.

“Do you know will he be long, sir?” asked Miss Squeers, with bashful hesitation.

“He said about an hour,” replied Nicholas — politely, of course, but without any indication of being stricken to the heart by Miss Squeers’s charms.

“I never knew anything happen so cross,” exclaimed the young lady. “Thank you! I am very sorry I intruded, I am sure. If I hadn’t thought my father was here, I wouldn’t upon any account have — it is very provoking — must look so very strange,” murmured Miss Squeers, blushing once more, and glancing from the pen in her hand to Nicholas at his desk, and back again.

“If that is all you want,” said Nicholas, pointing to the pen and smiling, in spite of himself, at the affected embarrassment of the schoolmaster’s daughter, “perhaps I can supply his place.”

Miss Squeers glanced at the door, as if dubious of the

propriety of advancing any nearer to an utter stranger; then round the schoolroom, as though in some measure reassured by the presence of forty boys; and finally sidled up to Nicholas and delivered the pen into his hand with a most winning mixture of reserve and condescension.

“Shall it be hard or a soft point?” inquired Nicholas, smiling to prevent himself from laughing outright.

“He has a beautiful smile,” thought Miss Squeers.

“Which did you say?” asked Nicholas.

“Dear me, I was thinking of something else for the moment, I declare,” replied Miss Squeers — “Oh! as soft as possible, if you please.” With which words, Miss Squeers sighed. It might be to give Nicholas to understand that her heart was soft and that the pen was wanted to match.

Upon these instructions Nicholas made the pen. When he gave it to Miss Squeers, she dropped it; and when he stooped to pick it up, Miss Squeers stooped also, and they knocked their heads together; whereat five-and-twenty little boys laughed aloud: being positively for the first and only time that half-year.

“Very awkward of me,” said Nicholas, opening the door for the young lady’s retreat.

“Not at all, sir,” replied Miss Squeers; “it was my fault. It was all my foolish — a — a — good morning!”

“Good-bye,” said Nicholas. “The next I make for you, I hope will be made less clumsily. Take care! You are biting the point off now.”

“Really,” said Miss Squeers; “so embarrassing that I scarcely know what I — very sorry to give you so much trouble.”

“Not the least trouble in the world,” replied Nicholas, closing the schoolroom door.

“I never saw such legs in the whole course of my life!” said Miss Squeers, as she walked away.

In fact, Miss Squeers was in love with Nicholas Nickleby.

To account for the rapidity with which this young lady had conceived a passion for Nicholas, it may be necessary to state that the friend from whom she had so recently returned was a miller's daughter of only eighteen who had become engaged to the son of a small corn factor,<sup>1</sup> resident in the nearest market town. Miss Squeers and the miller's daughter, being fast friends, had promised each other some two years before that whoever was first engaged to be married should straightway confide the mighty secret to the bosom of the other, before communicating it to any living soul, and bespeak her as bridesmaid without loss of time. In fulfilment of this pledge the miller's daughter, when her engagement was formed, came out express at eleven o'clock at night, as the corn factor's son made an offer of his hand and heart at twenty-five minutes past ten by the Dutch clock in the kitchen, and rushed into Miss Squeers's bedroom with the gratifying intelligence. Now Miss Squeers, being five years older, had been more than commonly anxious to return the compliment and possess her friend with a similar secret. The little interview with Nicholas had no sooner passed than Miss Squeers made her way, very rapidly, to her friend's house and revealed how that she was — not exactly engaged, but going to be — to a gentleman's son — (none of your corn factors, but a gentleman's son of high descent) — who had come down as teacher to Dotheboys Hall, under the most mysterious and remarkable circumstances — indeed, as Miss Squeers more than once hinted, she had good reason to believe, induced, by the fame of her many charms, to seek her out, and woo and win her.

“Isn't it an extraordinary thing?” said Miss Squeers, emphasizing the adjective strongly.

“Most extraordinary,” replied the friend. “But what has he said to you?”

<sup>1</sup> Grain dealer.



“Don't ask me what he said, my dear,” rejoined Miss Squeers. “If you had only seen his looks and smiles! I never was so overcome in all my life.”

“How I should like to see him!” exclaimed the friend.

“So you shall, 'Tilda,” replied Miss Squeers. “I should consider myself one of the most ungrateful creatures alive if I denied you. I think mother's going away for two days to fetch some boys; and when she does, I'll ask you and John up to tea and have him to meet you.”

This was a charming idea, and having fully discussed it, the friends parted.

It so fell out that Mrs. Squeers's journey to some distance was fixed that very afternoon, for the next day but one.

Whenever such opportunities as these occurred, it was Squeers's custom to drive over to the market town every evening, on pretense of urgent business, and stop till ten or eleven o'clock at a tavern he much affected. As the party was not in his way, therefore, but rather afforded a means of compromise with Miss Squeers (she would not tell her mother that he went to the tavern), he readily yielded his full assent hereunto, and willingly communicated to Nicholas that he was expected to take his tea in the parlour that evening at five o'clock.

Miss Squeers was in a desperate flutter as the time approached and dressed out to best advantage; with her hair — it had more than a tinge of red, — curled in five distinct rows, up to the very top of her head, to say nothing of the blue sash which floated down her back, or the worked apron, or the long gloves, or the green gauze scarf, worn over one shoulder and under the other; or any of the numerous devices which were to be as so many arrows to the heart of Nicholas. She had scarcely completed these arrangements when the friend arrived with a whitey-brown parcel — flat and three-cornered — containing sundry small adornments



which were to be put on upstairs, and which the friend put on, talking incessantly. When Miss Squeers had "done" the friend's hair, the friend "did" Miss Squeers's hair, throwing in some striking improvements in the way of ringlets down the neck; and then, when they were both touched up to their entire satisfaction, they went downstairs in full state with the long gloves on, all ready for company.

"Where's John, Tilda?" said Miss Squeers.

"Only gone home to clean himself," replied the friend. "He will be here by the time the tea's drawn."

"I do so palpitate," observed Miss Squeers.

"Ah! I know what it is," replied the friend.

"I have not been used to it, you know, 'Tilda," said Miss Squeers, applying her hand to the left side of her sash.

"You'll soon get the better of it, dear," rejoined the friend. While they were talking thus, the hungry servant brought in the tea things, and soon afterwards somebody tapped at the room door.

"There he is!" cried Miss Squeers. "Oh 'Tilda!"

"Hush!" said 'Tilda. "Hem! Say 'come in.'"

"Come in," cried Miss Squeers faintly. And in walked Nicholas.

"Good evening," said that young gentleman, all unconscious of his conquest. "I understood from Mr. Squeers that ——"

"Oh; it's all right," interposed Miss Squeers. "Father don't tea with us, but you won't mind that, I dare say." (This was said archly.)

Nicholas opened his eyes at this, but he turned the matter off very coolly — not caring, particularly, about anything just then — and went through the ceremony of introduction to the miller's daughter with so much grace that that young lady was lost in admiration.

"We are only waiting for one more gentleman," said Miss

Squeers, taking off the teapot lid and looking in to see how the tea was getting on.

It was matter of equal moment to Nicholas whether they were waiting for one gentleman or twenty, so he received the intelligence with perfect unconcern; and being out of spirits and not seeing any especial reason why he should make himself agreeable, looked out of the window and sighed involuntarily.

As luck would have it, Miss Squeers's friend was of a playful turn, and hearing Nicholas sigh, she took it into her head to rally the lovers on their lowness of spirits.

"But if it's caused by my being here," said the young lady, "don't mind me a bit, for I'm quite as bad. You may go on just as you would if you were alone."

"Tilda," said Miss Squeers, colouring up to the top row of curls, "I am ashamed of you"; and here the two friends burst into a variety of giggles and glanced, from time to time, over the tops of their pocket handkerchiefs at Nicholas, who from a state of unmixed astonishment gradually fell into one of irrepressible laughter—occasioned partly by the bare notion of his being in love with Miss Squeers, and partly by the preposterous appearance and behaviour of the two girls. These two causes of merriment, taken together, struck him as being so keenly ridiculous that, despite his miserable condition, he laughed till he was thoroughly exhausted.

"Well," thought Nicholas, "as I am here and seem expected, for some reason or other, to be amiable, it's of no use looking like a goose. I may as well accommodate myself to the company."

His youthful spirits and vivacity getting, for a time; the better of his sad thoughts, he no sooner formed this resolution than he saluted Miss Squeers and the friend with great gallantry, and drawing a chair to the tea table, began to make himself at home.

The ladies were in the full delight of this altered behaviour on the part of Mr. Nickleby when the expected swain arrived, with his hair very damp from recent washing and a clean shirt, whereof the collar might have belonged to some giant ancestor.

“Well, John,” said Miss Matilda Price (which, by the by, was the name of the miller’s daughter).

“Weel,” said John with a grin that even the collar could not conceal.

“I beg your pardon,” interposed Miss Squeers, hastening to do the honours, “Mr. Nickleby — Mr. John Browdie.”

“Servant, sir,” said John, who was something over six feet high.

“Yours to command, sir,” replied Nicholas, making fearful ravages on the bread and butter.

Mr. Browdie was not a gentleman of great conversational powers, so he grinned twice more, and having now bestowed his customary mark of recognition on every person in company, grinned at nothing in particular, and helped himself to food.

“Old wooman awa’, bean’t she?” said Mr. Browdie, with his mouth full.

Miss Squeers nodded assent.

Mr. Browdie gave a grin of special width, as if he thought that really was something to laugh at, and went to work at the bread and butter with increased vigour. It was quite a sight to behold how he and Nicholas emptied the plate between them.

“Ye wean’t get bread and butther ev’ery neight, I expect, mun,” said Mr. Browdie, after he had sat staring at Nicholas a long time over the empty plate.

Nicholas bit his lip and coloured, but affected not to hear the remark.

“Ecod,” said Mr. Browdie, laughing boisterously, “they



dean't put too much intiv'em. Ye'll be nowt but skeen and boans if you stop here long eneaf. Ho! ho! ho!"

"You are facetious, sir," said Nicholas, scornfully.

"Na; I dean't know," replied Mr. Browdie, "but t'ooother teacher, 'cod he wur a learn 'un, he wur." The recollection of the last teacher's leanness seemed to afford Mr. Browdie the most exquisite delight, for he laughed until he found it necessary to apply his coat cuffs to his eyes.

"I don't know whether your perceptions are quite keen enough, Mr. Browdie, to enable you to understand that your remarks are offensive," said Nicholas in a towering passion, "but if they are, have the goodness to ——"

"If you say another word, John," shrieked Miss Price, stopping her admirer's mouth as he was about to interrupt, "only half a word, I'll never forgive you, or speak to you again."

"Weel, my lass, I dean't care about 'un," said the corn factor, bestowing a hearty kiss on Miss Matilda; "let 'un gang on, let 'un gang on."

It now became Miss Squeers's turn to intercede with Nicholas, which she did with many symptoms of alarm and horror; the effect of the double intercession was that he and John Browdie shook hands across the table with much gravity, and such was the imposing nature of the ceremonial that Miss Squeers was overcome and shed tears.

"What's the matter, Fanny?" said Miss Price.

"Nothing, 'Tilda," replied Miss Squeers, sobbing.

"There never was any danger," said Miss Price, "was there, Mr. Nickleby?"

"None at all," replied Nicholas. "Absurd."

"That's right," whispered Miss Price, "say something kind to her, and she'll soon come round. Here! Shall John and I go into the little kitchen and come back presently?"

"Not on any account," rejoined Nicholas, quite alarmed



at the proposition. "What on earth should you do that for?"

"Well," said Miss Price, beckoning him aside, and speaking with some degree of contempt — "you *are* a one to keep company."

"What do you mean? I am not a one to keep company at all — here at all events. I can't make this out."

"No, nor I neither," rejoined Miss Price; "but men are always fickle, and always were, and always will be; that I can make out very easily."

"Fickle!" cried Nicholas; "what do you suppose? You don't mean to say that you think ——"

"Oh no, I think nothing at all," retorted Miss Price, pettishly. "Look at her, dressed so beautiful and looking so well — and really almost handsome. I am ashamed of you."

"My dear girl, what have I got to do with her dressing beautifully or looking well?"

"Come, don't call me a dear girl," said Miss Price — smiling a little though, for she was pretty, and a coquette too in her small way, and Nicholas was good-looking, and she supposed him the property of somebody else, which were all reasons why she should be gratified to think she had made an impression on him — "or Fanny will be saying it's my fault. Come, we're going to have a game at cards." Pronouncing these last words aloud, she tripped away and rejoined the big Yorkshireman.

"There are only four of us, 'Tilda," said Miss Squeers, looking slyly at Nicholas; "so we had better go partners, two against two."

"What do you say, Mr. Nickleby?" inquired Miss Price.

"With all the pleasure in life." And so saying, quite unconscious of his heinous offence, he amalgamated into one common heap those portions of a Dotheboys Hall card of

terms, which represented his own counters, and those allotted to Miss Price, respectively, making her his partner.

“Mr. Browdie,” said Miss Squeers hysterically, “shall we make a bank against them?”

The Yorkshireman assented — apparently quite overwhelmed by the new usher’s impudence — and Miss Squeers darted a spiteful look at her friend and giggled convulsively.

The deal fell to Nicholas, and the hand prospered.

“We intend to win everything,” said he.

“Tilda has won something she didn’t expect, I think, haven’t you, dear?” said Miss Squeers, maliciously.

“Only a dozen and eight, love,” replied Miss Price, affecting to take the question in a literal sense.

“How dull you are tonight!” sneered Miss Squeers.

“No, indeed,” replied Miss Price, “I am in excellent spirits. I was thinking you seemed out of sorts.”

“Me!” cried Miss Squeers, biting her lips, and trembling with very jealousy; “Oh no!”

“That’s well,” remarked Miss Price. “Your hair’s coming out of curl, dear.”

“Never mind me,” tittered Miss Squeers; “you had better attend to your partner.”

“Thank you for reminding her,” said Nicholas. “So she had.” The Yorkshireman flattened his nose, once or twice, with his clenched fist, as if to keep his hand in till he had an opportunity of exercising it upon the features of some other gentleman; and Miss Squeers tossed her head with such indignation that the gust of wind raised by the multitudinous curls in motion nearly blew the candle out.

“I never had such luck, really,” exclaimed coquettish Miss Price, after another hand or two. “It’s all along of you, Mr. Nickleby, I think. I should like to have you for a partner always.”

“I wish you had.”

“You’ll have a bad wife, though, if you always win at cards,” said Miss Price.

“Not if your wish is gratified,” replied Nicholas. “I am sure I shall have a good one in that case.”

To see how Miss Squeers tossed her head and the corn factor flattened his nose while this conversation was carrying on! It would have been worth a small annuity to have beheld that; let alone Miss Price’s evident joy at making them jealous and Nicholas Nickleby’s happy unconsciousness of making anybody uncomfortable.

“We have all the talking to ourselves, it seems,” said Nicholas, looking good-humouredly round the table, as he took up the cards for a fresh deal.

“You do it so well,” tittered Miss Squeers, “that it would be a pity to interrupt, wouldn’t it, Mr. Browdie! He, he, he!”

“No,” said Nicholas, “we do it in default of having anybody else to talk to.”

“We’ll talk to you, you know, if you’ll say anything,” said Miss Price.

“Thank you, Tilda, dear,” retorted Miss Squeers, majestically.

“Or you can talk to each other, if you don’t choose to talk to us,” said Miss Price, rallying her dear friend. “John, why don’t you say something?”

“Say summat?” repeated the Yorkshireman.

“Ay, and not sit there so silent and glum.”

“Weel, then!” said the Yorkshireman, striking the table with his fist, “what I say’s this: Dang my boans and boddy, if I stan’ this ony longer. Do ye gang whōam wi’ me, and do yon loight an’ toight young whipster look sharp out for a brokken head next time he comes under my hond.”

“Mercy on us, what’s all this?” cried Miss Price, in affected astonishment.



“Cum whoam, tell 'e, cum whoam,” replied the Yorkshireman, sternly. And as he delivered the reply, Miss Squeers burst into a shower of tears, arising in part from desperate vexation and in part from an impotent desire to lacerate somebody's countenance with her fair finger nails.

“Why, and here's Fanny in tears now!” exclaimed Miss Price, as if in fresh amazement. “What can be the matter?”

“Oh! you don't know, miss, of course you don't know. Pray don't trouble yourself to inquire,” said Miss Squeers, producing that change of countenance which children call making a face.

“Well, I'm sure!” exclaimed Miss Price.

“And who cares whether you are sure or not, ma'am?” retorted Miss Squeers, making another face.

“You needn't take the trouble to make yourself plainer than you are, ma'am, however,” rejoined Miss Price, “because that's quite unnecessary.”

Miss Squeers, in reply, turned very red and thanked God that she hadn't got the bold faces of some people. Miss Price, in rejoinder, congratulated herself upon not being possessed of the envious feeling of other people, whereupon Miss Squeers made some general remark touching the danger of associating with low persons, in which Miss Price entirely coincided, observing that it was very true indeed and she had thought so for a long time. “Tilda,” exclaimed Miss Squeers with dignity, “I hate you.”

“Ah! There's no love lost between us, I assure you,” said Miss Price, tying her bonnet strings with a jerk. “You'll cry your eyes out when I'm gone; you know you will.”

“I scorn your words, minx.”

“You pay me a great compliment when you say so,” answered the miller's daughter, curtsying very low. “Wish you a very good night, ma'am, and pleasant dreams attend your sleep!”



With this parting-benediction Miss Price swept from the room, followed by the huge Yorkshireman, who exchanged with Nicholas, at parting, that expressive scowl with which the cut-and-thrust counts, in melodramatic performances, inform each other *they will meet again*.

They were no sooner gone than Miss Squeers fulfilled the prediction of her friend by giving vent to a most copious burst of tears. Nicholas stood looking on for a few seconds, rather doubtful what to do, but feeling uncertain whether the fit would end in his being embraced or scratched, and considering that either infliction would be equally agreeable, he walked off very quietly while Miss Squeers was moaning in her pocket handkerchief.

“This is one consequence,” thought Nicholas, when he had groped his way to the dark sleeping room, “of my cursed readiness to adapt myself to any society in which chance carried me. If I had sat mute and motionless, as I might have done, this would not have happened.”

He listened for a few minutes, but all was quiet.

“I was glad,” he murmured, “to grasp at any relief from the sight of this dreadful place, or the presence of its vile master. Now I have set these people by the ears and made two new enemies, where, heaven knows, I needed none. Well, it is a just punishment for having forgotten, even for an hour, what is around me here!”

So saying, he felt his way among the throng of weary-hearted sleepers, and crept into his poor bed.

## CHAPTER VII

ON the second morning after the departure of Nicholas for Yorkshire, Kate Nickleby sat in a very faded chair raised upon a very dusty throne in Miss La Creevy's room, giving that lady a sitting for the portrait upon which she was engaged.

"And when," said Miss La Creevy, "do you expect to see your uncle again?"

"I scarcely know; I had expected to have seen him before now. Soon, I hope, for this state of uncertainty is worse than anything."

"I suppose he has money, hasn't he?"

"He is very rich, I have heard. I don't know that he is, but I believe so."

"Ah, you may depend upon it he is, or he wouldn't be so surly," remarked Miss La Creevy. "When a man's a bear, he is generally pretty independent."

"His manner is rough," said Kate.

"Rough!" cried Miss La Creevy, "a porcupine's a feather bed to him! I never met with such a cross-grained old savage."

"It is only his manner, I believe," observed Kate, timidly; "he was disappointed in early life, I think I have heard, or has had his temper soured by some calamity. I should be sorry to think ill of him until I knew he deserved it."

"Well, that's very right and proper," observed the miniature painter, "and heaven forbid that I should be the cause of your doing so! But now, mightn't he, without feeling it

himself, make you and your mama some nice little allowance that would keep you both comfortable until you were well married, and be a little fortune to her afterwards? What would a hundred a year, for instance, be to him?"

"I don't know what it would be to him," said Kate, with energy, "but it would be that to me I would rather die than take."

"Heyday!" cried Miss La Creevy.

"A dependence upon him would embitter my whole life. I should feel begging a far less degradation."

"Well!" exclaimed Miss La Creevy. "This of a relation whom you will not hear an indifferent person speak ill of, my dear, sounds oddly enough, I confess."

"I dare say it does," replied Kate, speaking more gently, "indeed I am sure it must. I—I—only mean that with the feelings and recollection of better times upon me, I could not bear to live on anybody's bounty — not his particularly, but anybody's."

Miss La Creevy looked slyly at her companion, as if she doubted whether Ralph himself were not the subject of dislike, but seeing that her young friend was distressed, made no remark.

"I only ask of him," continued Kate, whose tears fell while she spoke, "that he will move so little out of his way in my behalf as to enable me by his recommendation — only by his recommendation — to earn, literally, my bread and remain with my mother. Whether we shall ever be happy again depends upon the fortunes of my dear brother; but if my uncle will get me something to do, and Nicholas only tells us that he is well and cheerful, I shall be contented."

As she ceased to speak, there was a rustling behind the screen which stood between her and the door, and some person knocked at the wainscot.

"Come in, whoever it is!" cried Miss La Creevy.

The person complied, and, coming forward at once, gave to view the form and features of Mr. Ralph Nickleby.

“Your servant, ladies,” said Ralph, looking sharply at them by turns. “You were talking so loud that I was unable to make you hear. I called in, on my way upstairs, more than half expecting to find you here. Is that my niece’s portrait, ma’am?”

“Yes, it is, Mr. Nickleby,” said Miss La Creevy, with a very sprightly air, “and between you and me and the post, sir, it will be a very nice portrait, too, though I say it who am the painter.”

“Don’t trouble yourself to show it to me, ma’am,” cried Ralph, moving away, “I have no eye for likenesses. Is it nearly finished?”

“Why, yes,” replied Miss La Creevy, considering with the pencil end of her brush in her mouth. “Two more sittings will ——”

“Have them at once, ma’am. She’ll have no time to idle over fooleries after tomorrow. Work, ma’am, work; we must all work. Have you let your lodgings, ma’am?”

“I have not put a bill up yet, sir.”

“Put it up at once, ma’am; they won’t want the rooms after this week, or if they do, can’t pay for them. Now, my dear, if you’re ready, we’ll lose no more time.”

With an assumption of kindness which sat worse upon him even than his usual manner, Mr. Ralph Nickleby motioned to the young lady to precede him, and bowing gravely to Miss La Creevy, closed the door and followed upstairs, where Mrs. Nickleby received him with many expressions of regard. Stopping them somewhat abruptly, Ralph waved his hand with an impatient gesture, and proceeded to the object of his visit.

“I have found a situation for your daughter, ma’am.”

“Well,” replied Mrs. Nickleby. “Now, I will say that



that is only just what I have expected of you. 'Depend upon it,' I said to Kate only yesterday morning at breakfast, 'your uncle has provided, in a most ready manner, for Nicholas, and he will not leave us until he has done at least the same for you.' These were my very words, as near as I remember. Kate, my dear, why don't you thank your——"

"Let me proceed, ma'am, pray," said Ralph, interrupting his sister-in-law in the full torrent of her discourse. "The situation that I procured is with — with a milliner and dressmaker, in short."

"A milliner!" cried Mrs. Nickleby.

"A milliner and dressmaker, ma'am," replied Ralph. "Dressmakers in London, as I need not remind you, ma'am, make large fortunes." Here he proceeded to explain the great advantages of such work.

Now the first ideas called up in Mrs. Nickleby's mind by the words "milliner" and "dressmaker" were connected with certain wicker baskets lined with black oilskin which she remembered to have seen carried to and fro in the streets; but as Ralph proceeded with his description these disappeared, and were replaced by visions of large houses at the West End, neat private carriages, and a banker's book; all of which images succeeded each other with such rapidity that he had no sooner finished speaking than she nodded her head and said "Very true," with great appearance of satisfaction.

"What your uncle says is very true, Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby. "I recollect when your poor papa and I came to town after we were married that a young lady brought me home a chip cottage-bonnet with white and green trimmings and green persian lining, in her own carriage, which drove up to the door full gallop; at least, I am not quite certain whether it was her own carriage or a hackney chariot, but I remember very well that the horse

dropped down dead as he was turning round and that your poor papa said he hadn't had any corn for a fortnight."

This anecdote was not received with any great demonstration of feeling, inasmuch as Kate hung down her head while it was relating, and Ralph manifested very intelligible symptoms of extreme impatience.

"The lady's name," said Ralph, hastily striking in, "is Mantalini — Madame Mantalini. I know her. She lives near Cavendish Square. If your daughter is disposed to try after the situation, I'll take her there directly."

"Have you nothing to say to your uncle, my love?"

"A great deal, but not now. I would rather speak to him when we are alone; — it will save his time if I thank him and say what I wish to say to him, as we walk along."

With these words, Kate hurried away, to hide the traces of emotion that were stealing down her face and to prepare herself for the walk, while Mrs. Nickleby amused her brother-in-law by giving him, with many tears, a detailed account of the dimensions of a rosewood cabinet piano they had possessed in their days of affluence, together with a minute description of eight drawing-room chairs, with turned legs and green chintz seats to match the curtains, which had cost two pounds fifteen shillings apiece and had gone at the sale for a mere nothing.

These reminiscences were at length cut short by Kate's return in her walking dress, when Ralph, who had been fretting and fuming during the whole time of her absence, lost no time and used very little ceremony in descending into the street.

"Now walk as fast as you can, and you'll get into the step that you'll have to walk to business with every morning." So saying, he led Kate off at a good round pace.

"I am very much obliged to you, uncle," said the young lady, after they had hurried on in silence for some time, "very."

"I'm glad to hear it; I hope you'll do your duty."

"Uncle," said Kate, when she judged they must be near their destination, "I must ask one question of you. I am to live at home?"

"At home! Where's that?"

"I mean with my mother — the widow."

"You will live, to all intents and purposes, here, for here you will take your meals, and here you will be from morning till night — occasionally, perhaps, till morning again."

"But at night, I mean," said Kate; "I cannot leave her, uncle. I must have some place that I can call a home; it will be wherever she is, you know, and may be a very humble one."

"May be!" said Ralph, walking faster, in the impatience provoked by the remark, "must be, you mean. May be a humble one! Is the girl crazy?"

"The word slipped from my lips; I did not mean it indeed."

"I hope not."

"But my question, uncle; you have not answered it."

"Why, I anticipated something of the kind," said Ralph; "and — though I object very strongly, mind — have provided against it. I spoke of you as an out-of-door worker; so you will go to this home, that *may* be humble, every night."

There was comfort in this. Kate poured forth many thanks for her uncle's consideration, which Ralph received as if he had deserved them all. They arrived without any further conversation at the dressmaker's door, which displayed a very large plate, with Madame Mantalini's name and occupation, and was approached by a handsome flight of steps.

A liveried footman opened the door and, in reply to Ralph's inquiry whether Madame Mantalini was at home, ushered them through a handsome hall and up a spacious



staircase into a large show room which comprised two spacious drawing-rooms. Here was exhibited an immense variety of superb dresses and materials for dresses; some arranged on stands, others laid carelessly on sofas, and others again scattered over the carpet, hanging on the cheval glasses, or mingling, in some other way, with the rich furniture of various descriptions which was profusely displayed.

They waited a much longer time than was agreeable to Mr. Ralph Nickleby, who eyed the gaudy frippery about him with very little concern, and was at length about to pull the bell when a gentleman suddenly popped his head into the room and, seeing somebody there, as suddenly popped it out again.

“Here. Hollo!” cried Ralph. “Who’s that?”

At the sound of Ralph’s voice, the head reappeared, and the mouth, displaying a very long row of very white teeth, uttered in a mincing tone the words, “Demmit. What, Nickleby! oh, demmit!” Having uttered these ejaculations, the gentleman advanced and shook hands with Ralph, with great warmth. He was dressed in a gorgeous morning gown, with a waistcoat and Turkish trousers of the same pattern, a pink silk neckerchief, and bright green slippers, and had a very copious watch chain wound round his body. Moreover, he had whiskers and a moustache, both dyed black and gracefully curled.

“Demmit, you don’t mean to say you want me, do you, demmit?” said this gentleman, smiting Ralph on the shoulder.

“Not yet,” said Ralph, sarcastically.

“Ha! ha! demmit,” cried the gentleman; when, wheeling round to laugh with greater elegance, he encountered Kate Nickleby, who was standing near.

“My niece,” said Ralph.

“I remember,” said the gentleman, striking his nose with the knuckle of his forefinger as a chastening for his forget-



fulness. "Demmit, I remember what you come for. Step this way, Nickleby. My dear, will you follow me? Ha! ha! They all follow me, Nickleby; always did, demmit, always."

Giving loose to the playfulness of his imagination after this fashion, the gentleman led the way to a private sitting room on the second floor, scarcely less elegantly furnished than the apartment below, where the presence of a silver coffee pot, an egg shell, and sloppy china for one seemed to show that he had just breakfasted.

"Sit down, my dear," said the gentleman, first staring Miss Nickleby out of countenance, and then grinning in delight at the achievement. "This cursed high room takes one's breath away. These infernal sky parlours — I'm afraid I must move, Nickleby."

"I would, by all means," replied Ralph, looking bitterly round.

"What a demd rum fellow you are, Nickleby," said the gentleman, "the demdest, longest-headed, queerest-tempered, old coiner of gold and silver ever was — demmit."

Having complimented Ralph to this effect, the gentleman rang the bell and stared at Miss Nickleby until it was answered, when he left off to bid the man desire his mistress to come directly, after which he began staring again, and left off no more until Madame Mantalini appeared.

The dressmaker was a buxom person, handsomely dressed and rather good-looking, but much older than the gentleman in the Turkish trousers, whom she had wedded some six months before. His name was originally Muntle; but it had been converted, by an easy transition, into Mantalini, the lady rightly considering that an English name would be of serious injury to the business. Her husband's share in the business consisted of spending the money and, occasionally, when that ran short, driving to Mr. Ralph Nickleby to procure discount — at a percentage — for the customers' bills.



“Just so, Mr. Nickleby,” said Madame Mantalini. “Can you speak French, child?”



"My life," said Mr. Mantalini, "what a demd devil of a time you have been!"

"I didn't even know Mr. Nickleby was here, my love," said Madame Mantalini.

"Then what a doubly demd infernal rascal that footman must be, my soul," remonstrated Mr. Mantalini.

"My dear," said madame, "that is entirely your fault."

"*My* fault, my heart's joy?"

"Certainly," returned the lady; "what can you expect, dearest, if you will not correct the man?"

"Correct the man, my soul's delight!"

"Yes, I am sure he wants speaking to badly enough," said Madame, pouting.

"Then do not vex itself," said Mr. Mantalini; "he shall be horse-whipped till he cries out demnebly." With this promise Mr. Mantalini kissed Madame Mantalini, and after that performance, Madame Mantalini pulled Mr. Mantalini playfully by the ear: which done, they descended to business.

"Now, ma'am," said Ralph, who had looked on at all this, with such scorn as few men can express in their looks, "this is my niece."

"Just so, Mr. Nickleby," replied Madame Mantalini, surveying Kate from head to foot and back again. "Can you speak French, child?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied Kate, not daring to look up; for she felt that the eyes of the odious man in the dressing gown were directed towards her.

"Like a demd native?" asked the husband.

Miss Nickleby offered no reply to this inquiry, but turned her back upon the questioner, as if addressing herself to make answer to what his wife might demand.

"We keep twenty young women constantly employed in the establishment," said madame.

"Indeed, ma'am," replied Kate, timidly.

“Yes, and some of ’em demd handsome, too,” said the master.

“Mantalini!” exclaimed his wife, in an awful voice.

“My senses’ idol,” said Mantalini.

“Do you wish to break my heart?”

“Not for twenty thousand hemispheres populated with — with — with little ballet dancers,” replied Mantalini in a poetical strain.

“Then you will, if you persevere in that mode of speaking,” said his wife. “What can Mr. Nickleby think when he hears you?”

“Oh! Nothing, ma’am, nothing,” replied Ralph. “I know his amiable nature, and yours.”

“You will pay no attention, if you please, to what Mr. Mantalini says,” observed his wife, addressing Miss Nickleby.

“I do not, ma’am,” said Kate, with quiet contempt.

“Mr. Mantalini knows nothing whatever about any of the young women,” continued madame, looking at her husband, and speaking to Kate. “If he has seen any of them, he must have seen them in the street, going to or returning from their work, and not here. He was never even in the room. I do not allow it. What hours of work have you been accustomed to?”

“I have never yet been accustomed to work at all, ma’am,” replied Kate, in a low voice.

“For which reason she’ll work all the better now,” said Ralph, putting in a word, lest this confession should injure the negotiation.

“I hope so,” returned Madame Mantalini; “our hours are from nine to nine, with extra work when we’re very full of business, for which I allow payment as overtime.”

Kate bowed her head to intimate that she heard and was satisfied.

“Your meals,” continued Madame Mantalini, “that is,



dinner and tea, you will take here. I should think your wages would average from five to seven shillings a week; but I can't give you any certain information on that point, until I see what you can do."

Kate bowed her head again.

"If you're ready to come," said Madame Mantalini, "you had better begin on Monday morning at nine exactly, and Miss Knag the forewoman shall then have directions to try you with some easy work at first. Is there anything more, Mr. Nickleby?"

"Nothing more, ma'am," replied Ralph, rising.

"Then I believe that's all," said the lady. Having arrived at this natural conclusion, she looked at the door, as if she wished to be gone, but hesitated notwithstanding, as though unwilling to leave Mr. Mantalini the honor of showing them downstairs. Ralph relieved her of her perplexity by taking his departure without delay, Madame Mantalini making many gracious inquiries why he never came to see them, and Mr. Mantalini cursing the stairs with great volubility as he followed them down in the hope of inducing Kate to look round — a hope which was not gratified.

"There!" said Ralph, when they were in the street, "now you're provided for." Kate was about to thank him again, but he stopped her.

"I had some idea of providing for your mother in a pleasant part of the country — he was thinking about some poor-house, — but as you want to be together, I must do something else for her. She has a little money?"

"A very little."

"A little will go a long way if it's used sparingly. She must see how long she can make it last, living rent free. You leave your lodgings on Saturday?"

"You told us to do so, uncle."

"Yes, there is a house empty that belongs to me, which I

can put you into till it is let; and then, if nothing else turns up, perhaps I shall have another. You must live there."

"Is it far from here?"

"Pretty well, in another quarter of the town — at the East End, but I'll send my clerk to you at five o'clock on Saturday to take you there. Good bye. You know your way? Straight on."

Miss Nickleby's reflections as she went home and afterwards were of that desponding nature which the occurrences of the morning had awakened. Her uncle's was not a manner likely to dispel any doubts or apprehensions she might have formed; neither was the glimpse she had had of Madame Mantalini's establishment by any means encouraging. It was with many gloomy forebodings and misgivings; therefore, that she looked forward with a heavy heart to the opening of her new career.

"I shall be sorry — truly sorry to leave you, my kind friend," said Kate to the miniature painter.

"You shall not shake me off, for all that," replied Miss La Creevy, with as much sprightliness as she could assume. "I shall see you very often and come and hear how you get on; and if in all London or all the wide world besides there is no other heart that takes an interest in your welfare, there will be one little lonely woman that prays for it night and day."

With this, the poor soul, who had a heart big enough for the guardian genius of London, after making a great many extraordinary faces which would have secured her an ample fortune, could she have transferred them to ivory or canvas, sat down in a corner, and had what she termed "a real good cry."

But no crying, or talking, or hoping, or fearing could keep off that dreaded Saturday afternoon, or Newman Noggs either, who, punctual to his time, limped up to the door,

exactly as the church clock in the neighbourhood struck five. Newman waited for the last stroke and then knocked.

"From Mr. Ralph Nickleby," said Newman, announcing his errand, when he got upstairs.

"We shall be ready directly," said Kate. "We have not much to carry, but I fear we must have a coach."

"I'll get one," replied Newman.

"Indeed you shall not trouble yourself," said Mrs. Nickleby.

"I will," said Newman.

"I can't suffer you to think of such a thing," said Mrs. Nickleby.

"You can't help it," said Newman.

"Not help it!"

"No; I thought of it as I came along; but didn't get one, thinking you mightn't be ready. I think of a great many things. Nobody can prevent that."

"Oh yes, I understand you, Mr. Noggs," said Mrs. Nickleby. "Our thoughts are free, of course. Everybody's thoughts are their own, clearly."

"They wouldn't be if some people had their way," muttered Newman.

"Well, no more they would, Mr. Noggs, and that's very true," rejoined Mrs. Nickleby. "Some people to be sure are such — How's your master?"

Newman darted a meaning glance at Kate and replied with a strong emphasis on the last word of his answer that Mr. Ralph Nickleby was well and sent his love.

"I am sure we are very much obliged to him," observed Mrs. Nickleby.

"Very," said Newman. "I'll tell him so."

They went into the City, turning down by the riverside. After a long and very slow drive, the streets being crowded at that hour with vehicles of every kind, they stopped in



front of a large old dingy house, the door and windows of which were so bespattered with mud that it looked as if it had been uninhabited for years.

The door of this deserted mansion Newman opened with a key which he took out of his hat—in which, by the by, in consequence of the dilapidated state of his pockets, he deposited everything, and would most likely have carried his money if he had had any. The coach being discharged, he led the way into the interior of the mansion.

Old and gloomy and black it was, and sullen and dark were the rooms, once so bustling with life and enterprise. There was a wharf behind, opening on the Thames. An empty dog kennel, some bones of animals, fragments of iron hoops, and staves of old casks lay strewn about, but no life was stirring there. It was a picture of cold, silent decay.

“This house depresses and chills one,” said Kate, “and seems as if some blight had fallen on it. If I were superstitious, I should be almost inclined to believe that some dreadful crime had been perpetrated within these old walls and that the place had never prospered since. How frowning and how dark it looks!”

“Lord, my dear,” replied Mrs. Nickleby, “don’t talk in that way, or you’ll frighten me to death.”

“It is only my foolish fancy, mama,” said Kate, forcing a smile.

“Well, then, my love, I wish you would keep your foolish fancy to yourself and not wake up my foolish fancy to keep it company. Why didn’t you think of all this before? You are so careless. We might have asked Miss La Creevy to keep us company or borrowed a dog, or a thousand things—but it always was the way, and was just the same with your poor dear father. Unless I thought of everything——” This was Mrs. Nickleby’s usual commencement of a general lamentation, running through a dozen or so of complicated



sentences addressed to nobody in particular and into which she now launched until her breath was exhausted.

Newman appeared not to hear these remarks, but preceded them to a couple of rooms on the first floor. Some kind of attempt had been made to render these habitable. In one were a few chairs, a table, an old hearth rug, and some faded draperies. A fire was ready laid in the grate. In the other stood an old tent bedstead and a few scanty articles of bedroom furniture.

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, trying to be pleased, "now isn't this thoughtful and considerate of your uncle? Why, we should not have had anything but the bed we bought yesterday to lie down upon, if it hadn't been for his thoughtfulness!"

"Very kind, indeed," replied Kate, looking round.

Newman Noggs did not say that he had hunted up the old furniture they saw, from attic and cellar, or that he had taken in the halfpennyworth of milk for tea that stood upon a shelf, or filled the rusty kettle on the hob, or collected the wood chips from the wharf, or begged the coals. But the notion of Ralph Nickleby having directed it to be done tickled his fancy so much that he could not refrain from cracking all his ten fingers in succession, at which performance Mrs. Nickleby was rather startled.

"We need detain you no longer, I think," said Kate.

"Is there nothing I can do?" asked Newman.

"Nothing, thank you," rejoined Miss Nickleby.

"Perhaps, my dear, Mr. Noggs would like to drink our healths," said Mrs. Nickleby, fumbling in her bag for some small coin.

"I think, mama," said Kate, hesitating, and remarking Newman's averted face, "you would hurt his feelings if you offered it."

Newman Noggs, bowing to the young lady more like a

gentleman than the miserable wretch he seemed, placed his hand upon his breast and, pausing for a moment, with the air of a man who struggles to speak but is uncertain what to say, quitted the room.

As the jarring echoes of the heavy house door, closing on its latch, reverberated dismally through the building, Kate felt half tempted to call him back and beg him to remain a little while; but she was ashamed to own her fears, and Newman Noggs was on his road homewards.

## CHAPTER VIII

IT was fortunate for Miss Fanny Squeers that, when her worthy papa returned home on the night of the small tea party, he was what is called "too far gone" with liquor to observe the tokens of vexation of spirit in her countenance. Being, however, of a rather violent and quarrelsome mood in his cups, it is not impossible that he might have fallen out with her, either on this or some imaginary topic, if the young lady had not kept a boy up, on purpose, to bear the first brunt of the good gentleman's anger; which, having vented itself in a variety of kicks and cuffs, subsided sufficiently to admit of his being persuaded to go to bed. This Mr. Squeers did, with his boots on and an umbrella under his arm.

The hungry servant attended Fanny Squeers in her own room according to custom, to curl her hair, perform other little offices for her, and administer as much flattery as she could get up for the purpose.

"How lovely your hair do curl tonight, miss!" said the handmaiden. "I declare if it isn't a pity and a shame to brush it out!"

"Hold your tongue!"

"Well, I couldn't help saying, miss, if you was to kill me for it," said the attendant, "that I never see nobody look so vulgar as Miss Price this night."

Miss Squeers sighed and composed herself to listen.

"I know it's wrong in me to say so, miss," continued the girl, delighted to see the impression she was making, "Miss Price being a friend of your'n, and all; but she do dress

herself out so, and go on in such a manner to get noticed, that — oh, well — if people only saw themselves! ”

“ What do you mean, Phib? ” asked Miss Squeers, looking in her own little glass, where, like most of us, she saw — not herself but the reflection of some pleasant image in her own brain. “ How you talk! ”

“ Talk, miss! It’s enough to make a tomcat talk French grammar only to see how she tosses her head.”

“ She *does* toss her head,” observed Miss Squeers, with an air of abstraction.

“ So vain, and so very, very plain,” said the girl.

“ Poor ’Tilda ’! sighed Miss Squeers, compassionately.

“ And always laying herself out so to get to be admired,” pursued the servant. “ Oh, dear! It’s positive indelicate.”

“ I can’t allow you to talk in that way, Phib,” said Miss Squeers. “ ’Tilda’s friends are low people; and if she don’t know any better, it’s their fault, and not hers.”

“ Well, but you know, miss,” said Phoebe, for which name “ Phib ” was used as a patronising abbreviation, “ if she was only to take copy by a friend — oh! if she only knew how wrong she was, and would but set herself right by you, what a nice young woman she might be in time! ”

“ Phib,” rejoined Miss Squeers, with a stately air, “ it’s not proper for me to hear these comparisons drawn; they make ’Tilda look a coarse improper sort of person, and it seems unfriendly in me to listen to them. I would rather you dropped the subject, Phib; at the same time, I must say that if ’Tilda Price would take pattern by somebody — not me particularly —— ”

“ Oh yes; you, miss.”

“ Well, me, Phib, if you will have it so. I must say that, if she would, she would be all the better for it.”

“ So somebody else thinks, or I am much mistaken,” said the girl, mysteriously.



“What do you mean?”

“Never mind, miss,” replied the girl; “I know what I know; that’s all.”

“Phib,” said Miss Squeers dramatically, “I insist upon your explaining yourself. What is this dark mystery? Speak.”

“Why, if you will have it, miss, it’s this,” said the servant girl. “Mr. John Browdie thinks as you think; and if he wasn’t too far gone to do it creditable, he’d be very glad to be off with Miss Price and on with Miss Squeers.”

“Gracious heavens!” exclaimed Miss Squeers, clasping her hands with great dignity. “What is this?”

“Truth, ma’am, and nothing but truth,” replied the artful Phib.

“What a situation!” cried Miss Squeers; “on the brink of unconsciously destroying the peace and happiness of my own ’Tilda. What is the reason that men fall in love with me, whether I like it or not, and desert their chosen intendeds for my sake?”

“Because they can’t help it, miss,” replied the girl; “the reason’s plain.”

“Never let me hear of it again,” retorted Miss Squeers. “Never! Do you hear? ’Tilda Price has faults — many faults — but I wish her well, and above all, I wish her married. No, Phib. Let her have Mr. Browdie. I may pity him, poor fellow; but I have a great regard for ’Tilda, and only hope she may make a better wife than I think she will.”

With this effusion of feeling, Miss Squeers went to bed.

When a knock came at the front door next day and the miller’s daughter was announced, Miss Squeers betook herself to the parlour in a Christian frame of spirit, perfectly beautiful to behold.

“Well, Fanny,” said the miller’s daughter, “you see I have come to see you, although we had some words last night.”

“ I pity your bad passions, 'Tilda, but I bear no malice. I am above it.”

“ Don't be cross, Fanny. I have come to tell you something that I know will please you.”

“ What may that be, 'Tilda? ” demanded Miss Squeers, screwing up her lips, and looking as if nothing in earth, air, fire, or water, could afford her the slightest gleam of satisfaction.

“ This: after we left here last night, John and I had a dreadful quarrel.”

“ That doesn't please me,” said Miss Squeers, relaxing into a smile, though.

“ Lor! I wouldn't think so bad of you as to suppose it did. That's not it.”

“ Oh! ” said Miss Squeers, relapsing into melancholy. “ Go on.”

“ After a great deal of wrangling and saying we would never see each other again, we made it up, and this morning John went and wrote our names down to be put up, for the first time, next Sunday; so we shall be married in three weeks, and I give you notice to get your dress made to wear as bridesmaid.

There was mingled gall and honey in this intelligence. The prospect of the friend's being married so soon was the gall, and the certainty of her not entertaining serious designs upon Nicholas was the honey. Upon the whole, the sweet greatly preponderated over the bitter; so Miss Squeers said she would get the dress made and that she hoped 'Tilda might be happy, though at the same time she didn't know and would not have her build too much upon it; for men were strange creatures, and a great many married women were very miserable, and wished themselves single again with all their hearts.

“ But come now, Fanny,” said Miss Price, “ I want to have a word or two with you about young Mr. Nickleby.”

“He is nothing to me,” interrupted Miss Squeers, with hysterical symptoms. “I despise him too much!”

“Oh, you don’t mean that, I am sure?” replied her friend. “Confess, Fanny; don’t you like him now?”

Without returning any direct reply, Miss Squeers all at once fell into a paroxysm of spiteful tears and exclaimed that she was a wretched, neglected, miserable castaway.

“I hate everybody,” said Miss Squeers, “and I wish that everybody was dead — that I do.”

“Dear, dear,” said Miss Price, quite moved by this sentiment. “You are not serious, I am sure.”

“Yes, I am,” rejoined Miss Squeers, tying tight knots in her pocket handkerchief and clenching her teeth. “And I wish I was dead too. There!”

“Oh! you’ll think very differently in another five minutes,” said Matilda. “How much better to take him into favour again than to hurt yourself by going on in that way. Wouldn’t it be much nicer now, to have him all to yourself on good terms, in a company keeping, love making, pleasant sort of manner?”

“I don’t know but what it would,” sobbed Miss Squeers. “Oh! ’Tilda, how could you have acted so mean and dishonourable! I wouldn’t have believed it of you, if anybody had told me.”

“Heyday!” exclaimed Miss Price, giggling. “One would suppose I had been murdering somebody at least.”

“Very nigh as bad,” said Miss Squeers passionately.

However, the two girls “made up” and planned for ’Tilda’s wedding. When it was time for Miss Price to return home, Miss Squeers walked part way with her.

It happened that this was the hour when Nicholas was accustomed to issue forth for a melancholy walk and to brood, as he sauntered listlessly through the village, upon his miserable lot. Miss Squeers knew this perfectly well, but had



perhaps forgotten it; for when she caught sight of that young gentleman advancing towards them, she evinced many symptoms of surprise and consternation, and assured her friend that she felt "fit to drop into the earth."

"Shall we turn back, or run into a cottage?" asked Miss Price. "He don't see us yet."

"No, 'Tilda, it is my duty to go through with it, and I will!"

As Miss Squeers said this, in the tone of one who has made a high moral resolution and was, besides, taken with one or two chokes and catchings of breath, her friend made no other remark, and they bore straight down upon Nicholas, who, walking with his eyes bent upon the ground, was not aware of their approach until they were close upon him; otherwise he might, perhaps, have taken shelter himself.

"Good morning," said Nicholas, bowing and passing by.

"He is going," murmured Miss Squeers. "I shall choke, 'Tilda."

"Come back, Mr. Nickleby, do!" cried Miss Price, affecting alarm at her friend's threat, but really actuated by a malicious wish to hear what Nicholas would say; "come back, Mr. Nickleby!"

Mr. Nickleby came back and looked as confused as might be, as he inquired whether the ladies had any commands for him.

"Don't stop to talk," urged Miss Price, hastily; "but support her on the other side. How do you feel now, dear?"

"Better," sighed Miss Squeers, laying a beaver bonnet of a reddish brown, with a green veil attached, on Mr. Nickleby's shoulder. "This foolish faintness!"

"Don't call it foolish, dear," said Miss Price: her bright eye dancing with merriment as she saw the perplexity of Nicholas; "you have no reason to be ashamed of it. It's



those who are too proud to come round again, without all this to-do, that ought to be ashamed."

"You are resolved to fix it upon me, I see," said Nicholas, smiling, "although I told you last night it was not my fault."

"There — he says it was not his fault, my dear," remarked the wicked Miss Price. "Perhaps you were too jealous, or too hasty with him? He says it was not his fault. You hear; I think that's apology enough."

"You will not understand me," said Nicholas. "Please dispense with this jesting, for I have no time, and really no inclination, to be the subject or promoter of mirth just now."

"What do you mean?" asked Miss Price, affecting amazement.

"Don't ask him, Tilda; I forgive him."

"Dear me," said Nicholas, as the brown bonnet went down on his shoulder again, "this is more serious than I supposed. Allow me! Will you have the goodness to hear me speak?"

Here he raised up the brown bonnet and, regarding with astonishment a look of tender reproach from Miss Squeers, shrunk back a few paces to be out of the reach of the fair burden, and went on to say:

"I am very sorry — truly and sincerely sorry — for having been the cause of any difference among you last night. I reproach myself most bitterly for having been so unfortunate as to cause the dissension that occurred, although I did so, I assure you, most unwittingly and heedlessly."

"Well; that's not all you have got to say, surely," exclaimed Miss Price, as Nicholas paused.

"I fear there is something more," stammered Nicholas, with a half smile, and looking toward Miss Squeers, "it is a most awkward thing to say — but — still — may I ask if that lady supposes that I entertain any — in short — does she think that I am in love with her?"

"Delightful embarrassment," thought Miss Squeers, "I

have brought him to it at last. Answer for me, dear," she whispered to her friend.

"Does she think so?" rejoined Miss Price; "of course she does."

"She does!" exclaimed Nicholas with such energy of utterance as might have been, for the moment, mistaken for rapture.

"Certainly," replied Miss Price.

"If Mr. Nickleby has doubted that, 'Tilda," said the blushing Miss Squeers in soft accents, "he may set his mind at rest. His sentiments are reciprocally —"

"Stop," cried Nicholas hurriedly; "please hear me. This is the grossest and wildest delusion, the completest and most signal mistake that ever human being laboured under, or committed. I have scarcely seen the young lady half a dozen times; but if I had seen her sixty times, or am destined to see her sixty thousand, it would be, and will be, precisely the same. I have not one thought, wish, or hope connected with her, unless it be — and I say this not to hurt her feelings, but to impress her with the real state of my own — unless it be the one object, dear to my heart as life itself, of being one day able to turn my back upon this accursed place, never to set foot in it again, or think of it — even think of it — but with loathing and disgust."

With this plain and straightforward declaration, Nicholas, waiting to hear no more, retreated.

But poor Miss Squeers! Her anger, rage, and vexation — the rapid succession of bitter and passionate feelings that whirled through her mind — are not to be described. Refused! Refused by a teacher, picked up by advertisement at an annual salary of five pounds payable at indefinite periods, and "found" in food and lodging like the very boys themselves; and this too in the presence of a little chit of a miller's daughter of eighteen, who was going to be married

in three weeks' time to a man who had gone down on his very knees to ask her! She could have choked in right good earnest at the thought of being so humbled.

But there was one thing clear in the midst of her mortification, and that was that she hated and detested Nicholas with all the narrowness of mind and littleness of purpose worthy a descendant of the house of Squeers. And there was one comfort, too; and that was that every hour in every day she could wound his pride and goad him with the infliction of some slight or insult. With these two reflections uppermost in her mind, Miss Squeers made the best of the matter to her friend, by observing that Mr. Nickleby was such an odd creature and of such a violent temper that she feared she should be obliged to give him up, and parted from her.

"Let him see," said the irritated young lady, when she had regained her own room, "if I don't set mother against him a little more when she comes back!"

It was scarcely necessary to do this, but Miss Squeers was as good as her word; and poor Nicholas, in addition to bad food and dirty lodging, was treated with every special indignity that malice could suggest.

Nor was this all. There was another and deeper system of annoyance which made his heart sink and nearly drove him wild by its injustice and cruelty.

The wretched creature, Smike, since the night Nicholas had spoken kindly to him in the schoolroom, had followed him to and fro with an ever-restless desire to serve or help him, anticipating such little wants as his humble ability could supply and content only to be near him. He would sit beside him for hours, looking patiently into his face; and a word would brighten up his careworn face and call into it a passing gleam even of happiness. He was an altered being; he had an object now; and that object was to show his attachment to



the only person — that person a stranger — who had treated him, not to say with kindness, but like a human creature.

Upon this poor being, all the spleen and ill humour that could not be vented on Nicholas were unceasingly bestowed. Drudgery would have been nothing — SMIKE was well used to that. Buffetings inflicted without cause would have been equally a matter of course; for to them also he had served a long and weary apprenticeship; but it was no sooner observed that he had become attached to Nicholas than stripes and blows, stripes and blows, morning, noon, and night, were his only portion. SQUEERS was jealous of the influence which his man had so soon acquired, and his family hated him, and SMIKE paid for both. Nicholas saw it, and ground his teeth at every repetition of the savage and cowardly act.

He had arranged a few regular lessons for the boys. One night as he paced up and down the dismal schoolroom, his swollen heart almost bursting to think that he should have increased the misery of the wretched being whose peculiar destitution had awakened his pity, he paused mechanically in a dark corner where sat the object of his thoughts.

The poor soul was poring hard over a tattered book, with the traces of recent tears still upon his face; vainly endeavouring to master some task which a child of nine years old could have conquered with ease, but which, to the addled brain of the crushed boy of nineteen, was a sealed and hopeless mystery. Yet there he sat, patiently conning the page again and again, stimulated by no boyish ambition, for he was the common jest and scoff even of the uncouth objects that congregated about him, but inspired by the one eager desire to please his solitary friend.

Nicholas laid his hand upon his shoulder.

“I can't do it,” said the dejected creature, looking up with bitter disappointment in every feature. “No, no.”

“Do not try,” replied Nicholas.



The boy shook his head, and closing the book with a sigh, looked vacantly round, and laid his head upon his arm. He was weeping.

“Do not, for God’s sake,” said Nicholas, in an agitated voice; “I cannot bear to see you.”

“They are more hard with me than ever,” sobbed the boy.

“I know it,” rejoined Nicholas; “they are.”

“But for you,” said the outcast, “I should die. They would kill me; they would; I know they would.”

“You will do better, poor fellow,” replied Nicholas, shaking his head mournfully, “when I am gone.”

“Gone!” cried the other, looking intently in his face.

“Softly!” rejoined Nicholas. “Yes.”

“Are you going?” demanded the boy, in an earnest whisper.

“I cannot say,” replied Nicholas. “I was speaking more to my own thoughts than to you.”

“Tell me,” said the boy imploringly, “oh do tell me, will you go — will you?”

“I shall be driven to that at last!” said Nicholas. “The world is before me, after all.”

“Tell me,” urged Smike, “is the world as bad and dismal as this place?”

“Heaven forbid,” replied Nicholas, pursuing the train of his own thoughts; “its hardest, coarsest toil were happiness to this.”

“Should I ever meet you there?” demanded the boy, speaking with unusual wildness and volubility.

“Yes,” replied Nicholas, willing to soothe him.

“No, no!” said the other, clasping him by the hand. “Should I — should I — tell me that again. Say I should be sure to find you.”

“You would,” replied Nicholas, with the same humane

intention, "and I would help and aid you, and not bring fresh sorrow on you as I have done here."

The boy caught both the young man's hands passionately in his and, hugging them to his breast, uttered a few broken sounds which were unintelligible. Squeers entered, at the moment, and he shrunk back into his old corner.

## CHAPTER IX

**I**T was with a heavy heart and many sad forebodings that Kate Nickleby left the city when its clocks yet wanted a quarter of an hour of eight and threaded her way alone, amid the noise and bustle of the streets, towards the West End of London.

She arrived at Madame Mantalini's some minutes before the appointed hour. After walking a few times up and down, in the hope that some other girl or woman might arrive and spare her the embarrassment of stating her business to the servant, she knocked timidly at the door, which, after some delay, was opened by the footman, who had been putting on his striped jacket as he came upstairs and was now intent on fastening his apron.

"Is Madame Mantalini in?" asked Kate.

"Not often out at this time, miss."

"Can I see her?"

"Eh?" replied the man, holding the door in his hand, and honouring the inquirer with a stare and a broad grin, "Lord, no."

"I came by her own appointment; I am — I am — to be employed here."

"Oh! you should have rung the worker's bell," said the footman, touching the handle of one in the door post. "Let me see, though, I forgot — Miss Nickleby, is it?"

"Yes."

"You're to walk upstairs then, please. Madame Mantalini wants to see you — this way — take care of these things on the floor."

Cautioning her in these terms not to trip over a litter of

pastry cook's trays, lamps, and waiters full of glasses, which were strewn about the hall, plainly bespeaking a late party on the previous night, the man led the way to the second story and ushered Kate into a back room, communicating by folding doors with the apartment in which she had first seen the mistress of the establishment.

"If you'll wait here a minute, I'll tell her presently." Having made this promise with much affability, he retired and left Kate alone.

There was not much to amuse in the room, of which the most attractive feature was a half-length portrait in oil of Mr. Mantalini, whom the artist had depicted scratching his head in an easy manner and thus displaying to advantage a diamond ring, the gift of Madame Mantalini before her marriage. There was, however, the sound of voices in conversation in the next room; and as the conversation was loud and the partition thin, Kate could not help discovering that they belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Mantalini.

"If you will be odiously, demnebly, outrigeously jealous, my soul," said Mr. Mantalini, "you will be very miserable — horrid miserable — demnition miserable." And then there was a sound as though Mr. Mantalini were sipping his coffee.

"I *am* miserable," returned Madame Mantalini, evidently pouting.

"Then you are an ungrateful, unworthy, demd unthankful little fairy."

"I am not," returned Madame, with a sob.

"Do not put itself out of humour," said Mr. Mantalini, breaking an egg. "It is a pretty, bewitching little demd countenance; and it should not be out of humour, for it spoils its loveliness, and makes it cross and gloomy like a frightful, naughty, demd hobgoblin."

"I am not to be brought round in that way always," rejoined Madame, sulkily.



“It shall be brought round in any way it likes best, and not brought round at all if it likes that better,” retorted Mr. Mantalini, with his egg spoon in his mouth.

“It’s very easy to talk.”

“Not so easy when one is eating a demnition egg, for the yolk runs down the waistcoat, and yolk of egg does not match any waistcoat but a yellow waistcoat, demmit.”

“You were flirting with her during the whole night,” said Madame Mantalini, apparently desirous to lead the conversation back to the point from which it had strayed.

“No, no, my life.”

“You were. I had my eye upon you all the time.”

“Bless the little, winking, twinkling eye; was it on me all the time!” cried Mantalini, in a sort of lazy rapture. “Oh, demmit!”

“And I say once more, that you ought not to waltz with anybody but your own wife; and I will not bear it, Mantalini, if I take poison first.”

“She will not take poison and have horrid pains, will she?” said Mantalini, who, by the altered sound of his voice, seemed to have moved his chair and taken up his position nearer to his wife. “She will not take poison, because she had a demd fine husband who might have married two countesses and a dowager ——”

“*Two countesses!* You told me one before!”

“Two! Two demd fine women, real countesses and splendid fortunes, demmit.”

“And why didn’t you?” asked madame, playfully.

“Why didn’t I! Had I not seen, at a morning concert, the demdest little fascinator in all the world, and while that little fascinator is my wife, may not all the countesses and dowagers in England be ——”

Mr. Mantalini did not finish the sentence, but he gave Madame Mantalini a very loud kiss, which Madame Man-

talini returned, after which there seemed to be some more kissing mixed up with the progress of the breakfast.

“And what about the cash, my existence’s jewel?” said Mantalini, when these endearments ceased. “How much have we in hand?”

“Very little indeed.”

“We must have some more; we must have some discount out of old Nickleby to carry on the war with, demmit.”

“You can’t want any more just now,” said Madame, coaxingly.

“My life and soul, there is a horse for sale at Scrubbs’s, which it would be a sin and a crime to lose — going, my senses’ joy, for nothing.”

“For nothing, I am glad of that.”

“For actually nothing; a hundred guineas down will buy him; mane, and crest, and legs, and tail, all of the demdest beauty. I will ride him in the park before the very chariots of the rejected countesses. The demd old dowager will faint with grief and rage; the other two will say ‘He is married, he has made away with himself, it is a demd thing, it is all up!’ They will hate each other demnebly, and wish you dead and buried. Ha! ha! Demmit.”

Madame Mantalini’s prudence, if she had any, was not proof against these triumphal pictures; after a little jingling of keys, she observed that she would see what her desk contained, and, rising for that purpose, opened the folding door and walked into the room where Kate was seated.

“Dear me, child!” exclaimed Madame Mantalini, recoiling in surprise. “How came you here?”

“Child!” cried Mantalini, hurrying in. “How came — eh! — oh — demmit, how d’ye do?”

“I have been waiting here some time, ma’am,” said Kate, addressing Madame Mantalini. “The servant must have forgotten to let you know that I was here, I think.”

“ You really must see to that man,” said madame, turning to her husband. “ He forgets everything.”

“ I will twist his demd nose off his demd countenance for leaving such a very pretty creature all alone by herself.”

“ Mantalini, you forget yourself.”

“ I don't forget you, my soul, and never shall, and never can,” said Mantalini, kissing his wife's hand, and grimacing aside to Miss Nickleby, who turned away.

Appeased by this compliment, the lady of the business took some papers from her desk, which she handed over to Mr. Mantalini, who received them with great delight. She then requested Kate to follow her, and after several attempts on the part of Mr. Mantalini to attract the young lady's attention, they went away, leaving that gentleman extended at full length on the sofa, with his heels in the air and a newspaper in his hand.

Madame Mantalini led the way down a flight of stairs and through a passage to a large room at the back of the premises, where were a number of young women employed in sewing, cutting out, making up, altering, and various other processes.

On Madame Mantalini calling aloud for Miss Knag, a short, bustling, overdressed female, full of importance, presented herself; and all the young ladies, suspending their operations for the moment, whispered to each other sundry criticisms upon the make and texture of Miss Nickleby's dress, her complexion, cast of features, and personal appearance.

“ Oh, Miss Knag,” said Madame Mantalini, “ this is the young person I spoke about.”

Miss Knag bestowed a reverential smile upon Madame Mantalini, which she transformed into a gracious one for Kate, and said that, although it was a great deal of trouble to have young people who were wholly unused to the business,



still, she was sure the young person would try to do her best."

"I think that, for the present at all events, it will be better for Miss Nickleby to come into the show room with you, and try things on for people," said Madame Mantalini. "She will not be able for the present to be of much use in any other way; and her appearance will ——"

"Suit very well with mine, Madame Mantalini," interrupted Miss Knag. "So it will; and to be sure I might have known that you would not be long in finding that out; for you have so much taste in all those matters. Miss Nickleby and I are quite a pair, Madame Mantalini, only I am a little darker than Miss Nickleby, and — hem — I think my foot may be a little smaller. Miss Nickleby, I am sure, will not be offended at my saying that, when she hears that our family always have been celebrated for small feet ever since — hem — ever since our family had any feet at all, indeed, I think."

"You'll take care that Miss Nickleby understands her hours and so forth," said Madame Mantalini; "and so I'll leave her with you. You'll not forget my directions, Miss Knag?"

Miss Knag, of course, replied that to forget anything Madame Mantalini had directed was a moral impossibility; and that lady, dispensing a general good morning among her assistants, sailed away.

"Charming creature, isn't she, Miss Nickleby?" said Miss Knag rubbing her hands together.

"I have seen very little of her. I hardly know yet."

"Have you seen Mr. Mantalini?"

"Yes, I have seen him twice."

"Isn't he a charming creature?"

"Indeed, he does not strike me as being so, by any means."

"No, my dear!" cried Miss Knag, elevating her hands. "Why, goodness, gracious mercy, where's your taste? Such a fine, tall, full-whiskered, dashing, gentlemanly man, with



such teeth and hair, and — hem — well now, you do astonish me.”

“ I dare say I am very foolish,” replied Kate, laying aside her bonnet; “ but as my opinion is of very little importance to him or any one else, I do not regret having formed it, and shall be slow to change it, I think.”

“ He is a very fine man, don't you think so? ” asked one of the young ladies.

“ Indeed he may be, for anything I could say to the contrary,” replied Kate.

“ And drives very beautiful horses, doesn't he? ” inquired another.

“ I dare say he may, but I never saw them,” answered Kate.

“ Never saw them! ” interposed Miss Knag. “ Oh, well! There it is at once, you know; how can you possibly pronounce an opinion about a gentleman — hem — if you don't see him as he turns out altogether? ”

Kate, who was anxious to change the subject, made no further remark, and left Miss Knag in possession of the field.

After a short silence, during which most of the young people made a closer inspection of Kate's appearance and compared notes respecting it, one of them offered to help her off with her shawl, and the offer being accepted, inquired whether she did not find black very uncomfortable to wear.

“ I do indeed,” replied Kate, with a bitter sigh. She could not quite restrain her tears.

“ I am very sorry to have wounded you by my thoughtless speech,” said her companion. “ I did not think of it. You are in mourning for some near relation? ”

“ For my father.”

“ For what relation, Miss Simmonds? ” asked Miss Knag in an audible voice.

“ Her father,” replied the other softly.

“ Her father, eh? ” said Miss Knag, without the slightest

depression of her voice. "Ah! A long illness, Miss Simmonds?"

"Hush," replied the girl; "I don't know."

"Our misfortune was very sudden," said Kate, turning away, "or I might perhaps, at a time like this, be enabled to support it better."

There had existed not a little desire in the room, according to invariable custom when any new "young person" came, to know who Kate was and what she was, and all about her; but although it might have been very naturally increased by her appearance and emotion, the knowledge that it pained her to be questioned was sufficient to repress even this curiosity; and Miss Knag, finding it hopeless to attempt extracting any further particulars just then, reluctantly commanded silence, and bade the work proceed.

In silence, then, the tasks were plied until half-past one, when a baked leg of mutton, with potatoes to correspond, were served in the kitchen. The meal over, and the young ladies having enjoyed the additional relaxation of washing their hands, the work began again, and was again performed in silence until the noise of carriages rattling through the streets and of loud double knocks at doors, gave token that the day's work of the more fortunate members of society was proceeding in its turn.

One of these double knocks at Madame Mantalini's door announced the equipage of some great lady — or rather rich one, for there is occasionally a distinction between riches and greatness — who had come with her daughter to approve of some court dresses which had been a long time preparing, and upon whom Kate was deputed to wait, accompanied by Miss Knag, and officered of course by Madame Mantalini.

Kate's part in the pageant was humble enough, her duties being limited to holding articles of costume until Miss Knag

was ready to try them on, and now and then tying a string, or fastening a hook and eye. She might not unreasonably have supposed herself beneath the reach of any arrogance or bad humour; but it happened that two customers, a lady and daughter, were both out of temper that day and the poor girl came in for her share of their revilings. She was awkward — her hands were cold — dirty — coarse — she could do nothing right; they wondered how Madame Mantalini could have such people about her, requested that they might see some other young woman the next time they came, and so forth.

So common an occurrence would be hardly deserving of mention, but for its effect. Kate shed many bitter tears when these people were gone, and felt, for the first time, humbled by her occupation. She had, it is true, quailed at the prospect of drudgery and hard service; but she had felt no degradation in working for her bread, until she found herself exposed to insolence and pride. Philosophy would have taught her that the degradation was on the side of those who had sunk so low as to display such passions habitually and without cause; but she was too young for consolation, and her honest feeling was hurt. May not the complaint that common people are above their station often take its rise in the fact of uncommon people being below theirs?

In such scenes and occupations the time wore on until nine o'clock, when Kate, jaded and dispirited with the occurrences of the day, hastened from the confinement of the workroom to join her mother at the street corner and walk home, the more sadly from having to disguise her real feelings and feign to participate in all the sanguine visions of her companion.

“ Bless my soul, Kate,” said Mrs. Nickleby; “ I’ve been thinking all day what a delightful thing it would be for

Madame Mantalini to take you into partnership — such a likely thing, too, you know! Why, your poor dear papa's cousin's sister-in-law — a Miss Browndock — was taken into partnership by a lady that kept a school at Hammersmith and made her fortune in no time at all. I forget, by the by, whether that Miss Browndock was the same lady that got the ten thousand pounds prize in the lottery, but I think she was; indeed, now I come to think of it, I am sure she was. 'Mantalini and Nickleby,' how well it would sound! — and if Nicholas had any good fortune, you might have Doctor Nickleby, the headmaster of Westminster School, living in the same street."

"Dear Nicholas!" cried Kate, taking from her handbag her brother's letter from Dotheboys Hall. "In all our misfortunes, how happy it makes me, mama, to hear he is doing well, and to find him writing in such good spirits! It consoles me for all we may undergo, to think that he is comfortable and happy."



## CHAPTER X

THE cold, feeble dawn of a January morning was stealing in at the windows of the common sleeping room, when Nicholas, raising himself on his arm, looked among the prostrate forms which on every side surrounded him, as though in search of some particular object.

It needed a quick eye to detect, from among the huddled mass of sleepers, the form of any given individual. As they lay closely packed together, covered, for warmth's sake, with their patched and ragged clothes, little could be distinguished but the sharp outlines of pale faces.

Nicholas looked upon the sleepers with the air of one who missed something his eye was accustomed to meet and had expected to rest upon. He was still occupied in this search and had half risen from his bed in the eagerness of his quest, when the voice of Squeers was heard, calling from the bottom of the stairs.

“Now, then,” cried that gentleman, “are you going to sleep all day, up there——”

“You lazy hounds!” added Mrs. Squeers, finishing the sentence and producing, at the same time, a sharp sound, like that which is occasioned by the lacing of corsets.

“We shall be down directly, sir,” replied Nicholas.

“Down directly!” said Squeers. “Ah! you had better be down directly, or I'll be down upon some of you in less. Where's that Smike?”

Nicholas looked hurriedly round again, but made no answer.

“Smike!” shouted Squeers.

“Do you want your head broke in a fresh place, Smike?” demanded his amiable lady in the same key.

Still there was no reply, and still Nicholas stared about him, as did the greater part of the boys, who were by this time roused.

“Confound his impudence!” muttered Squeers, rapping the stair rail impatiently with his cane. “Nickleby!”

“Well, sir.”

“Send that obstinate scoundrel down; don’t you hear me calling?”

“He is not here, sir,” replied Nicholas.

“Don’t tell me a lie,” retorted the schoolmaster. “He is.”

“He is not,” retorted Nicholas angrily; “don’t tell me one.”

“We shall soon see that,” said Mr. Squeers, rushing upstairs. “I’ll find him, I warrant you.”

With this assurance, Mr. Squeers bounced into the dormitory and, swinging his cane in the air ready for a blow, darted into the corner where the lean body of the drudge was usually stretched at night. The cane descended harmlessly upon the ground. There was nobody there.

“What does this mean?” said Squeers, turning round with a very pale face. “Where have you hid him?”

“I have seen nothing of him since last night,” replied Nicholas.

“Come,” said Squeers, evidently frightened, though he endeavoured to look otherwise, “you won’t save him this way. Where is he?”

“At the bottom of the nearest pond, for aught I know,” rejoined Nicholas in a low voice, and fixing his eyes full on the master’s face.

“What do you mean by that?” retorted Squeers in great perturbation. Without waiting for a reply, he inquired of the boys whether any one among them knew anything of their missing schoolmate.

There was a general hum of anxious denial, in the midst of which, one shrill voice was heard to say (as, indeed, everybody thought):

“Please, sir, I think Smike’s run away, sir.”

“Ha!” cried Squeers, turning sharp round; “who said that?”

“Tompkins, please, sir,” rejoined a chorus of voices. Mr. Squeers made a plunge into the crowd and at one dive caught a very little boy, habited still in his night gear, and the perplexed expression of whose countenance, as he was brought forward, seemed to intimate that he was uncertain whether he was about to be punished or rewarded for the suggestion. He was not long in doubt.

“You think he has run away, do you, sir?” demanded Squeers.

“Yes, please, sir,” replied the little boy.

“And what, sir,” said Squeers, catching the little boy suddenly by the arms and whisking up his drapery in a most dexterous manner, “what reason have you to suppose that any boy would want to run away from this establishment? Eh, sir?”

The child raised a dismal cry by way of answer, and Mr. Squeers, throwing himself into the most favourable attitude for exercising his strength, beat him until the little urchin in his writhings actually rolled out of his hands, when he mercifully allowed him to roll away as he best could.

“There,” said Squeers, “now if any other boy thinks Smike has run away, I should be glad to have a talk with him.”

There was, of course, a profound silence, during which Nicholas showed his disgust as plainly as looks can show it.

“Well, Nickleby,” said Squeers, eyeing him maliciously. “You think he has run away, I suppose?”

“I think it extremely likely,” replied Nicholas, in a quiet manner.

“Oh, you do, do you?” sneered Squeers. “Maybe you know he has.”

“I know nothing of the kind.”

“He didn’t tell you he was going, I suppose, did he?” sneered Squeers.

“He did not. I am very glad he did not, for it would then have been my duty to have warned you in time.”

“Which no doubt you would have been devilish sorry to do,” said Squeers in a taunting fashion.

“I should indeed. You interpret my feelings with great accuracy.”

Mrs. Squeers had listened to this conversation, from the bottom of the stairs; but now, losing all patience, she hastily assumed her night jacket, and made her way to the scene of action.

“What’s all this here to-do?” said the lady, as the boys fell off right and left, to save her the trouble of clearing a passage with her brawny arms. “What on earth are you talking to him for, Squeery?”

“Why, my dear,” said Squeers, “the fact is, that Smike is not to be found.”

“Well, I know that,” said the lady, “and where’s the wonder? If you get a parcel of proud-stomached teachers that set the young dogs a’re-belling, what else can you look for? Now, young man, you just have the kindness to take yourself off to the schoolroom, and take the boys off with you, and don’t you stir out of there till you have leave given you, or you and I may fall out in a way that’ll spoil your beauty, handsome as you think yourself, and so I tell you.”

“Indeed!” said Nicholas.

“Yes; and indeed and indeed again, Mister Jackanapes,” said the excited lady; “and I wouldn’t keep such as you in the house another hour if I had my way.”



“Nor would you if I had mine,” replied Nicholas. “Now, boys!”

“Ah! Now boys,” said Mrs. Squeers, mimicking, as nearly as she could, the voice and manner of the usher. “Follow your leader, boys, and take pattern by SMIKE if you dare. See what he’ll get for himself, when he is brought back; and, mind! I tell you that you shall have as bad, and twice as bad, if you so much as open your mouths about him.”

“If I catch him,” said Squeers, “I’ll only stop short of flaying him alive. I give you notice, boys.”

“If you catch him,” retorted Mrs. Squeers, contemptuously — “you are sure to; you can’t help it, if you go the right way to work. Come! Away with you!”

With these words Mrs. Squeers dismissed the boys, and after a little light skirmishing with those in the rear, who were pressing forward to get out of the way, but were detained for a few moments by the throng in front, succeeded in clearing the room, when she confronted her spouse alone.

“He is off,” said Mrs. Squeers. “The cow house and stable are locked up, so he can’t be there; and he’s not downstairs anywhere, for the girl has looked there. He must have gone York way, and by a public road, too.”

“Why must he?” inquired Squeers.

“Stupid!” said Mrs. Squeers angrily. “He hadn’t any money, had he?”

“Never had a penny of his own in his whole life that I know of.”

“To be sure,” rejoined Mrs. Squeers, “and he didn’t take anything to eat with him; that I’ll answer for. Ha! ha! ha!”

“Ha! ha! ha!” laughed Squeers.

“Then, of course,” said Mrs. Squeers, “he must beg his way, and he could do that nowhere but on the public road.”

“That’s true,” exclaimed Squeers, clapping his hands.

“True! Yes; but you would never have thought of it, for all that, if I hadn’t said so,” replied his wife. “Now if you take the chaise and go one road, and I borrow Swallow’s chaise and go the other, what with keeping our eyes open and asking questions one or other of us is pretty certain to lay hold of him.”

The worthy lady’s plan was adopted and put in execution without a moment’s delay. After a very hasty breakfast and the prosecution of some inquiries in the village, the result of which seemed to show that he was on the right track, Squeers started forth in the pony chaise, intent upon discovery and vengeance. Shortly afterwards, Mrs. Squeers, arrayed in the white topcoat and tied up in various shawls and handkerchiefs, issued forth in another chaise and another direction, taking with her a good-sized bludgeon, several odd pieces of strong cord, and a stout labouring man — all provided and carried upon the expedition with the sole object of assisting in the capture, and (once caught) insuring the safe custody of the unfortunate Smike.

Nicholas remained behind, in a tumult of feeling, sensible that whatever might be the upshot of the boy’s flight, nothing but painful and deplorable consequences were likely to ensue from it. Death from want and exposure to the weather was the best that could be expected from the protracted wandering of so poor and helpless a creature, alone and unfriended, through a country of which he was wholly ignorant. There was little, perhaps, to choose between this fate and a return to the tender mercies of the Yorkshire school; but the unhappy being had established a hold upon his sympathy and compassion which made his heart ache at the prospect of the suffering he was destined to undergo. He lingered on in restless anxiety, picturing a thousand possibilities, until the evening of the next day, when Squeers returned, alone, and unsuccessful.

“No news of the scamp!” said the schoolmaster, who had evidently been “stretching his legs” a great many times during the journey. “I’ll have consolation for this out of somebody, Nickleby, if Mrs. Squeers don’t hunt him down; so I give you warning.”

“It is not in my power to console you, sir,” said Nicholas. “It is nothing to me.”

“Isn’t it?” said Squeers in a threatening manner. “We shall see!”

“We shall,” rejoined Nicholas.

“Here’s the pony run right off his legs, and me obliged to come home with a hack cob that’ll cost fifteen shillings beside other expenses,” said Squeers; “who’s to pay for that, do you hear?”

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders and remained silent.

“I’ll have it out of somebody, I tell you,” said Squeers, his usual harsh crafty manner changed to open bullying. “None of your whining vapourings here, Mr. Puppy, but be off to your kennel, for it’s past your bed time! Come! Get out!”

Nicholas bit his lip and knit his hands involuntarily, for his finger ends tingled to avenge the insult; but remembering that the man was drunk and that it could come to little but a noisy brawl, he contented himself with darting a contemptuous look at the tyrant, and walked, as majestically as he could, upstairs: not a little nettled, however, to observe that Miss Squeers and Master Squeers, and the servant girl were enjoying the scene from a snug corner; the two former, indulging in many edifying remarks about the presumption of poor upstarts, which occasioned a vast deal of laughter, in which even the miserable servant girl joined.

Another day came, and Nicholas was scarcely awake when he heard the wheels of a chaise approaching the house. It stopped. The voice of Mrs. Squeers was heard, and in exultation ordering a glass of spirits for somebody, which



was in itself a sufficient sign that something extraordinary had happened. Nicholas hardly dared to look out of the window; but he did so, and the very first object that met his eyes was the wretched Smike: so bedabbled with mud and rain, so haggard and worn and wild, that, but for his garments being such as no scarecrow was ever seen to wear, he might have been doubtful, even then, of his identity.

“Lift him out,” said Squeers, after he had literally feasted his eyes, in silence, upon the culprit. “Bring him in; bring him in!”

“Take care,” cried Mrs. Squeers, as her husband proffered his assistance. “We tied his legs and made ’em fast to the chaise, to prevent his giving us the slip again.”

With hands trembling with delight, Squeers unloosened the cord; and Smike, to all appearance more dead than alive, was brought into the house and securely locked up in a cellar until such time as Mr. Squeers should deem it expedient to operate upon him in presence of the assembled school.

The news that Smike had been caught and brought back in triumph, ran like wildfire through the hungry community, and expectation was on tiptoe all the morning. On tiptoe it was destined to remain, however, until afternoon; when Squeers, having refreshed himself with his dinner, and further strengthened himself by an extra libation or so, made his appearance (accompanied by his amiable partner) with a countenance of portentous import and a fearful whip, strong, supple, wax-ended, and new — in short, purchased that morning expressly for the occasion.

“Is every boy here?” asked Squeers, in a tremendous voice.

Every boy was there, but every boy was afraid to speak; so Squeers glared along the lines to assure himself; and every eye dropped, and every head cowered down as he did so.

“Each boy keep his place,” said Squeers, administering his favourite blow to the desk and regarding with gloomy satis-



faction the universal start which it never failed to occasion. "Nickleby! to your desk, sir."

It was noticed by more than one small observer that there was a very curious and unusual expression in the usher's face, but he took his seat without opening his lips in reply. Squeers, casting a triumphant glance at his assistant and a look of most comprehensive despotism on the boys, left the room, and shortly afterwards returned, dragging Smike by the collar — or rather by that fragment of his jacket which was nearest the place where his collar would have been, had he boasted such a decoration.

In any other place the appearance of the wretched, jaded, spiritless object would have occasioned a murmur of compassion and remonstrance. It had some effect, even there; for the lookers-on moved uneasily in their seats; and a few of the boldest ventured to steal looks at each other, expressive of indignation and pity.

They were lost on Squeers, however, whose gaze was fastened on the luckless Smike, as he inquired, according to custom in such cases, whether he had anything to say for himself.

"Nothing, I suppose?" said Squeers, with a diabolical grin.

Smike glanced round, and his eye rested, for an instant, on Nicholas, as if he had expected him to intercede; but his look was riveted on his desk.

"Have you anything to say?" demanded Squeers again, giving his right arm two or three flourishes to try its power and suppleness. "Stand a little out of the way, Mrs. Squeers, my dear; I've hardly got room enough."

"Spare me, sir!" cried Smike.

"Oh! that's all, is it?" said Squeers. "Yes, I'll flog you within an inch of your life, and spare you that."

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed Mrs. Squeers, "that's a good 'un!"

“I was driven to do it,” said Smike faintly, and casting another imploring look about him.

“Driven to do it, were you?” said Squeers. “Oh! it wasn’t your fault; it was mine, I suppose — eh?”

“A nasty, ungrateful, pig-headed, brutish, obstinate, sneaking dog,” exclaimed Mrs. Squeers, taking Smike’s head under her arm, and administering a cuff at every epithet, “what does he mean by that?”

“Stand aside, my dear,” replied Squeers. “We’ll try and find out.”

Mrs. Squeers, being out of breath with her exertions, complied. Squeers caught the boy firmly in his grip. One desperate cut had fallen on his body. He was wincing from the lash and uttering a scream of pain. The lash was raised again, and again about to fall — when Nicholas Nickleby, suddenly starting up, cried “Stop!” in a voice that made the rafters ring.

“Who cried stop?” said Squeers, turning savagely round.

“I,” said Nicholas, stepping forward. “This must not go on.”

“Must not go on!” cried Squeers, almost in a shriek.

“No!” thundered Nicholas.

Aghast and stupefied by the boldness of the interference, Squeers released his hold of Smike, and falling back a pace or two, gazed upon Nicholas with looks that were positively frightful.

“I say must not,” repeated Nicholas, nothing daunted; “shall not. I will prevent it.”

Squeers continued to gaze upon him, with his eyes starting out of his head; but astonishment had actually, for the moment, bereft him of speech.

“You have disregarded all my quiet interference in the miserable lad’s behalf,” said Nicholas, “you have returned no answer to the letter in which I begged forgiveness for him, and

offered to be responsible that he would remain quietly here. Don't blame me for this public interference. You have brought it upon yourself; not I."

"Sit down, beggar!" screamed Squeers, almost beside himself with rage, and seizing SMIKE as he spoke.

"Wretch," rejoined Nicholas, fiercely, "touch him at your peril! I will not stand by and see it done. My blood is up, and I have the strength of ten such men as you. Look to yourself, for by heaven, I will not spare you, if you drive me on!"

"Stand back," cried Squeers, brandishing his whip.

"I have a long series of insults to avenge," said Nicholas, flushed with passion; "and my indignation is aggravated by the cruelties on helpless infancy in this foul den. Have a care; for if you do raise the devil within me, the consequences shall fall heavily upon your own head!"

He had scarcely spoken when Squeers, in a violent outbreak of wrath and with a cry like the howl of a wild beast, spat upon him and struck him a blow across the face with his whip, which raised up a bar of livid flesh.

Smarting with the agony of the blow and concentrating into that one moment all his feelings of rage, scorn, and indignation, Nicholas sprang upon him, snatched the whip from his hand, and pinning him by the throat, beat the ruffian till he roared for mercy.

The boys — with the exception of Master Squeers, who, coming to his father's assistance, harassed the enemy in the rear — moved not, hand or foot; but Mrs. Squeers, with many shrieks for aid, hung on to the tail of her partner's coat and endeavoured to drag him from his infuriated adversary, while Miss Squeers, who had been looking through the keyhole in expectation of a very different scene, darted in at the very beginning of the attack and, after throwing a lot of inkstands at the teacher's head, beat Nicholas to



her heart's content, animating herself at every blow with the recollection of his having refused her proffered love, and thus imparting additional strength to an arm which (as she took after her mother in this respect) was, at no time, one of the weakest.

Nicholas felt the blows no more than if they had been dealt with feathers, he was so angry; but becoming tired of the noise and uproar, and feeling that his arm grew weak besides, he threw all his remaining strength into half a dozen finishing cuts, and flung Squeers from him, with all the force he could muster. The violence of his fall knocked Mrs. Squeers over a bench; and Squeers, striking his head against it in his descent, lay at his full length on the ground, stunned and motionless.

Having brought affairs to this happy termination, and ascertained, to his thorough satisfaction, that Squeers was only stunned, and not dead, Nicholas left his family to restore him, and went out to consider what course he had better adopt. He looked anxiously round for Smike as he left the room, but he was nowhere to be seen.

He packed up a few clothes in a small leathern valise, marched boldly out by the front door, and struck into the road which led to Greta Bridge.

His circumstances did not appear in a very encouraging light. He had only four shillings and a few odd pence in his pocket, and was more than two hundred and fifty miles from London.

Lifting up his eyes, as he arrived at the conclusion that there was no remedy for this unfortunate state of things, he beheld a horseman coming towards him, whom, on nearer approach, he discovered, to his infinite chagrin, to be no other than Mr. John Browdie, who was urging his animal forward by means of a thick ash stick, which seemed to have been recently cut from some stout sapling.



“ I am in no mood for more noise and riot,” thought Nicholas, “ and yet, do what I will, I shall have a quarrel with this honest blockhead and perhaps a blow or two from yonder staff.”

In truth there appeared some reason that such a result would follow from the encounter, for John Browdie no sooner saw Nicholas advancing than he reined in his horse by the footpath and waited until such time as he should come up, looking meanwhile very sternly between the horse’s ears at Nicholas, as he came on at his leisure.

“ Servant, young genelman,” said John.

“ Yours,” said Nicholas.

“ Weel; we ha’ met at last,” observed John, making the stirrup ring under a smart touch of the ash stick.

“ Yes,” replied Nicholas, hesitating. “ Come! ” he said frankly, after a moment’s pause, “ we parted on no very good terms the last time we met; it was my fault, I believe; but I had no intention of offending you and no idea that I was doing so. I was very sorry for it afterwards. Will you shake hands? ”

“ Shake hands! ” cried the good-humoured Yorkshireman; “ ah! that I weel”; at the same time he bent down from the saddle and gave Nicholas’s fist a huge wrench; “ but wa’at be the matther wi’ thy feace, mun? it be all broken loike.”

“ It is a cut,” said Nicholas, “ — a blow; but I returned it to the giver and with good interest, too.”

“ Noa, did’ee though? Well deane! I loike un’ for thot.”

“ The fact is,” said Nicholas, not very well knowing how to make the avowal, “ the fact is, that I have been ill-treated.”

“ Noa! ” interposed John Browdie, in a tone of compassion; for he was a giant in strength and stature, and Nicholas, very likely, in his eyes, seemed a mere dwarf; “ dean’t say thot.”

“ Yes, I have, by that man Squeers, and I have beaten him soundly, and am leaving this place in consequence.”

“What!” cried John Browdie, with such an ecstatic shout that the horse quite shied at it. “Beatten the schoolmeaster! Ho! ho! ho! Beatten the schoolmeaster! Whoever heard the like of that now! Give us thee hand again, youngster. Beatten the schoolmeaster! Dang it, I loove thee for’t.”

With these expressions of delight, John Browdie laughed and laughed again — so loud that the echoes far and wide sent back nothing but jovial peals of merriment — and shook Nicholas by the hand meanwhile, no less heartily. When his mirth had subsided, he inquired what Nicholas meant to do; on his informing him, to go straight to London, he shook his head doubtfully, and inquired if he knew how much the coaches charged, to carry passengers so far.

“No, I do not,” said Nicholas; “but it is of no great consequence to me, for I intend walking.”

“Gang awa’ to Lunnun afoot!” cried John in amazement.

“Every step of the way,” replied Nicholas. “I should be many steps further on by this time, and so good-by!”

“Nay, noo,” replied the honest countryman, reining in his impatient horse, “stan’ still, tellee. Hoo much cash hast thee gotten?”

“Not much, but I can make it enough. Where there’s a will there’s a way, you know.”

John Browdie made no verbal answer to this remark, but putting his hand in his pocket pulled out an old purse of soiled leather and insisted that Nicholas should borrow from him whatever he required for his present necessities.

“Dean’t be afeared, mun,” he said, “tak’ eneaf to carry thee whoam. Thee’lt pay me yan day, a’ warrant.”

Nicholas could not be induced to borrow more than a sovereign, with which loan Mr. Browdie had to content himself.

“Take that bit o’ timber to help thee on wi’, mun,” he

added, pressing his stick on Nicholas, and giving his hand another squeeze; "keep a good heart and bless thee. Beaten the schoolmeaster! 'Cod, it's the best thing a've heerd this twonty year!"

So saying, and indulging in another series of loud laughs for the purpose of avoiding the thanks which Nicholas poured forth, John Browdie set spurs to his horse and went off at a smart canter, looking back from time to time, as Nicholas stood gazing after him and waving his hand cheerily, as if to encourage him on his way. Nicholas watched the horse and rider until they disappeared over a distant hill and then set forward on his journey.

He did not travel far that afternoon, for by this time it was nearly dark, and there had been a heavy fall of snow which not only made the way toilsome, but the track uncertain and difficult to find after dark. He stayed that night at a cottage where beds were let at a cheap rate and, getting up early the next morning, made his way before night to the next town. Passing through in search of some cheap resting place, he found an empty barn near the roadside in a warm corner of which he stretched his weary limbs and soon fell asleep.

When he awoke next morning and tried to recollect his dreams, which had been all connected with his recent sojourn at Dotheboys Hall, he sat up, rubbed his eyes, and stared at some motionless object which seemed to be stationed a few yards in front of him.

"Strange!" cried Nicholas; "can this be some lingering creation of the visions that have scarcely left me! It cannot be real — and yet I — I am awake! Smike!"

The form moved, rose, advanced, and dropped upon its knees at his feet. It was Smike indeed.

"Why do you kneel to me?" said Nicholas, hastily raising him.

"To go with you — anywhere — everywhere — to the



world's end — to the churchyard grave," replied Smike, clinging to his hand. "Let me, oh do let me. You are my home — my kind friend — take me with you, pray."

"I am a friend who can do little for you," said Nicholas, kindly. "How came you here?"

He had followed him, it seemed; had never lost sight of him all the way, had watched while he slept, and when he halted for refreshment; and had feared to appear before, lest he should be sent back. He had not intended to appear now, but Nicholas had awakened more suddenly than he looked for, and he had not had time to conceal himself.

"Poor fellow!" said Nicholas, "your hard fate denies you any friend but one, and he is nearly as poor and helpless as yourself."

"May I — may I go with you?" asked Smike timidly. "I will be your faithful hard-working servant, I will, indeed. I want no clothes," added the poor creature, drawing his rags together; "these will do very well. I only want to be near you."

"And you shall," cried Nicholas. "And the world shall deal by you as it does by me, till one or both of us shall quit it for a better. Come!"

With these words, he strapped his burden on his shoulders and, taking his stick in one hand, extended the other to his delighted charge; and so they passed out of the old barn, together.



## CHAPTER XI

**A** HARD-FEATURED, square-faced man, elderly and shabby, stopped to unlock the door of the front attic, into which he walked with the air of legal owner.

This person wore a wig of short, coarse red hair, which he took off with his hat and hung upon a nail. Having adopted in its place a dirty cotton nightcap and groped about in the dark till he found a remnant of candle, he knocked at the partition which divided the two garrets and inquired, in a loud voice, whether Mr. Noggs had a light.

The sounds that came back were stifled by the lath and plaster, but they were in the voice of Newman, and conveyed a reply in the affirmative.

“A nasty night, Mr. Noggs!” said the man stepping in to light his candle.

“Does it rain?”

“Does it! I am wet through.”

“It doesn’t take much to wet you and me through, Mr. Crowl,” said Newman, laying his hand upon the lapel of his threadbare coat.

“Well, and that makes it the more vexatious,” said Mr. Crowl.

Uttering a low querulous growl, the speaker raked the scanty fire nearly out of the grate and inquired where he kept his coals.

Newman Noggs pointed to the bottom of a cupboard, and Mr. Crowl, seizing the shovel, threw on half the stock, which Noggs very deliberately took off again without saying a word.

“ You have not turned saving at this time of day, I hope? ” said Crawl.

Newman briefly said that he was going downstairs to supper.

“ Think of that now! ” said Crawl. “ If I didn’t — thinking that you were certain not to go, because you said you wouldn’t — make up my mind to spend the evening with you! ”

“ I was obliged to go. They would have me.”

“ Well, but what’s to become of me? It’s all your fault. I’ll tell you what — I’ll sit by your fire till you come back again.”

Newman cast a despairing glance at his small store of fuel, but, not having the courage to say no — a word which in all his life he never had said at the right time, either to himself or any one else — gave way to the proposed arrangement, and Mr. Crawl immediately went about making himself comfortable with Newman Noggs’s means.

The dinner downstairs was a great success, and Newman had a pleasant time. They were just about to drink some hot punch, late in the evening, when a hasty knock was heard at the room door.

“ Don’t be alarmed; it’s only me,” cried Crawl, looking in, in his nightcap — “ it’s Mr. Noggs that’s wanted.”

“ *Me!* ” cried Newman, much astonished.

“ Why, it is a queer hour, isn’t it? ” replied Crawl, who was not best pleased at the prospect of losing his fire; “ and they are queer-looking people, too, all covered with rain and mud. Shall I tell them to go away? ”

“ No,” said Newman, rising. “ People? How many? ”

“ Two.”

“ Want me? By name? ”

“ By name, Mr. Newman Noggs, as pat as need be.”

Newman reflected for a few seconds, and then hurried

away, muttering that he would be back directly. He was as good as his word; for in an exceedingly short time he burst into the room and seizing, without a word of apology or explanation, a lighted candle and tumbler of hot punch from the table, darted away like a madman.

“What the deuce is the matter with him?” exclaimed Crawl, throwing the door open. “Hark! Is there any noise above?”

Not hearing any unusual sounds, he went to his own room and retired for the night.

Newman Noggs scrambled in violent haste upstairs with the steaming beverage, which he had so unceremoniously snatched from the table. He bore his prize straight to his own back garret, where, footsore and nearly shoeless, wet, dirty, jaded, and disfigured with every mark of fatiguing travel, sat Nicholas and Smike, at once the cause and partner of his toil, both perfectly worn out by their unwonted and protracted exertion.

Newman’s first act was to compel Nicholas, with gentle force, to swallow half of the punch at a breath, nearly boiling as it was; and his next, to pour the remainder down the throat of Smike, who, never having tasted anything stronger than medicine in his whole life, exhibited various manifestations of surprise and delight.

“You are wet through,” said Newman, passing his hand hastily over the coat which Nicholas had thrown off; “and I—I—haven’t even a change,” he added, with a wistful glance at the shabby clothes he wore himself.

“I have dry clothes, or at least such as will serve my turn well, in my bundle,” replied Nicholas. “If you look so distressed to see me, you will add to the pain I feel already, at being compelled, for one night, to cast myself upon your slender means for aid and shelter.”

Mr. Noggs brightened up again, and went about making

such arrangements as were in his power for the comfort of his visitors.

These were simple enough; but slight as they were, they were not made without much bustling and running about. As Nicholas had husbanded his scanty stock of money so well that it was not quite expended, a supper of bread and cheese, with some cold beef from the cook's shop, was soon placed upon the table; and these viands being flanked by a pot of porter, there was no ground for apprehension on the score of hunger or thirst. Such preparations as Newman had in his power to make for the accommodation of his guests during the night occupied no very great time in completing; and as he had insisted that Nicholas should change his clothes and that Smike should invest himself in his solitary coat (which no entreaties could dissuade him from stripping off for the purpose), the travellers partook of their frugal fare with more satisfaction than one of them at least had derived from many a better meal.

They then drew near the fire, which Newman Noggs had made up as well as he could, after the inroads of Crawl upon the fuel; and Nicholas now pressed him with earnest questions concerning his mother and sister.

“Well; both well.”

“They are living in the city still?”

“They are.”

“And my sister. Is she still engaged in the business which she wrote to tell me she thought she should like so much?”

Newman opened his eyes rather wider than usual, but merely replied by a gasp, which was interpreted as meaning yes or no. The pantomime consisted of a nod also; so Nicholas took the answer as a favourable one.

“Now listen to me,” said Nicholas, laying his hand on Newman's shoulder. “Before I would make an effort to see them, I deemed it expedient to come to you, lest, by



gratifying my own selfish desire, I should inflict an injury upon them which I can never repair. What has my uncle heard from Yorkshire?"

Newman opened and shut his mouth several times, as though he were trying to speak, but could make nothing of it, and finally fixed his eyes on Nicholas with a grim and ghastly stare.

"What has he heard?" urged Nicholas, colouring. "You see that I am prepared to hear the very worst that malice can have suggested. Why should you conceal it from me? I must know it sooner or later; and what purpose can be gained by trifling with the matter for a few minutes, when half the time would put me in possession of all that has occurred? Tell me at once."

"Tomorrow morning; hear it tomorrow."

"What purpose would that answer?"

"You would sleep the better."

"I should sleep the worse. Sleep! I cannot hope to close my eyes all night, unless you tell me everything."

"And if I should tell you everything," said Newman, hesitating.

"Why, then you may rouse my indignation or wound my pride, but you will not break my rest; for if the scene were acted over again, I could take no other part than I have taken. I shall never regret doing as I have done — never, if I starve or beg in consequence. What is a little poverty or suffering to the disgrace of the basest and most inhuman cowardice! I tell you, if I had stood by tamely and passively, I should have hated myself and merited the contempt of every man in existence. The black-hearted scoundrel!"

With this allusion to the absent Mr. Squeers, Nicholas repressed his wrath and, relating to Newman what had passed at Dotheboys Hall, entreated him to speak out without more pressing. Thus adjured, Mr. Noggs took from an old trunk

a sheet of paper which appeared to have been scrawled over in great haste.

“The day before yesterday your uncle received this letter. I took a hasty copy of it, while he was out.”

Newman Noggs accordingly read as follows:

Dotheboys Hall  
Thursday Morning.

Sir,

My pa requests me to write to you, the doctors considering it doubtful whether he will ever recuver the use of his legs which prevents his holding a pen.

We are in a state of mind beyond everything, and my pa is one mask of brooses both blue and green; likewise two benches are steepled in his Goar. We were kimpelled to have him carried down into the kitchen where he now lays. You will judge from this that he has been brought very low.

When your nevew that you recommended for a teacher had done this to my pa, and jumped upon his body with his feet, and also langwedge which I will not pollewt my pen with describing, he assaulted my ma with dreadful violence, dashed her to the earth, and drove her back comb several inches into her head. A very little more and it must have entered her skull. We have a medical certifiket that if it had, the tortershell would have affected her brain.

Me and my brother were then the victims of his feury since which we have suffered very much which leads us to the arrowing belief that we have received some injury in our insides, especially as no marks of violence are visible externally. I am screaming out loud all the time I write and so is my brother, which takes off my attention rather and I hope will excuse mistakes.

The monster having sasiated his thirst for blood ran away, taking with him a boy of desperate character that he had excited to rebellyon, and a garnet ring belonging to my ma, and not having been apprehended by the constables is supposed to have been took up by some stage-coach. My pa begs that if he comes to you the ring may be returned, and that you will let the thief and assassin go, as if we prosecuted him he would not be transported, and if he is let go he is

sure to be hung before long which will save us trouble and be much more satisfactory. Hoping to hear from you when convenient

I remain

Yours and cetera

FANNY SQUEERS.

P. S. I pity his ignorance and despise him.

A profound silence succeeded to the reading of this choice epistle, during which Newman Noggs, as he folded it up, gazed with a kind of grotesque pity at the boy of desperate character therein referred to; who, having no more distinct perception of the matter in hand than that he had been the unfortunate cause of heaping trouble and falsehood upon Nicholas, sat mute and dispirited, with a most woebegone and heart-stricken look.

“Mr. Noggs,” said Nicholas, after a few moments’ reflection, “I must go out at once.”

“Go out!”

“Yes, to Golden Square. Nobody who knows me would believe this story of the ring; but it may suit the purpose, or gratify the hatred, of Mr. Ralph Nickleby to attach credence to it. It is due — not to him, but to myself — that I should state the truth; and moreover, I have a word or two to exchange with him which will not keep cool.”

“They must,” said Newman.

“They must not, indeed,” rejoined Nicholas firmly, as he prepared to leave the house.

“Hear me speak,” said Newman, planting himself before his impetuous young friend. “He is not there. He is away from town. He will not be back for three days, and I know that letter will not be answered before he returns.”

“Are you sure of this?” asked Nicholas, pacing the narrow room with rapid strides.



“Quite. He had hardly read it when he was called away. Its contents are known to nobody but himself and us.”

“Are you certain? Not even to my mother or sister? If I thought that they — I will go there — I must see them. Which is the way? Where is it?”

“Now be advised by me; make no effort to see even them till he comes home. I know the man. When he returns go straight to him and speak as boldly as you like. He knows the real truth as well as you or I. Trust him for that.”

“You mean well to me and should know him better than I can,” replied Nicholas, after some consideration. “Well, let it be so.”

Newman, who had stood with his back planted against the door, ready to oppose any egress from the apartment, by force if necessary, resumed his seat with much satisfaction; and as the water in the kettle was by this time boiling, made a glassful of spirits and water for Nicholas and a cracked mugfull for the accommodation of himself and Smike, of which the two partook in great harmony, while Nicholas, leaning his head upon his hand, remained in melancholy meditation.

The first care of Nicholas next morning was to look for some room without trenching upon the hospitality of Newman Noggs, who would have slept upon the stairs with pleasure, so that his young friend was accommodated. There was a small back room vacant on the second floor which Nicholas rented, and hired a few common articles of furniture from a neighbouring broker. The more he thought about his troubles the worse they seemed, so he resolved to banish them from his mind by dint of hard walking. Taking up his hat and leaving Smike to arrange and rearrange the room with as much delight as if it had been the costliest palace, he went out on the streets and mingled with the crowd which thronged them. But the unhappy state of his own affairs was the one



idea which occupied the brain of Nicholas, walk as fast as he would; and when he tried to dislodge it by speculating on the prospects of the people who surrounded him, he caught himself, in a few seconds, contrasting their condition with his own, and gliding almost imperceptibly back into his old train of thought again.

Occupied in these reflections, as he was making his way along one of the great public thoroughfares of London, he chanced to raise his eyes to a blue board, whereon was inscribed in characters of gold:

GENERAL AGENCY OFFICE  
FOR PLACES AND SITUATIONS OF ALL KINDS  
INQUIRE WITHIN

In the window hung a long, tempting array of written placards announcing vacant places of all grades. Nicholas halted before this temple of promise and ran his eye over the openings in life which were so profusely displayed. Then he went inside. He was not able to get a position from this place, but he had, what was to him, an experience of a lifetime. Just as it was his turn to go up to the desk, there came into the office an applicant in whose favour he immediately retired and whose appearance both surprised and interested him. This was a young lady who could be scarcely eighteen, of very slight and delicate figure, but exquisitely shaped, who, walking timidly up to the desk, made an inquiry in a very low voice about a situation as governess or companion. She raised her veil for an instant and disclosed a countenance of most uncommon beauty, though shaded by a cloud of sadness. She made the usual acknowledgment and glided away. If her clothing had been worn by one who imparted fewer graces of her own, it might have looked poor and shabby, but she simply looked quietly dressed. Her attend-

ant was a red-faced, round-eyed, slovenly girl, who, from a certain roughness about the bare arms under her shawl, was clearly a servant. This girl followed her mistress, and before Nicholas had recovered from the first effects of his surprise and admiration, the young lady was gone. It is not a matter of such improbability as some sober people may think, that he would have followed them out, had he not been restrained by what passed between the fat woman, who managed the place, and her bookkeeper.

“When is she coming again, Tom?” asked the fat woman.

“Tomorrow morning,” replied Tom, mending his pen. Then he said to Nicholas, in a very coarse disagreeable manner;

“I say, what a good-looking gal that was, wasn’t she?”

“What girl?” demanded Nicholas, sternly.

“Oh yes. I know what gal, eh?” whispered Tom, shutting one eye, and cocking his chin in the air. “You didn’t see her, you didn’t — I say, don’t you wish you was me, when she comes tomorrow morning?”

Nicholas looked at the ugly clerk as if he had a mind to reward his admiration of the young lady by beating the ledger about his ears, but he refrained, and strode haughtily out of the office, thinking no longer of his own misfortunes, but wondering what could be those of the beautiful girl he had seen. He made up his mind that he would be on hand at the employment office in the morning when she arrived and that he would try to find out who she was. Never before had any girl impressed him as being so sweet and lovely, yet oppressed with sorrow and trouble.

Smike had scraped a meal together from the remains of last night’s supper and was anxiously awaiting his return. The occurrences of the morning had not improved Nicholas’s appetite, and by him the dinner remained untasted. He was sitting in a thoughtful attitude with the plate which

poor SMIKE had filled with the choicest morsels untouched, when Newman NOGGS looked into the room.

“Come back?” asked Newman.

“Yes, tired to death, and what is worse, might have remained at home, for all the good I have done, as far as finding work goes.”

“Couldn’t expect to do much in one morning.”

“May be so, but I did expect, and am disappointed,” saying which, he gave Newman an account of his proceedings.

“If I could do anything,” said Nicholas, “anything however slight, until Ralph Nickleby returns, and I have eased my mind by confronting him, I should feel happier. I should think it no disgrace to work at anything. Lying indolently here, like a half-tamed sullen beast, distracts me.”

He visited the employment office the next day but could not find any work. Neither did he see anything more of the beautiful girl who had so impressed him the day before. In spite of all his troubles, her image remained in his mind.

## CHAPTER XII

WELL, now, indeed Madame Mantalini," said Miss Knag, as Kate was taking her weary way homewards on the first night, "That Miss Nickleby is a very creditable young person — a very creditable young person indeed — hem — upon my word, Madame Mantalini, it does very extraordinary credit even to your discrimination, that you should have found such a very excellent, very well behaved, very — hem — very unassuming young woman to assist in the fitting on. I have seen some young women when they had the opportunity of displaying before their betters behave in such a — oh, dear — well — but you're always right, Madame Mantalini, always; and as I very often tell the young ladies, how you do contrive to be always right when so many people are so often wrong is to me a mystery indeed."

"Beyond putting a very excellent client out of humour, Miss Nickleby has not done anything very remarkable today — that I am aware of, at least," said Madame Mantalini, in reply.

"Oh, dear! but you must allow a great deal for inexperience, you know."

"And youth?"

"Oh, I say nothing about that, Madame Mantalini, because if youth were any excuse, you wouldn't have ——"

"Quite so good a forewoman as I have, I suppose."

"Well, I never did know anybody like you, Madame Mantalini, and that's a fact, for you know what one's going to say, before it has time to rise to one's lips. Oh, very good! Ha, ha, ha!"



“For myself,” observed Madame Mantalini, glancing with affected carelessness at her assistant and laughing heartily in her sleeve, “I consider Miss Nickleby the most awkward girl I ever saw in my life.”

“Poor dear thing, it’s not her fault. If it was, we might hope to cure it; but as it’s her misfortune, Madame Mantalini, why really, you know, as the man said about the blind horse, we ought to respect it.”

“Her uncle told me she had been considered pretty,” remarked Madame Mantalini. “I think her one of the most ordinary girls I ever met with.”

“Ordinary!” cried Miss Knag with a countenance beaming delight; “and awkward! Well, all I can say is, Madame Mantalini, that I quite love the poor girl; and that if she was twice as indifferent-looking and twice as awkward as she is, I should be only so much the more her friend, and that’s the truth of it.”

In fact, Miss Knag had conceived an incipient affection for Kate Nickleby, after witnessing her failure that morning, and this short conversation with her superior increased the favourable prepossession to a most surprising extent.

At this high point, Miss Knag’s friendship remained for three whole days, much to the wonderment of Madame Mantalini’s young ladies, who had never beheld such constancy in that quarter before; but on the fourth it received a check no less violent than sudden, which thus occurred.

It happened that an old lord of great family, who was going to marry a young lady of no family in particular, came with the young lady’s sister, to witness the ceremony of trying on two nuptial bonnets which had been ordered the day before. Madame Mantalini announced the fact in a shrill treble through the speaking pipe, which communicated with the work room. Miss Knag darted hastily upstairs, with a bonnet in each hand, and presented herself in the show room.

The bonnets were no sooner fairly on the young lady than Miss Knag and Madame Mantalini fell into convulsions of admiration.

“A most elegant appearance,” said Madame Mantalini.

“I never saw anything so exquisite in all my life,” said Miss Knag.

Now the old lord, who was a very old lord, said nothing, but mumbled and chuckled in a state of great delight, no less with the nuptial bonnets and their wearers than with his own address in getting such a fine woman for his wife; and the young lady, who was a very lively young lady, seeing the old lord in this rapturous condition, chased the old lord behind a cheval glass and then and there kissed him, while Madame Mantalini and the other young lady looked discreetly another way.

But Miss Knag, who was tinged with curiosity, stepped accidentally behind the glass and encountered the lively young lady's eye just at the very moment when she kissed the old lord; upon which the young lady, in a pouting manner, murmured “an old thing,” and “great impertinence,” and finished by darting a look of displeasure at Miss Knag and smiling contemptuously.

“Madame Mantalini,” said the young lady.

“Ma'am,” said Madame Mantalini.

“Pray have up that pretty young creature we saw yesterday.”

“Oh yes, do,” said the sister.

“Of all things in the world, Madame Mantalini,” said the lord's intended, throwing herself languidly on a sofa, “I hate being waited upon by frights or elderly persons. Let me always see that young creature, I beg, whenever I come.”

“By all means,” said the old lord; “the lovely young creature, by all means.”

“Everybody is talking about her,” said the young lady,

in the same careless manner; "and my lord, being a great admirer of beauty, must positively see her."

"She is universally admired," replied Madame Mantalini. "Miss Knag, send up Miss Nickleby. You needn't return."

"I beg your pardon, Madame Mantalini, what did you say last?" asked Miss Knag, trembling.

"You needn't return," repeated the superior, sharply. Miss Knag vanished without another word, and in all reasonable time was replaced by Kate, who took off the new bonnets and put on the old ones, blushing very much to find that the old lord and the two young ladies were staring her out of countenance all the time.

"Why, how you colour, child!" said the lord's chosen bride.

"She is not quite so accustomed to her business as she will be in a week or two," interposed Madame Mantalini with a gracious smile.

"I am afraid you have been giving her some of your wicked looks, my lord," said the intended.

"No, no, no," replied the old lord, "no, no, I'm going to be married and lead a new life. Ha, ha, ha! a new life, a new life! ha, ha, ha!"

It was a satisfactory thing to hear that the old gentleman was going to lead a new life, for it was pretty evident that his old one would not last him much longer. The mere exertion of protracted chuckling reduced him to a fearful ebb of coughing and gasping; it was some minutes before he could find breath to remark that the girl was too pretty for a milliner.

"I hope you don't think good looks a disqualification for the business, my lord," said Madame Mantalini, simpering.

"Not by any means," replied the old lord, "or you would have left it long ago."



“You naughty creature,” said the lively lady, poking the peer with her parasol; “I won’t have you talk so. How dare you?”

This playful inquiry was accompanied with another poke, and another, and then the old lord caught the parasol, and wouldn’t give it up again, which induced the other lady to come to the rescue, and some very pretty sportiveness ensued.

“You will see that those little alterations are made, Madame Mantalini,” said the lady. “No, you bad man, you positively shall go first; I wouldn’t leave you behind with that pretty girl, not for half a second. I know you too well. Jane, my dear, let him go first, and we shall be quite sure of him.”

The old lord, evidently much flattered by this suspicion, bestowed a grotesque leer upon Kate as he passed and, receiving another tap with the parasol for his wickedness, tottered downstairs to the door, where his sprightly body was hoisted into the carriage by two stout footmen.

“Foh!” said Madame Mantalini, “how he ever gets into a carriage without thinking of a hearse, I can’t think. There, take the things away, my dear; take them away.”

Kate, who had remained during the whole scene with her eyes modestly fixed upon the ground, was only too happy to avail herself of the permission to retire and hasten joyfully downstairs to Miss Knag’s dominion.

The circumstances of the little kingdom had greatly changed, however, during the short period of her absence. In place of Miss Knag being stationed in her accustomed seat, preserving all the dignity and greatness of Madame Mantalini’s representative, she was reposing on a large box, bathed in tears, while three or four of the young ladies in close attendance upon her, together with the presence of hartshorn, vinegar, and other restoratives, would have borne ample



testimony, even without the derangement of the headdress and front row of curls, to her having fainted desperately.

“ Bless me! ” said Kate, stepping hastily forward, “ What is the matter? ”

This inquiry produced in Miss Knag violent symptoms of a relapse and several young ladies, darting angry looks at Kate, applied more vinegar and hartshorn, and said it was “ a shame.”

“ What is a shame? ” demanded Kate. “ What is the matter? What has happened? Tell me.”

“ Matter! ” cried Miss Knag, coming all at once bolt upright, to the great consternation of the assembled maidens. “ Matter! Fie upon you, you nasty creature! ”

“ Gracious! ” cried Kate, almost paralysed by the violence with which the adjective had been jerked out from between Miss Knag’s closed teeth; “ have I offended you? ”

“ *You* offended me! ” retorted Miss Knag, “ You! a chit, a child, an upstart, nobody! Oh, indeed! Ha, ha! ”

Now it was evident, as Miss Knag laughed, that something struck her as being exceedingly funny; and as the young ladies took their tone from Miss Knag — she being the chief, — they all got up a laugh without a moment’s delay and nodded their heads a little, and smiled sarcastically to each other, as much as to say how very good that was!

“ Here she is,” continued Miss Knag, getting off the box and introducing Kate with much ceremony and many low curtseys to the delighted throng; “ here she is — everybody is talking about her — the belle, ladies — the beauty, the — oh, you bold-faced thing! ”

At this crisis, Miss Knag was unable to repress a virtuous shudder, which immediately communicated itself to all the young ladies, after which Miss Knag laughed, and after that, cried.

“ For fifteen years,” exclaimed Miss Knag, sobbing in a

most affecting manner, "for fifteen years have I been the credit and ornament of this room and the one upstairs. Thank God," said Miss Knag, stamping first her right foot and then her left with remarkable energy, "I have never in all that time, till now, been exposed to the arts, the vile arts, of a creature who disgraces us with all her proceedings and makes proper people blush for themselves. But I feel it, I do feel it, although I am disgusted."

Miss Knag here relapsed into softness, and the young ladies, renewing their attentions, murmured that she ought to be superior to such things and that for their part they despised them and considered them beneath their notice; in witness whereof, they called out more emphatically than before that it was a shame and that they felt so angry they hardly knew what to do with themselves.

"Have I lived to this day to be called a fright!" cried Miss Knag, suddenly becoming convulsive.

"Oh no, no," replied the chorus, "pray don't say so; don't now!"

"Have I deserved to be called an elderly person?" screamed Miss Knag.

"Don't think of such things, dear," answered the chorus.

"I hate her," cried Miss Knag; "I detest and hate her. Never let her speak to me again; never let anybody who is a friend of mine speak to her; a hussy, an impudent, artful hussy!" Having denounced the object of her wrath in these terms, Miss Knag screamed once, hiccuped thrice, gurgled in her throat several times, slumbered, shivered, woke, came to, composed her headdress, and declared herself quite well again.

Poor Kate had regarded these proceedings at first in perfect bewilderment. She had then turned red and pale by turns, and once or twice tried to speak; but as the true motives of this altered behaviour developed themselves, she

retired a few paces and looked calmly on without deigning a reply. Nevertheless, although she walked proudly to her seat and turned her back upon the group of little satellites who had clustered round their ruling planet in the remotest corner of the room, she gave way, in secret, to some such bitter tears as would have gladdened Miss Knag's inmost soul if she could have seen them fall. The rest of the week was so miserable for Kate that she hailed the arrival of Saturday night as a prisoner would a few delicious hours of intermission from slow and wearing torture.

When she joined her mother at the street corner as usual, she was surprised to find her in conversation with Ralph Nickleby, who said:

“ Ah, my dear, we were at that moment talking about you.”

“ Indeed,” replied Kate, listlessly.

“ I was coming to call for you, but your mother and I have been talking over family affairs, and the time has slipped away rapidly.”

“ Well, now, hasn't it? ” interposed Mrs. Nickleby. “ Upon my word I couldn't have believed it possible that — Kate, my dear, you're to dine with your uncle at half-past six tomorrow. Your black silk will be quite dress enough, my dear, with that pretty little scarf and a plain band in your hair,— dear, dear, if I only had those amethysts of mine — you recollect them, Kate, my love — how they used to sparkle, you know, but your papa, your poor dear papa — ah! there never was anything so cruelly sacrificed as those jewels were, never! ” Overpowered by this agonizing thought, Mrs. Nickleby shook her head, in a melancholy manner, and applied her handkerchief to her eyes.

“ I don't want them, mama, indeed,” said Kate. “ Forget that you ever had them.”

“ Now,” said Ralph, with a smile “ to return to the point from which we have strayed. I have a little party of — of —



gentlemen with whom I am connected in business just now, at my house tomorrow, and your mother has promised that you shall keep house for me. I am not much used to parties; but this is one of business, and such fooleries are an important part of it sometimes. You don't mind obliging me?"

"Mind!" cried Mrs. Nickleby. "My dear Kate, why —"

"Pray," interrupted Ralph, motioning her to be silent. "I spoke to my niece."

"I shall be very glad, of course, uncle, but I am afraid you will find me awkward and embarrassed."

"Oh no. Come when you like, in a hackney coach — I'll pay for it. Good night — a — a — God bless you."

The blessing seemed to stick in Mr. Ralph Nickleby's throat, as if it were not used to the thoroughfare, and didn't know the way out. But it got out somehow, though awkwardly enough; and having disposed of it, he shook hands with his two relatives and abruptly left them.

"What a very strongly marked countenance your uncle has!" said Mrs. Nickleby, quite struck with his parting look.

"I don't see the slightest resemblance to his poor brother."

"Mama!" said Kate reprovingly. "To think of such a thing!"

"No," said Mrs. Nickleby, musing. "There certainly is none. But it's a very honest face."

The worthy matron made this remark with great emphasis as if it comprised no small quantity of ingenuity and research. Kate looked up hastily, and as hastily looked down again.

"What has come over you, my dear, in the name of goodness?" asked Mrs. Nickleby, when they had walked on, for some time, in silence.

"I was only thinking, mama."

"Thinking! Yes, and indeed, plenty to think about, too. Your uncle has taken a strong fancy to you — that's quite clear."



The next day, in good time, or in bad time, as the reader likes to take it — (for Mrs. Nickleby's impatience went a good deal faster than the clocks at the end of the town, and Kate was dressed to the very last hairpin a full hour and a half before it was at all necessary to begin to think about it) — with many adieux to her mother and many kind messages to Miss La Creevy, who was to come to tea, Kate Nickleby went away in state, if ever anybody went away in state in a hackney coach yet. And the coach, and the coachman, and the horses, rattled, and jangled, and whipped, and cursed, and swore, and tumbled on together, until they came to Golden Square.

The coachman gave a tremendous double knock at the door, which was opened long before he had done, as quickly as if there had been a man behind it with his hand tied to the latch. Kate, who had expected no more uncommon appearance than Newman Noggs in a clean shirt, was not a little astonished to see that the opener was a man in handsome livery and that there were two or three others in the hall. She was ushered upstairs into a back drawing-room, where she was left alone.

If she had been surprised at the apparition of the footman, she was perfectly absorbed in amazement at the richness and splendour of the furniture. The softest and most elegant carpets, the most exquisite pictures, the costliest mirrors, articles of richest ornament, encountered her on every side. The very staircase, nearly down to the hall door, was crammed with beautiful and luxurious things, as though the house were brimfull of riches, which, with a very trifling addition, would fairly run over into the street.

At length, the door opened, and Ralph himself, divested of his boots, and ceremoniously embellished with black silks and shoes, presented his crafty face.

“I couldn't see you before, my dear,” he said, in a low

tone, and pointing, as he spoke, to the next room. "I was engaged in receiving them. Now — shall I take you in?"

"Pray, uncle," said Kate, a little flurried, as people much more conversant with society often are, when they are about to enter a roomfull of strangers and have had time to think of it previously, "are there any ladies here?"

"No, I don't know any."

"Must I go in immediately?"

"As you please. They are all come, and dinner will be announced directly afterwards — that's all."

Kate would have entreated a few minutes' respite, but reflecting that her uncle might consider the payment of the hackney coach fare a sort of bargain for her punctuality, she suffered him to draw her arm through his, and to lead her away.

Seven or eight gentlemen were standing round the fire when they went in and, as they were talking very loud, were not aware of their entrance until Mr. Ralph Nickleby, touching one on the coat sleeve, said in a harsh emphatic voice, as if to attract general attention —

"Lord Frederick Verisopht, my niece, Miss Nickleby."

The group dispersed, as if in great surprise, and the gentleman addressed, turning round, exhibited a suit of clothes of the most superlative cut, a pair of whiskers of similar quality, a moustache, a head of hair, and a young face.

"Eh!" said the gentleman. "What — the — deyvle!"

With which broken ejaculation, he fixed his glass in his eye, and stared at Miss Nickleby in great surprise.

"My niece, my lord."

"Then my ears did not deceive me, and it's not wa-a-x work; How dee do? I'm very happy." And then his lordship turned to another superlative gentleman, something older, something stouter, something redder in the face, and said in a loud whisper that the girl was "deyvlish pitty."

“Introduce me, Nickleby,” said this second gentleman, who was lounging with his back to the fire and both elbows on the chimney piece.

“Sir Mulberry Hawk,” said Ralph.

“Otherwise the most knowing card in the pa-ack, Miss Nickleby,” said Lord Frederick Verisopht.

“Don’t leave me out, Nickleby,” cried a sharp-faced gentleman, who was sitting on a low chair with a high back, reading the paper.

“Mr. Pyke,” said Ralph.

“Nor me, Nickleby,” cried a gentleman with a flushed face and a flashy air, from the elbow of Sir Mulberry Hawk.

“Mr. Pluck,” said Ralph. Then wheeling about again, towards a gentleman with the neck of a stork and the legs of no animal in particular, Ralph introduced him as the Honourable Mr. Snobb; and a white-headed person at the table as Colonel Chowser. The colonel was in conversation with somebody, who appeared to be a make-weight, and was not introduced at all.

There were two circumstances which, in this early stage of the party, struck home to Kate’s bosom and brought the blood tingling to her face. One was the flippant contempt with which the guests evidently regarded her uncle, and the other, the easy insolence of their manner towards herself.

When Ralph had completed the ceremony of introduction, he led his blushing niece to a seat. As he did so, he glanced warily round as though to assure himself of the impression which her unlooked-for appearance had created.

“An unexpected playsure, Nickleby,” said Lord Frederick Verisopht, taking his glass out of his right eye, where it had, until now, done duty on Kate and fixing it in his left, to bring it to bear on Ralph.

“Designed to surprise you, Lord Frederick,” said Mr. Pluck.



“Not a bad idea,” said his lordship, “and one that would almost warrant the addition of an extra two and a half per cent.”

“Nickleby,” said Sir Mulberry Hawk, in a thick coarse voice, “take the hint, and tack it on to the other five-and-twenty, or whatever it is, and give me half for the advice.”

Sir Mulberry garnished this speech with a hoarse laugh, whereat Messrs. Pyke and Pluck laughed together.

These gentlemen had not yet quite recovered from the jest when dinner was announced, and then they were thrown into fresh ecstasies by a similar cause; for Sir Mulberry Hawk, in an excess of humour, shot dexterously past Lord Frederick Verisopht, who was about to lead Kate downstairs, and drew her arm through his up to the elbow.

“No, damn it, Verisopht, fair play’s a jewel, and Miss Nickleby and I settled the matter with our eyes ten minutes ago.”

“Ha, ha, ha!” laughed the Honourable Mr. Snobb, “very good, very good.”

Rendered additionally witty by this applause, Sir Mulberry Hawk leered upon his friends most facetiously and led Kate downstairs with an air of familiarity which roused in her gentle breast such burning indignation as she felt it almost impossible to repress. Nor was the intensity of these feelings at all diminished when she found herself placed at the top of the table, with Sir Mulberry Hawk and Lord Frederick Verisopht on either side.

“Oh, you’ve found your way into our neighbourhood, have you?” said Sir Mulberry as his lordship sat down.

“Of course,” replied Lord Frederick, fixing his eyes on Miss Nickleby, “how can you a-ask me?”

“Well, you attend to your dinner, and don’t mind Miss Nickleby and me, for we shall prove very indifferent company, I dare say.”



“ I wish you'd interfere here, Nickleby,” said Lord Frederick.

“ What is the matter, my lord? ” demanded Ralph from the bottom of the table, where he was supported by Messrs. Pyke and Pluck.

“ This fellow, Hawk, is monopolising your niece.”

“ He has a tolerable share of everything that you lay claim to, my lord,” said Ralph with a sneer.

“ Gad, so he has, deyvle take me if I know which is master in my own house, he or I.”

“ I know,” muttered Ralph.

“ I think I shall cut him off with a shilling,” said the young nobleman, jocosely.

“ No, no, curse it,” said Sir Mulberry. “ When you come to the shilling — that last shilling — I'll cut you fast enough; but till then, I'll never leave you — you may take your oath of it.”

This sally was received with a general roar, above which was plainly distinguishable the laughter of Mr. Pyke and Mr. Pluck, who were evidently Sir Mulberry's toads in ordinary. Indeed, it was not difficult to see that the majority of the company preyed upon the unfortunate young lord, who, weak and silly as he was, appeared by far the least vicious of the party. Sir Mulberry Hawk was remarkable for his tack in ruining, by himself and his creatures, young gentlemen of fortune — a genteel and elegant profession, of which he had undoubtedly gained the head.

The dinner was elegant and the company were remarkable for doing it ample justice, in which respect Messrs. Pyke and Pluck particularly signalised themselves; these two gentlemen eating of every dish and drinking of every bottle with a capacity and perseverance truly astonishing. They were remarkably fresh, too, notwithstanding their great exertions; for on the appearance of the dessert, they broke out

again, as if nothing serious had taken place since breakfast.

“ Well,” said Lord Frederick, sipping his first glass of port, “ if this is a discounting dinner, all I have to say is, deyvle take me, if it wouldn’t be a good pla-an to get discount every day.”

“ You’ll have plenty of it, in your time,” returned Sir Mulberry Hawk; “ Nickleby will tell you that.”

“ What do you say, Nickleby? ” inquired the young man. “ Am I to be a good customer? ”

“ It depends entirely on circumstances, my lord,” replied Ralph.

“ On your lordship’s circumstances,” interposed Colonel Chowser of the Militia — and the race-courses.

The gallant colonel glanced at Messrs. Pyke and Pluck as if he thought they ought to laugh at his joke; but those gentlemen, being only engaged to laugh for Sir Mulberry Hawk, were as grave as a pair of undertakers.

All this while, Kate had sat as silently as she could, scarcely daring to raise her eyes, lest they should encounter the admiring gaze of Lord Frederick Verisopht or, what was still more embarrassing, the bold looks of his friend, Sir Mulberry. The latter gentleman was obliging enough to direct general attention towards her, saying, “ Here is Miss Nickleby, wondering why the deuce somebody doesn’t make love to her.”

“ No, indeed,” said Kate, hastily looking up, “ I —— ” and then she stopped, feeling it would have been better to have said nothing at all.

“ I’ll hold any man fifty pounds,” said Sir Mulberry, “ that Miss Nickleby can’t look in my face and tell me she wasn’t thinking so.”

“ Done! ” cried the noble gull. “ Within ten minutes.”

“ Done! ” repeated Sir Mulberry. The money was pro-

duced on both sides, and the Honourable Mr. Snobb was elected to the double office of stakeholder and timekeeper.

“Pray,” said Kate, in great confusion, while these preliminaries were in course of completion. “Please do not make me the subject of any bets. Uncle, I cannot really ——”

“Why not, my dear?” replied Ralph, in whose grating voice, however, there was an unusual huskiness, as though he spoke unwillingly and would rather that the proposition had not been broached. “It is done in a moment; there is nothing in it. If the gentlemen insist on it ——”

“I don’t insist on it,” said Mulberry, with a loud laugh. “That is, I by no means insist upon Miss Nickleby’s making the denial, for if she does, I lose; but I shall be glad to see her bright eyes, especially as she favours the mahogany so much.”

“So she does, and it’s too ba-a-d of you, Miss Nickleby,” said the noble youth.

“Quite cruel,” said Mr. Pyke.

“Horrid cruel,” said Mr. Pluck.

“I don’t care if I do lose,” said Sir Mulberry; “for one tolerable look at Miss Nickleby’s eyes is worth double the money.”

“More,” said Mr. Pyke.

“Far more,” said Mr. Pluck.

“How goes the enemy, Snobb?” asked Sir Mulberry Hawk.

“Four minutes gone.”

“Bravo!”

“Won’t you ma-ake one effort for me, Miss Nickleby?” asked Lord Frederick, after a short interval.

“You needn’t trouble yourself to inquire, my buck,” said Sir Mulberry; “Miss Nickleby and I understand each other; she declares on my side and shows her taste. You haven’t a chance, old fellow. Time, Snobb?”

“Eight minutes gone.”



“Get the money ready,” said Sir Mulberry; “you’ll soon hand over.”

“Ha, ha, ha!” laughed Mr. Pyke.

Mr. Pluck, who always came second and topped his companion if he could, screamed outright.

The poor girl, who was so overwhelmed with confusion that she scarcely knew what she did, had determined to remain perfectly quiet but, fearing that by so doing she might seem to countenance Sir Mulberry’s boast, which had been uttered with great coarseness and vulgarity of manner, raised her eyes and looked him in the face. There was something so odious, so insolent, so repulsive in the look which met her that, without the power to stammer forth a syllable, she rose and hurried from the room. She restrained her tears by a great effort until she was alone upstairs, and then gave them vent.

“Capital!” said Sir Mulberry Hawk, putting the stakes in his pocket. “That’s a girl of spirit, and we’ll drink her health.”

It is needless to say, that Pyke and Co. responded, with great warmth of manner, to this proposal, or that the toast was drunk with many little insinuations from the firm, relative to the completeness of Sir Mulberry’s conquest.

Ralph, who, while the attention of the other guests was attracted to the principals in the preceding scene, had eyed them like a wolf, appeared to breathe more freely now his niece was gone; the decanters passed quickly round; he leaned back in his chair, and turned his eyes from speaker to speaker, as they warmed with wine, with looks that seemed to search their hearts and lay bare, for his distempered sport, every idle thought within them.

Meanwhile Kate, left wholly to herself, had, in some degree, recovered her composure. She had learned from a female attendant that her uncle wished to see her before she left and

had also gleaned the satisfactory intelligence that the gentlemen would take coffee at table. The prospect of seeing them no more contributed greatly to calm her agitation, and taking up a book, she composed herself to read.

She started sometimes, when the sudden opening of the dining room door let loose a wild shout of noisy revelry, and more than once rose in great alarm, as a fancied footstep on the staircase impressed her with the fear that some stray member of the party was returning alone. Nothing occurring, however, to realise her apprehensions, she endeavoured to fix her attention more closely on her book, in which by degrees she became so much interested that she had read on through several chapters without heed of time or place, when she was terrified by suddenly hearing her name pronounced by a man's voice close at her ear.

The book fell from her hand. Lounging on an ottoman close beside her was Sir Mulberry Hawk, evidently the worse for wine.

“What a delightful studiousness! Was it real, now, or only to display the eyelashes?”

Kate, looking anxiously towards the door, made no reply.

“I have looked at 'em for five minutes; upon my soul, they're perfect. Why did I speak and destroy such a pretty little picture!”

“Do me the favour to be silent,” said Kate, indignantly.

“No, don't,” said Sir Mulberry, folding his crushed hat to lay his elbow on, and bringing himself still closer to the young lady: “upon my life, you oughtn't to. Such a devoted slave of yours, Miss Nickleby — it's an infernal thing to treat him so harshly, upon my soul it is.”

“I wish you to understand, sir, that your behaviour offends and disgusts me. If you have a spark of gentlemanly feeling remaining, you will leave me.”

“Now why will you keep up this appearance of excessive

rigour, my sweet creature? Now be more natural — my dear Miss Nickleby, be more natural — do.”

Kate hastily rose; but as she rose, Sir Mulberry caught her dress and forcibly detained her.

“Let me go, sir,” she cried, her heart swelling with anger. “Do you hear? Instantly — this moment.”

“Not for the world; sit down, sit down, I want to talk to you.” Thus speaking, he leaned over, as if to replace her in her chair; but the young lady, making an effort to disengage herself, he lost his balance and measured his length upon the ground. As Kate sprang forward to leave the room, Mr. Ralph Nickleby appeared in the doorway and confronted her.

“What is this?” said Ralph.

“It is this, sir,” replied Kate, violently agitated; “that beneath the roof where I, a helpless girl, your dead brother’s child, should most have found protection, I have been exposed to insult which should make you shrink to look upon me. Let me pass you.”

Ralph did shrink, as the indignant girl fixed her kindling eye upon him; but he did not comply with her injunction, nevertheless; for he led her to a distant seat, and, returning and approaching Sir Mulberry Hawk, who had by this time risen, motioned towards the door.

“Your way lies there, sir,” said Ralph, in a suppressed voice.

“What do you mean by that?” demanded his friend, fiercely.

The swollen veins stood out like sinews on Ralph’s wrinkled forehead, and the nerves about his mouth worked as though some unendurable emotion wrung them; but he smiled disdainfully, and again pointed to the door.

“Do you know me, you old madman?” asked Sir Mulberry.



“Well,” said Ralph. The fashionable vagabond for the moment quailed under the steady look of the older sinner, and walked towards the door, muttering as he went.

“You wanted the lord, did you?” he said, stopping short when he reached the door, as if a new light had broken in upon him, and confronting Ralph again. “Damme, I was in the way, was I?”

Ralph smiled again, but made no answer.

“Who brought him to you first?” pursued Sir Mulberry; “and how, without me, could you ever have wound him in your net as you have?”

“The net is a large one and rather full,” said Ralph. “Take care that it chokes nobody in the meshes.”

“You would sell your flesh and blood for money; yourself, if you have not already made a bargain with the devil,” retorted the other. “Do you mean to tell me that your pretty niece was not brought here as a decoy for the drunken boy downstairs?”

Although this hurried dialogue was carried on, in a suppressed tone on both sides, Ralph looked involuntarily round to ascertain that Kate had not moved her position so as to be within hearing. His adversary saw the advantage he had gained and followed it up.

“Do you mean to tell me that it is not so? Do you mean to say that, if *he* had found his way up here instead of me, you wouldn't have been a little more blind, and a little more deaf, and a little less flourishing, than you have been? Come, Nickleby, answer me that.”

“I tell you this; that if I brought her here, as a matter of business ——”

“Aye, that's the word,” with a laugh. “You're coming to yourself again now.”

“—As a matter of business,” pursued Ralph, speaking slowly and firmly, as a man who has made up his mind to

say no more, "because I thought she might make some impression on the silly youth you have taken in hand and are lending good help to ruin, I knew — knowing him — that it would be long before he outraged her girl's feelings, and that he would, with a little management, respect the sex and conduct even of his usurer's niece. But if I thought to draw him on more gently by this device, I did not think of subjecting the girl to the licentiousness and brutality of so old a hand as you. And now we understand each other."

"Especially as there was nothing to be got by it — eh?" sneered Sir Mulberry.

"Exactly so," said Ralph. He had turned away, and looked over his shoulder to make this last reply. The eyes of the two worthies met, with an expression as if each rascal felt that there was no disguising himself from the other; and Sir Mulberry Hawk shrugged his shoulders and walked slowly out.

His friend closed the door and looked restlessly towards the spot where his niece still remained in the attitude in which he had left her. She had flung herself heavily upon the couch and, with her head drooping over the cushion and her face hidden in her hands, seemed to be still weeping in an agony of shame and grief.

Ralph took a chair at some distance; then another a little nearer; then nearer again, and finally sat on the same sofa, and laid his hand on Kate's arm.

"Hush, my dear!" he said, as she drew it back, and her sobs burst out afresh. "Hush, hush! Don't mind it now; don't think of it."

"Oh, for pity's sake, let me go home, let me leave this house and go home."

"Yes, yes, you shall. But you must dry your eyes first and compose yourself. Let me raise your head. There — there."

“ Oh, uncle! What have I done — what have I done — that you should subject me to this? If I had wronged you in thought, or word, or deed, it would have been most cruel to me and to the memory of one you must have loved in some old time; but —— ”

“ Only listen to me for a moment,” interrupted Ralph, seriously alarmed by the violence of her emotions. “ I didn’t know it would be so; it was impossible for me to foresee it. I did all I could. — Come, let us walk about. You are faint with the closeness of the room and the heat of these lamps. You will be better now, if you make the slightest effort.”

“ I will do anything if you will only send me home.”

“ Well, well, I will, but you must get back your own looks; for those you have will frighten them, and nobody must know of this but you and I. Now let us walk the other way. There. You look better even now.”

With such encouragements as these, Ralph Nickleby walked to and fro with his niece leaning on his arm, actually trembling beneath her touch.

In the same manner, when he judged it prudent to allow her to depart, he supported her downstairs, after adjusting her shawl and performing such little offices, most probably for the first time in his life. Across the hall, and down the steps, Ralph led her too; nor did he withdraw his hand until she was seated in the coach.

As the door of the vehicle was roughly closed, a comb fell from Kate’s hair, close at her uncle’s feet; and as he picked it up and returned it into her hand, the light from a neighbouring lamp shone upon her face. The lock of hair that had escaped and curled loosely over her brow, the traces of tears yet scarcely dry, the flushed cheek, the look of sorrow, all fired some dormant train of recollection in the old man’s breast; and the face of his dead brother seemed present before him, with the very look it bore on some occasion of



boyish grief of which every circumstance flashed upon his mind with the distinctness of a scene of yesterday.

Ralph Nickleby, who was proof against all appeals of blood and kindred — who was steeled against every tale of sorrow and distress, — staggered while he looked, and went back into his house as a man who had seen a spirit from some world beyond the grave.

## CHAPTER XIII

LITTLE Miss La Creevy trotted briskly through divers streets at the west end of the town, early on Monday morning — the day after the dinner — charged with the important commission of acquainting Madame Mantalini that Miss Nickleby was too unwell to attend that day, but hoped to be enabled to resume her duties on the morrow. As Miss La Creevy walked along, she cogitated a good deal upon the probable causes of her young friend's indisposition.

“I don't know what to make of it, her eyes were decidedly red last night. She said she had a headache; headaches don't occasion red eyes. She must have been crying. I can't think of anything, unless it was the behaviour of that old bear. Cross to her, I suppose? Unpleasant brute!”

Relieved by this expression of opinion, although it was vented upon empty air, Miss La Creevy trotted on to Madame Mantalini's; and being informed that the governing power was not yet out of bed, requested an interview with the second in command, whereupon Miss Knag appeared.

“So far as I am concerned,” said Miss Knag, when the message had been delivered, “I could spare Miss Nickleby for evermore.”

“Oh, indeed, ma'am! But, you see, you are not mistress of the business, and therefore it's of no great consequence,” said Miss La Creevy.

“Very good, ma'am. Have you any further commands for me?”

“No, I have not, ma'am,” said Miss La Creevy.

“Then good morning, ma'am.”

“ Good morning to you, ma’am, and many obligations for your extreme politeness and good breeding.”

Thus terminating the interview during which both ladies had trembled very much and been marvellously polite — certain indications that they were within an inch of a very desperate quarrel — Miss La Creevy bounced out of the room, and into the street.

“ I wonder who that is,” said the queer little soul. “ A nice person to know, I should think! I wish I had the painting of her; I’d do her justice.” So, feeling quite satisfied that she had said a very cutting thing at Miss Knag’s expense, Miss La Creevy had a hearty laugh and went home to breakfast in great good humour.

Here was one of the advantages of having lived alone so long! The little bustling, active, cheerful creature existed entirely within herself, talked to herself, made a confidante of herself, was as sarcastic as she could be on people who offended her by herself, pleased herself, and did no harm. She went home to breakfast and had scarcely caught the full flavour of her first sip of tea, when the servant announced a gentleman. Miss La Creevy at once imagined a new sitter and was in unspeakable consternation at the presence of the tea things.

“ Here, take ’em away; run with ’em into the bedroom; anywhere,” said Miss La Creevy to her maid. “ Dear, dear! To think that I should be late on this particular morning of all others after being ready for three weeks by half-past eight o’clock, and not a soul coming near the place! ”

“ Don’t let me put you out of the way,” said a voice Miss La Creevy knew. “ I told the servant not to mention my name, because I wished to surprise you.”

“ Mr. Nicholas! ”

“ You have not forgotten me, I see,” replied Nicholas, extending his hand.

“ Why, I think I should have known you even if I had met



you in the street. Hannah, another cup and saucer. But now I look at you again, you seem thinner than when I saw you last, and your face is haggard and pale. And how come you to have left Yorkshire? ”

She stopped here, for there was so much heart in her altered tone and manner that Nicholas was quite moved.

“ I need look somewhat changed,” he said, after a short silence, “ for I have undergone some suffering, both of mind and body, since I left London. I have been very poor, too, and have even suffered from want.”

“ Good heavens, Mr. Nicholas, what are you telling me! ”

“ Nothing which need distress you quite so much,” answered Nicholas, with a more sprightly air; “ neither did I come here to bewail my lot, but on a matter more to the purpose. I wish to meet my uncle face to face. I should tell you that first.”

“ Then all I have to say about that is that I don't envy you your taste; and that sitting in the same room with his very boots would put me out of humour for a fortnight.”

“ In the main, there may be no great difference of opinion between you and me, so far; but you will understand that I desire to confront him, to justify myself, and to cast his duplicity and malice in his throat.”

“ That's quite another matter,” rejoined Miss La Creevy. “ Heaven forgive me, but I shouldn't cry my eyes quite out of my head if they choked him. Well? ”

“ To this end, I called upon him this morning,” said Nicholas. “ He only returned to town on Saturday, and I knew nothing of his arrival until late last night.”

“ And did you see him? ”

“ No, he had gone out.”

“ Hah! on some kind, charitable business, I dare say.”

“ I have reason to believe, from what has been told me by a friend of mine who is acquainted with his movements, that

he intends seeing my mother and sister today and giving them his version of the occurrences that have befallen me. I will meet him there."

"That's right; and yet, I don't know; there is much to be thought of — others to be considered."

"I have considered others; but as honesty and honour are both at issue, nothing shall deter me."

"You should know best."

"In this case I hope so, and all I want you to do for me is to prepare them for my coming. They think me a long way off; and if I went wholly unexpected, I should frighten them. If you can spare time to tell them that you have seen me and that I shall be with them in a quarter of an hour afterwards, you will do me a great service."

"I wish I could do you, or any of you, a greater service, but the power to serve is as seldom joined with the will as the will is with the power, I think."

Talking on very fast and very much, Miss La Creevy finished her breakfast with great expedition, put away the tea caddy, and hid the key under the fender, resumed her bonnet, and, taking Nicholas's arm, sallied forth at once to the city. Nicholas left her near the door of his mother's house and promised to return within a quarter of an hour.

When Miss La Creevy, admitted by a girl who was cleaning the house, made her way to the sitting room, she found Mrs. Nickleby and Kate in tears, and Ralph just concluding his statement of his nephew's misdemeanours. Kate beckoned her not to retire, and Miss La Creevy took a seat in silence.

"You are here already, are you, my gentleman?" thought the little woman. "Then he shall announce himself, and see what effect that has on you."

"This is pretty," said Ralph, folding up Miss Squeers's note; "very pretty. I recommended him — against all my

previous conviction, for I knew he would never do any good — to a man with whom, behaving himself properly, he might have remained, in comfort, for years. What is the result? Conduct for which he might be put in jail at the Old Bailey.”

“I never will believe it,” said Kate, indignantly. “Never. It is some base conspiracy which carries its own falsehood with it.”

“My dear,” said Ralph, “you wrong the worthy man. These are not inventions. The man is assaulted, your brother is not to be found; this boy, of whom they speak, goes with him — remember, remember.”

“It is impossible, Nicholas! — and a thief, too! Mama, how can you sit and hear such statements?”

Poor Mrs. Nickleby, who had at no time been remarkable for the possession of a véry clear understanding, and who had been reduced by the late changes in her affairs to a most complicated state of perplexity, made no other reply to this earnest remonstrance than exclaiming from behind a mass of pocket handkerchief that she never could have believed it — thereby most ingeniously leaving her hearers to suppose that she did believe it.

“It would be my duty, if he came in my way, to deliver him up to justice,” said Ralph, “my bounden duty. I should have no other course, as a man of the world and a man of business. And yet,” said Ralph, speaking in a very marked manner and looking furtively, but fixedly, at Kate, “and yet I would not. I would spare the feeling of his — of his sister. And his mother, of course,” added Ralph, as though by an afterthought, and with far less emphasis.

Kate very well understood that this was held out as an additional inducement to her, to preserve the strictest silence regarding the events of the preceding night. She looked involuntarily towards Ralph as he ceased to speak, but he had



turned his eyes another way and seemed for the moment quite unconscious of her presence.

“Everything,” said Ralph, after a long silence, broken only by Mrs. Nickleby’s sobs, “everything combines to prove the truth of this letter, if indeed there were any possibility of disputing it. Do innocent men steal away from the sight of honest folks, and skulk in hiding places, like outlaws? Do innocent men inveigle nameless vagabonds and prowl with them about the country as idle robbers do? Assault, riot, theft, what do you call these?”

“A lie!” cried a voice, as the door was dashed open, and Nicholas came into the room.

In the first moment of surprise, and possibly of alarm, Ralph rose from his seat and fell back a few paces, quite taken off his guard by this unexpected apparition. In another moment, he stood, fixed and immovable; with folded arms, regarding his nephew with a scowl, while Kate and Miss La Creevy threw themselves between the two, to prevent the personal violence which the fierce excitement of Nicholas appeared to threaten.

“Dear Nicholas,” cried his sister, clinging to him. “Be calm, consider ——”

“Consider, Kate!” cried Nicholas, clasping her hand so tight in the tumult of his anger that she could scarcely bear the pain. “When I consider all and think of what has passed, I need be made of iron to stand before him.”

“Or bronze,” said Ralph, quietly; “there is not hardihood enough in flesh and blood to face it out.”

“Oh dear, dear!” cried Mrs. Nickleby, “that things should have come to such a pass as this!”

“Who speaks in a tone as if I had done wrong and brought disgrace on them?” said Nicholas, looking round.

“Your mother, sir,” replied Ralph, motioning towards her.



“Whose ears have been poisoned by you, by you — who, under pretence of deserving the thanks she poured upon you, heaped every insult, wrong, and indignity, upon my head; you, who sent me to a den where sordid cruelty, worthy of yourself, runs wanton, and youthful misery stalks precocious; where the lightness of childhood shrinks into the heaviness of age, and its every promise blights and withers as it grows. I call heaven to witness that I have seen all this and that he knows it.”

“Refute these calumnies,” said Kate, “and be more patient, so that you may give them no advantage. Tell us what you really did, and show that they are untrue.”

“Of what do they — or of what does he — accuse me?”

“First, of attacking your master, and being within an ace of qualifying yourself to be tried for murder,” interposed Ralph. “I speak plainly, young man, bluster as you will.”

“I interfered to save a miserable creature from the vilest cruelty. In so doing, I inflicted such punishment upon a wretch as he will not readily forget, though far less than he deserved from me. If the same scene were renewed before me now, I would take the same part; but I would strike harder and heavier, and brand him with such marks as he should carry to his grave, go to it when he would.”

“You hear?” said Ralph, turning to Mrs. Nickleby. “Penitence, this!”

“Oh dear me! I don’t know what to think, I really don’t.”

“Do not speak just now, mama, I entreat you,” said Kate. “Dear Nicholas, I only tell you that you may know what wickedness can prompt, but they accuse you of — a ring is missing, and they dare to say that —”

“The woman,” said Nicholas, haughtily, “the wife of the fellow from whom these charges come, dropped — as I suppose — a worthless ring among some clothes of mine, early in the morning on which I left the house. At least, I know

that she was in the bedroom where they lay, struggling with an unhappy child, and that I found it when I opened my bundle on the road. I returned it, at once, by coach, and they have it now."

"I knew, I knew" said Kate, looking towards her uncle. "About this boy, love, in whose company they say you left?"

"The boy, a silly, helpless creature from brutality and hard usage, is with me now."

"You hear?" said Ralph, appealing to the mother again, "everything proved, even upon his own confession. Do you choose to restore that boy, sir?"

"No. I do not," said Nicholas, boldly.

"You do not?" sneered Ralph.

"No, not to the man with whom I found him. I would that I knew on whom he has the claim of birth: I might wring something from his sense of shame, if he were dead to every tie of nature."

"Indeed!" said Ralph. "Now, sir, will you hear a word or two from me?"

"You can speak when and what you please," replied Nicholas, embracing his sister. "I take little heed of what you say or threaten."

"Mighty well, sir, but perhaps it may concern others, who may think it worth their while to listen and consider what I tell them. I will address your mother, sir, who knows the world."

"Oh! and I only too dearly wish I didn't," sobbed Mrs. Nickleby.

There really was no necessity for the good lady to be much distressed upon this particular head; the extent of her worldly knowledge being, to say the least, very questionable; and so Ralph seemed to think, for he smiled as he spoke. He then glanced steadily at her and Nicholas by turns, as he delivered himself in these words:

“Of what I have done, or what I meant to do, for you, ma’am, and my niece, I say not one syllable. I held out no promise and leave you to judge for yourself. I hold out no threat now, but I say that this boy, headstrong, wilful, and disorderly as he is, should not have one penny of my money, or one crust of my bread, or one grasp of my hand, to save him from the loftiest gallows in all Europe. I will not meet him, come where he comes, or hear his name. I will not help him, or those who help him. With a full knowledge of what he brought upon you by so doing, he has come back in his selfish sloth to be an aggravation of your wants and a burden upon his sister’s scanty wages. I regret to leave you, and more to leave her, now, but I will not encourage this compound of meanness and cruelty, and as I will not ask you to renounce him, I see you no more.”

If Ralph had not known and felt his power in wounding those he hated, his glances at Nicholas would have shown it to him in all its force as he proceeded in the above address. Innocent as the young man was of all wrong, every artful insinuation stung; every well-considered sarcasm cut him to the quick; and when Ralph noted his pale face and quivering lip, he hugged himself to mark how well he had chosen the taunts best calculated to strike deep into a young and ardent spirit.

“I can’t help it,” cried Mrs. Nickleby. “I know you have been very good to us and meant to do a good deal for my daughter. I am quite sure of that; I know you did, and it was very kind of you, having her at your house and all — and of course it would have been a great thing for her and for me too. But I can’t, you know, brother-in-law, I can’t renounce my own son, even if he had done all you say he has — it’s not possible; I couldn’t do it; so we must go to rack and ruin, Kate, my dear. I can bear it, I dare say.” Pouring forth these and a perfectly wonderful train of other dis-



jointed expressions of regret, which no mortal power but Mrs. Nickleby's could ever have strung together, that lady wrung her hands, and her tears fell faster.

"Why, do you say *if* Nicholas has done what they say he has, mama?" asked Kate, with honest anger. "You know he has not."

"I don't know what to think, one way or other, my dear. Nicholas is so violent, and your uncle has so much composure that I can only hear what he says, and not what Nicholas does. Never mind, don't let us talk any more about it. We can go to the workhouse, or the Refuge for the Destitute, or the Magdalen Hospital, I dare say; and the sooner we go the better." With this extraordinary jumble of charitable institutions, Mrs. Nickleby again gave way to her tears.

"Stay," said Nicholas, as Ralph turned to go. "You need not leave this place, sir, for it will be relieved of my presence in one minute, and it will be long, very long, before I darken these doors again."

"Nicholas," cried Kate, throwing herself on her brother's shoulder, "do not say so. My dear brother, you will break my heart. Mama, speak to him. Do not mind her, Nicholas; she does not mean it; you should know her better. Uncle, somebody, for heaven's sake speak to him."

"I never meant, Kate," said Nicholas, tenderly, "I never meant to stay among you; think better of me than to suppose it possible. I may turn my back on this town a few hours sooner than I intended, but what of that? We shall not forget each other apart, and better days will come when we shall part no more. Be a woman, Kate," he whispered, proudly, "and do not make me one, while *he* looks on."

"No, no, I will not," said Kate, eagerly; "but you will not leave us. Oh! think of all the happy days we have had together, before these terrible misfortunes came upon us; of all the comfort and happiness of home, and the trials we

have to bear now; of our having no protector under all the slights and wrongs that poverty so much favours, and you cannot leave us to bear them alone, without one hand to help us."

"You will be helped when I am away; I am no help to you, no protector; I should bring you nothing but sorrow, and want, and suffering. My own mother sees it, and her fondness and fears for you point to the course that I should take. And so all good angels bless you, Kate, till I can take you to some home of mine, where we may revive the happiness denied to us now and talk of these trials as of things gone by. Do not keep me here, but let me go at once. There dear girl — dear girl." Nicholas stooped over her for a few seconds and, placing her gently in a chair, confided her to their honest friend, Miss La Creevy.

"I need not entreat your sympathy," he said, wringing her hand, "for I know your nature. You will never forget them."

He stepped up to Ralph, who had remained in the same attitude which he had preserved throughout the interview.

"Whatever step you take, sir," he said, in a voice inaudible beyond themselves, "I shall keep a strict account of. I leave them to you, at your desire. There will be a day of reckoning sooner or later, and it will be a heavy one for you if they are wronged."

Ralph did not allow a muscle of his face to indicate that he heard one word of this parting address. He hardly knew that it was concluded, and Mrs. Nickleby had scarcely made up her mind to detain her son by force if necessary, when Nicholas was gone.

As he hurried through the streets to his obscure lodging, seeking to keep pace, as it were, with the rapidity of the thoughts which crowded upon him, many doubts and hesitations arose in his mind and almost tempted him to return.

But what would they gain by this? Supposing he were to put Ralph Nickleby at defiance and were even fortunate enough to obtain some small employment, his being with them could only render their present condition worse and might greatly impair their future prospects; for his mother had spoken of some new kindness towards Kate which she had not denied.

Nicholas at length reached his poor room, where, no longer borne up by the excitement which had hitherto sustained him but depressed by the revulsion of feeling it left behind, he threw himself on the bed and, turning his face to the wall, gave free vent to the emotions he had so long stifled.

He had not heard anybody enter and was unconscious of the presence of Smike until, happening to raise his head, he saw him standing at the upper end of the room, looking wistfully towards him. He withdrew his eyes when he saw that he was observed, and affected to be busied with some scanty preparations for dinner.

“Well, Smike,” said Nicholas, as cheerfully as he could speak, “let me hear what new acquaintances you have made this morning, or what new wonder you have found out, in the compass of this street and the next one.”

“No,” said Smike, shaking his head mournfully; “I must talk of something else today.”

“Of what you like,” replied Nicholas, good-humouredly.

“Of this I know: you are unhappy and have got into great trouble by bringing me away. I ought to have known that, and stopped behind — I would, indeed, if I had thought it then. You — you — are not rich: you have not enough for yourself, and I should not be here. You grow,” said the lad, laying his hand timidly on that of Nicholas, “you grow thinner every day; your cheek is paler, and your eye more sunk. Indeed, I cannot bear to see you so, and think how I am burdening you. I tried to go away today, but the



thought of your kind face drew me back. I could not leave you without a word." The poor fellow could say no more, for his eyes filled with tears, and his voice was gone.

"The word which separates us," said Nicholas, grasping him heartily by the shoulder, "shall never be said by me, for you are my only comfort and stay. I would not lose you now, Smike, for all the world could give. The thought of you has upheld me through all I have endured today, and shall, through fifty times such trouble. Give me your hand. My heart is linked to yours. We will journey from this place together before the week is out. What if I am steeped in poverty? You lighten it, and we will be poor together."

## CHAPTER XIV

**T**HE whole capital which Nicholas found himself entitled to, after paying his rent and settling with the broker from whom he had hired his poor furniture, did not exceed, by more than a few halfpence, the sum of twenty shillings. And yet he hailed the morning on which he had resolved to quit London with a light heart, and sprang from his bed with an elasticity of spirit which is happily the lot of young persons.

It was a cold, dry, foggy morning in early spring. A few meagre shadows flitted to and fro in the misty streets, and occasionally there loomed through the dull vapour the heavy outline of some hackney coach wending homewards, which, drawing slowly nearer, rolled jangling by, scattering the thin crust of frost from its whitened roof, and soon was lost again in the mist.

Nicholas made his way alone to the city, and stood beneath the windows of his mother's house. It was dull and bare to see, but it had light and life for him; for there was at least one heart within its old walls to which insult or dishonour would bring the same blood rushing that flowed in his own veins.

He crossed the road and raised his eyes to the window of the room where he knew his sister slept. It was closed and dark. "Poor girl, she little thinks who lingers here."

He looked again and felt, for the moment, almost vexed that Kate was not there to exchange one word at parting. "Good God!" he thought, suddenly correcting himself, "what a boy I am!"

“It is better as it is. When I left them before, and could have said good bye a thousand times if I had chosen, I spared them the pain of leave-taking, and why not now?” As he spoke, some fancied motion of the curtain almost persuaded him that Kate was at the window, and by one of those strange contradictions of feeling which are common to us all, he shrank involuntarily into a doorway, that she might not see him. He smiled at his own weakness, said “God bless them,” and walked away with a lighter step.

Smikey was anxiously expecting him when he reached his old lodgings, and so was Newman, who had expended a day’s income in a can of rum and milk to prepare them for the journey. They had tied up the luggage; Smikey shouldered it, and away they went, with Newman Noggs in company; for he had insisted on walking as far as he could with them.

“Which way?” asked Newman, wistfully.

“To Kingston first.”

“And where afterwards? Why won’t you tell me?”

“Because I scarcely know myself, good friend,” rejoined Nicholas, laying his hand upon his shoulder; “and if I did, I have neither plan nor prospect yet, and might shift my quarters a hundred times before you could possibly communicate with me.”

“I am afraid you have some deep scheme in your head,” said Newman, doubtfully.

“So deep, that even I can’t fathom it. Whatever I resolve upon, depend upon it I will write you soon.”

“You won’t forget?”

“I am not very likely to. I have not so many friends that I shall grow confused among the number, and forget my best one.”

Occupied in such discourse, they walked on for a couple of hours, as they might have done for a couple of days, if Nicholas had not sat himself down on a stone by the way-



side and resolutely declared his intention of not moving another step until Newman Noggs turned back. Having pleaded ineffectually first for another half-mile, and afterwards for another quarter, Newman was fain to comply, and to shape his course towards Golden Square, after interchanging many hearty and affectionate farewells, and many times turning back to wave his hat to the two wayfarers when they had become mere specks in the distance.

“Now listen to me, Smike,” said Nicholas, as they trudged with stout hearts onward. “We are bound for Portsmouth.”

Smike nodded his head and smiled, but expressed no other emotion; for whether they had been bound for Portsmouth or Port Royal would have been alike to him, so they had been bound together.

“I don’t know much of these matters, but Portsmouth is a seaport town; and if no other employment is to be obtained, I should think we might get on board some ship. I am young and active and could be useful in many ways. So could you.”

“I hope so. When I was at that — you know where I mean?”

“Yes, I know; you needn’t name the place.”

“Well, when I was there,” resumed Smike, his eyes sparkling at the prospect of displaying his abilities, “I could milk a cow and groom a horse, with anybody.”

“Ha! I am afraid they don’t keep many animals of either kind on board ship, Smike and, even when they have horses, that they are not very particular about rubbing them down; still you can learn to do something else, you know. Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

“And I am very willing.”

“God knows you are, and if you fail, it shall go hard, but I’ll do enough for us both.”

“Do we go all the way, today?” asked Smike, after a short silence.

“That would be too severe a trial, even for your willing legs,” said Nicholas, with a good-humoured smile. “No. Godalming is some thirty and odd miles from London — as I found from a map I borrowed — and I purpose to rest there. We must push on again tomorrow, for we are not rich enough to loiter. Let me relieve you of that bundle! Come!”

“No, no,” rejoined Smike, falling back a few steps. “Don’t ask me to give it up to you.”

“Why not?”

“Let me do something for you, at least. You will never let me serve you as I ought. You will never know how I think, day and night, of ways to please you.”

“You are a foolish fellow to say it, for I know it well, and see it, or I should be a blind and senseless beast. Let me ask you a question while I think of it, and there is no one by,” he added, looking him steadily in the face. “Have you a good memory?”

“I don’t know,” said Smike, shaking his head sorrowfully. “I think I had once; but it’s all gone now — all gone.”

“Why do you think you had once?” asked Nicholas, turning quickly upon him as though the answer in some way helped out the purport of his question.

“Because I could remember, when I was a child, but that is very, very long ago, or at least it seems so. I was always confused and giddy at that place you took me from, and could never remember, and sometimes couldn’t even understand, what they said to me. I — let me see — let me see!”

“You are wandering now,” said Nicholas, touching him on the arm.

“No,” replied his companion, with a vacant look. “I was only thinking how —” He shivered involuntarily as he spoke.

“Think no more of that place, for it is all over,” retorted Nicholas, fixing his eye full upon that of his companion,

which was fast settling into an unmeaning stupefied gaze, once habitual to him, and common even then. "What of the first day you went to Yorkshire?"

"Eh!" cried the lad.

"That was before you began to lose your recollection, you know," said Nicholas, quietly. "Was the weather hot or cold?"

"Wet, very wet. I have always said, when it has rained hard, that it was like the night I came: and they used to crowd round and laugh to see me cry when the rain fell heavily. It was like a child, they said, and that made me think of it more. I turned cold all over sometimes, for I could see myself as I was then, coming in at the very same door."

"As you were then," repeated Nicholas, with assumed carelessness; "how was that?"

"Such a little creature, that they might have had pity and mercy upon me, only to remember it."

"You didn't find your way there, alone!"

"No; oh, no."

"Who was with you?"

"A man — a dark, withered man. I have heard them say so, at the school, and I remembered that before. I was glad to leave him, I was afraid of him; but they made me more afraid of them, and used me harder too."

"Look at me," said Nicholas, wishing to attract his full attention. "There; don't turn away. Do you remember no woman, no kind woman, who hung over you once, and kissed your lips, and called you her child?"

"No," said the poor creature, shaking his head; "no, never."

"Nor any house but that house in Yorkshire?"

"No," rejoined the youth, with a melancholy look; "a room — I remember I slept in a room, a large lonesome room



at the top of a house, where there was a trapdoor in the ceiling. I have covered my head with the clothes often, not to see it, for it frightened me — a young child with no one near at night, and I used to wonder what was on the other side. There was a clock, too, an old clock, in one corner. I remember that. I have never forgotten that room; for when I have terrible dreams, it comes back, just as it was. I see things and people in it that I had never seen then; but there is the room just as it used to be, that never changes.”

“Will you let me take the bundle now?” asked Nicholas, abruptly changing the theme.

“No, no. Come, let us walk on.”

He quickened his pace as he said this, apparently under the impression that they had been standing still, during the whole of the previous dialogue. Nicholas marked him closely, and every word of this conversation remained upon his memory.

It was by this time within an hour of noon; and although a dense vapour still enveloped the city they had left, in the open country it was clear and fair.

A broad, fine, honest sun lighted up the green pastures and dimpled water with the semblance of summer, while it left the travellers all the invigorating freshness of that early time of year. The ground seemed elastic under their feet; the sheep bells were music to their ears; and exhilarated by exercise and stimulated by hope, they pushed onward with the strength of lions.

The day wore on, and all these bright colours subsided and assumed a quieter tint.

To Godalming they came at last, and here they bargained for two humble beds and slept soundly. In the morning they were astir, though not quite so early as the sun, and again afoot, if not with all the freshness of yesterday, still, with enough of hope and spirit to bear them cheerily on.

It was a harder day's journey than yesterday's, for there were long and weary hills to climb; and in journeys, as in life, it is a great deal easier to go down hill than up. However, they kept on, with unabated perseverance, and the hill has not yet lifted its face to heaven that perseverance will not gain the summit of at last.<sup>1</sup>

By degrees, the prospect receded more and more on either hand, and as they had been shut out from rich and extensive scenery, so they emerged once again upon the open country. The knowledge that they were drawing near their place of destination gave them fresh courage to proceed; but the way had been difficult, and they had loitered on the road, and Smike was tired. Thus twilight had already closed in when they turned off the path to the door of a roadside inn, yet twelve miles short of Portsmouth.

"Twelve miles," said Nicholas, leaning with both hands on his stick, and looking doubtfully at Smike.

"Twelve long miles," repeated the landlord.

"Is it a good road?" inquired Nicholas.

"Very bad." As of course, being a landlord, he would say.

"I want to get on; I scarcely know what to do."

"Don't let me influence you, I wouldn't go on if it was me."

"Wouldn't you?" asked Nicholas.

"Not if I knew when I was well off," said the landlord. And having said it he pulled up his apron, put his hands into his pockets, and, taking a step or two outside the door, looked down the dark road with an assumption of great indifference.

A glance at the toil-worn face of Smike determined Nicholas; so without any further consideration he made up his mind to stay where he was.

The landlord led them into the kitchen; and as there was a good fire, he remarked that it was very cold. If there had

<sup>1</sup> This is a good sentence to memorize.

happened to be a bad one, he would have observed that it was very warm.

“What can you give us for supper?” was Nicholas’s natural question.

“Why — what would you like?”

Nicholas suggested cold meat, but there was no cold meat — poached eggs, but there were no eggs — mutton chops, but there wasn’t a mutton chop within three miles, though there had been more last week than they knew what to do with, and would be an extraordinary supply the day after tomorrow.

“Then I must leave it entirely to you, as I would have done, at first, if you had allowed me,” said Nicholas.

“Why, then, I’ll tell you what,” rejoined the landlord. “There’s a gentleman in the parlour that’s ordered a hot beefsteak pudding and potatoes, at nine. There’s more of it than he can manage, and I have very little doubt that, if I ask leave, you can sup with him. I’ll do that, in a minute.”

“No, no,” said Nicholas, detaining him. “I would rather not. I — at least — pshaw! why cannot I speak out? Here; you see that I am travelling in a very humble manner, and have made my way hither on foot. It is more than probable, I think, that the gentleman may not relish my company; and although I am the dusty figure you see, I am too proud to thrust myself into his.”

“Lord love you,” said the landlord, “it’s only Mr. Crummles; he isn’t particular.”

“Is he not?” asked Nicholas, on whose mind, to tell the truth, the prospect of the savoury pudding was making some impression.

“Not he, he’ll like your way of talking, I know. But we’ll soon see all about that. Just wait a minute.”

The landlord hurried into the parlour without staying for further permission, nor did Nicholas strive to prevent him,



wisely considering that supper, under the circumstances, was too serious a matter to trifle with. It was not long before the host returned in a condition of much excitement.

“All right, I knew he would. You’ll see something rather worth seeing in there. Ecod, how they are agoing of it!”

There was no time to inquire to what this exclamation referred, for he had already thrown open the door of the room, into which Nicholas, followed by Smike with the bundle on his shoulder (he carried it about with him as vigilantly as if it had been a sack of gold), straightway repaired.

Nicholas was prepared for something odd, but not for something quite so odd as the sight he encountered. At the upper end of the room were a couple of boys, one of them very tall and the other very short, both dressed as sailors — or at least as theatrical sailors, with belts, buckles, and pistols complete — fighting what is called in playbills a terrific combat, with two of those short broadswords with basket hilts which are commonly used at our minor theatres. The short boy had gained a great advantage over the tall boy, and both were overlooked by a large heavy man, perched against the corner of a table, who emphatically adjured them to strike a little more fire out of the swords, and they couldn’t fail to bring the house down, on the very first night.

“Mr. Vincent Crummles,” said the landlord with an air of great deference. “This is the young gentleman.”

Mr. Vincent Crummles received Nicholas with an inclination of the head, something between the courtesy of a Roman emperor and the nod of a pot companion, and bade the landlord shut the door and be gone.

“There’s a picture,” said Mr. Crummles, motioning Nicholas not to advance and spoil it. “The little ’un has him; if the big ’un doesn’t knock under, in three seconds, he’s a dead man. Do that again, boys.”



The two combatants went to work afresh, and chopped away until the swords emitted a shower of sparks, to the great satisfaction of Mr. Crummles, who appeared to consider this a very great point indeed.

After this, there was a good deal of dodging about, and then the short sailor (who was the moral character evidently, for he always had the best of it) made a violent demonstration and closed with the tall sailor, who, after a few unavailing struggles, went down, and expired in great torture, as the short sailor put his foot upon his breast, and bored a hole in him through and through.

“That’ll be a double encore if you take care, boys,” said Mr. Crummles. “You had better get your wind now and change your clothes.”

“What do you think of that, sir?” inquired Mr. Crummles.

“Very good, indeed — capital,” answered Nicholas.

“You won’t see such boys as those very often, I think,” said Mr. Crummles.

Nicholas assented — observing, that if they were a little better match —

“Match!” cried Mr. Crummles.

“I mean if they were a little more of a size,” said Nicholas, explaining himself.

“Size! why it’s the essence of the combat that there should be a foot or two between them. How are you to get up the sympathies of the audience in a legitimate manner if there isn’t a little man contending against a big one — unless there’s at least five to one, and we haven’t hands enough for that business in our company.”

“I see, I beg your pardon. That didn’t occur to me, I confess.”

“It’s the main point. I open at Portsmouth the day after tomorrow. If you’re going there, look into the theatre, and see how that’ll tell.”

Nicholas promised to do so, if he could, and drawing a chair near the fire, fell into conversation with the manager, who laid open his affairs without the smallest reserve and talked at some length upon the merits of his company and the acquirements of his family, of both of which the two broadsword boys formed an honourable portion. There was to be a gathering, it seemed, of the different ladies and gentlemen of the theatrical company at Portsmouth on the morrow, whither the father and sons were proceeding.

“ You are going that way? ” asked the manager.

“ Ye-yes, yes, I am.”

“ Do you know that town at all? ” inquired the manager, who seemed to consider himself entitled to the same degree of confidence as he had himself exhibited.

“ No.”

“ Never there? ”

“ Never.”

Mr. Crummles looked from time to time with great interest at Smike, with whom he had appeared considerably struck from the first. He had now fallen asleep, and was nodding in his chair.

“ Excuse my saying so,” said the manager, leaning over to Nicholas, and sinking his voice, “ but what a capital countenance your friend has got! ”

“ Poor fellow! I wish it were a little more plump, and less haggard.”

“ Plump! ” exclaimed the manager, quite horrified, “ you’d spoil it for ever.”

“ Do you think so? ”

“ Think so, sir! Why as he is now,” said the manager, striking his knee emphatically; “ without a pad upon his body, and hardly a touch of paint upon his face, he’d make such an actor for the starved business as was never seen in this country. Only let him be tolerably well up in the

Apothecary in Romeo and Juliet, with the slightest possible dab of red on the tip of his nose, and he'd be certain of three rounds the moment he put his head out."

"You view him with a professional eye," said Nicholas, laughing.

"And well I may; I never saw a young fellow so regularly cut out for that line since I've been in the profession. And I played the heavy children when I was eighteen months old."

The appearance of the beefsteak pudding, which came in simultaneously with the junior Vincent Crummleses, turned the conversation to other matters, and indeed, for a time, stopped it altogether. These two young gentlemen wielded their knives and forks with scarcely less address than their broadswords; and as the whole party were quite as sharp set as either class of weapons, there was no time for talking until the supper had been disposed of.

The Master Crummleses had no sooner swallowed the last morsel of food than they evinced, by various half-suppressed yawns and stretchings of their limbs, an obvious inclination to retire for the night, which Smike had betrayed still more strongly: he having, in the course of the meal, fallen asleep several times while in the very act of eating. Nicholas therefore proposed that they should break up at once, but the manager would by no means hear of it, vowing that he had promised himself the pleasure of inviting his new acquaintance to share a bowl of punch and that, if he declined, he should deem it very unhandsome behaviour.

"Let them go," said Mr. Vincent Crummles, "and we'll have it snugly and cosily together by the fire."

Nicholas was not much disposed to sleep — being in truth too anxious — so, after a little demur, he accepted the offer, and having exchanged a shake of the hand with the young Crummleses, and the manager having on his part bestowed a most affectionate benediction on Smike, he sat himself



down opposite to that gentleman by the fireside to assist in emptying the bowl, which soon afterwards appeared, steaming, in a manner which was quite exhilarating to behold and sending forth a most grateful-and inviting fragrance.

But despite the punch and the manager, who told a variety of stories, and smoked tobacco from a pipe, and inhaled it in the shape of snuff with a most astonishing power, Nicholas was absent and dispirited. His thoughts were in his old home, and when they reverted to his present condition, the uncertainty of the morrow cast a gloom upon him which his utmost efforts were unable to dispel. His attention wandered. Although he heard the manager's voice, he was deaf to what he said; and when Mr. Vincent Crummles concluded the history of some long adventure with a loud laugh and an inquiry as to what Nicholas would have done under the same circumstances, he was obliged to make the best apology in his power and to confess the entire ignorance of all he had been talking about.

“Why, so I saw. You're uneasy in your mind. What's the matter?”

Nicholas could not refrain from smiling at the abruptness of the question but, thinking it scarcely worth while to parry it, owned that he was under some apprehensions lest he might not succeed in the object which had brought him to that part of the country.

“And what's that?”

“Getting something to do which will keep me and my poor fellow traveller in the common necessities of life. That's the truth. You guessed it long ago, I dare say, so I may as well have the credit of telling it to you with a good grace.”

“What's to be got to do at Portsmouth more than anywhere else?” asked Mr. Vincent Crummles, melting the sealing wax on the stem of his pipe in the candle and rolling it out afresh with his little finger.

“There are many vessels leaving the port, I suppose. I shall try for a berth in some ship or other. There is meat and drink there, at all events.”

“Salt meat and new rum, pease pudding and chaff biscuits,” said the manager, taking a whiff of his pipe to keep it alight and returning to his work of embellishment.

“One may do worse than that. I can rough it, I believe, as well as most young men of my age and previous habits.”

“You need be able to, if you go on board ship; but you won’t.”

“Why not?” asked Nicholas.

“Because there’s not a skipper or mate that would think you worth your salt, when he could get a practised hand, and they as plentiful there as the oysters in the streets.”

“What do you mean?” asked Nicholas, alarmed by this prediction and the confident tone in which it had been uttered. “Men are not born able seamen. They must be reared, I suppose?”

Mr. Vincent Crummles nodded his head. “They must; but not at your age, or from young gentlemen like you.”

There was a pause. The countenance of Nicholas fell, and he gazed ruefully at the fire.

“Does no other profession occur to you, which a young man of your figure and address could take up easily and see the world to advantage in?”

“No,” said Nicholas, shaking his head.

“Why, then, I’ll tell you one,” said Mr. Crummles, throwing his pipe into the fire and raising his voice. “The stage.”

“The stage!” cried Nicholas, in a voice almost as loud.

“The theatrical profession. I am in the theatrical profession myself, my wife is in the theatrical profession, my children are in the theatrical profession. I had a dog that lived and died in it from a puppy; and my chaise pony goes

on in *Timour the Tartar*. I'll bring you out, and your friend too. Say the word. I want a novelty."

"I don't know anything about it," rejoined Nicholas, whose breath had been almost taken away by this sudden proposal. "I never acted a part in my life, except at school."

"There's genteel comedy in your walk and manner, juvenile tragedy in your eye, and touch-and-go farce in your laugh. You'll do as well as if you had thought of nothing else but the lamps from your birth downwards."

Nicholas thought of the small amount of small change that would remain in his pocket after paying the tavern bill, and he hesitated.

"You can be useful to us in a hundred ways. Think what capital bills a man of your education could write for the shop windows."

"Well, I think I could manage that department."

"To be sure you could. 'For further particulars see small handbills' — we might have half a volume in every one of 'em. Pieces too; why, you could write us a piece to bring out the whole strength of the company, whenever we wanted one."

"I am not quite so confident about that. But I dare say I could scribble something now and then that would suit you."

"We'll have a new show piece out directly," said the manager. "Let me see — peculiar resources of this establishment — new and splendid scenery — you must manage to introduce a real pump and two washing tubs."

"Into the piece?"

"Yes, I bought 'em cheap at a sale the other day, and they'll come in admirably. That's the London play. Then look up some dresses and properties, and have a piece written to fit 'em. Most of the theatres keep an author on purpose."



“ Indeed! ”

“ Oh, yes, a common thing. It'll look very well in the bills in separate lines — Real pump! — Splendid tubs! — Great attraction! You don't happen to be anything of an artist, do you? ”

“ That is not one of my accomplishments. ”

“ Ah! Then it can't be helped. If you had been, we might have had a large woodcut of the last scene for the posters, showing the whole depth of the stage, with the pump and tubs in the middle; but, however, if you're not, it can't be helped! ”

“ What should I get for all this? ” inquired Nicholas, after a few moments' reflection. “ Could I live by it? ”

“ Live by it! Like a prince! With your own salary, and your friend's, and your writings, you'd make — ah! you'd make a pound a week! ”

“ You don't say so! ”

“ I do indeed, and if we had a run of good houses, nearly double the money. ”

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders, but sheer destitution was before him. What if he went abroad, and his mother or Kate were to die the while? Without more deliberation, he hastily declared it was a bargain, and gave Mr. Vincent Crummles his hand upon it.

As Mr. Crummles had a strange four-legged animal in the inn stables which he called a pony and a vehicle of unknown design which he called a four-wheeled phaeton, Nicholas proceeded on his journey next morning with greater ease than he had expected, the manager and himself occupying the front seat and the Master Crummleses and Smike being packed together behind.

“ Many and many is the circuit this pony has gone, ” said Mr. Crummles. “ He is quite one of us. His mother was on the stage. She ate apple pie at a circus for fourteen years,

fired pistols, and went to bed in a night cap, and took the low comedy entirely. His father was a dancer."

"Was the father at all distinguished?" asked Nicholas.

"Not very. He was rather a low sort of pony. The fact is, he had been originally jobbed out by the day, and he never quite got over his old habits. He was clever in melodrama, too, but not very fine. When the mother died, he took the port-wine business."

"The port-wine business!" exclaimed Nicholas.

"Drinking port wine with the clown, but he was greedy, and one night bit off the bowl of the glass, and choked himself, so his vulgarity was the death of him at last."

The descendant of this ill-starred animal requiring increased attention from Mr. Crummles as he progressed in his day's work, that gentleman had very little time for conversation. Nicholas was thus left to entertain himself with his own thoughts until they arrived at the drawbridge at Portsmouth, when Mr. Crummles pulled up.

"We'll get down here," said the manager, "and the boys will take the pony round to the stable, and call at my lodgings with the luggage. You had better let yours be taken there, for the present."

Thanking Mr. Vincent Crummles for his obliging offer, Nicholas jumped out and, giving Smike his arm, accompanied the manager up High Street on their way to the theatre, feeling nervous and uncomfortable enough at the prospect of an immediate introduction to a scene so new to him.

They passed a great many bills, pasted against the walls and displayed in windows, wherein the names of Mr. Vincent Crummles, Mrs. Vincent Crummles, Master Crummles, Master P. Crummles, and Miss Crummles, were printed in very large letters, and everything else in very small ones. Turning at length into an entry, in which was a strong smell of orange peel and lamp oil, with an under-current of saw-

dust, they groped their way through a dark passage, descended a step or two, threaded a little maze of canvas screens and paint-pots, and emerged upon the stage of the Portsmouth Theatre.

“Here we are,” said Mr. Crummles.

It was not very light, but Nicholas found himself close to the first entrance on the prompt side, among bare walls, dusty scenes, mildewed clouds, heavily daubed draperies, and dirty floors. He looked about him. Ceiling, pit, boxes, gallery, orchestra, fittings, and decorations of every kind — all looked coarse, cold, gloomy, and wretched.

“Is this a theatre?” whispered Smike, in amazement; “I thought a theatre was a blaze of light and finery.”

“Why, so it is,” replied Nicholas, hardly less surprised; “but not by day, Smike — not by day.”

The manager’s voice recalled him from a more careful inspection of the building to the opposite side of the proscenium, where, at a small mahogany table with rickety legs and of an oblong shape sat a stout, portly female, apparently between forty and fifty, in a tarnished silk cloak, with her bonnet dangling by the strings in her hand and her hair (of which she had a great quantity) braided in a large festoon over each temple.

“Mr. Johnson,” said the manager (for Nicholas had given this name as his own), “let me introduce Mrs. Vincent Crummles.”

“I am glad to see you, sir,” said Mrs. Vincent Crummles, in a sepulchral voice. “I am very glad to see you, and still more happy to hail you as a promising member of our corps.”

The lady shook Nicholas by the hand as she addressed him in these terms. He saw it was a large one, but had not expected quite such an iron grip as that with which she honoured him.

“And this,” said the lady, crossing to Smike, as tragic



actresses cross when they obey a stage direction, "and this is the other. You, too, are welcome, sir."

"He'll do, I think, my dear?" said the manager, taking a pinch of snuff.

"He is admirable," replied the lady; "an acquisition, indeed."

As Mrs. Vincent Crummles recrossed back to the table, there bounded on to the stage from some mysterious inlet a little girl in a dirty white frock with tucks up to the knees, short trousers, sandaled shoes, white spencer,<sup>1</sup> pink gauze bonnet, green veil, and curl papers, who turned a pirouette, cut twice in the air, turned another pirouette, then, looking off at the opposite wing, shrieked, bounded forward to within six inches of the footlights, and fell into a beautiful attitude of terror, as a shabby gentleman in an old pair of buff slippers came in at one powerful slide and, chattering his teeth, fiercely brandished a walking stick.

"They are going through *The Indian Savage and the Maiden*," said Mrs. Crummles.

"Oh!" said the manager, "the little ballet interlude. Very good, go on. A little this way, if you please, Mr. Johnson. That'll do. Now!"

The manager clapped his hands as a signal to proceed, and the savage, becoming ferocious, made a slide towards the maiden; but the maiden avoided him in six twirls, and came down, at the end of the last one, upon the very points of her toes. This seemed to make some impression upon the savage; for, after a little more ferocity and chasing of the maiden into corners, he began to relent, and stroked his face several times with his right thumb and four fingers, thereby intimating that he was struck with admiration of the maiden's beauty. Acting upon the impulse of this passion, he (the savage) began to hit himself severe thumps in the chest and to exhibit

<sup>1</sup> A closet fitting jacket.

other indications of being desperately in love, which being rather a prosy proceeding, was very likely the cause of the maiden's falling asleep. Whether it was or no, asleep she did fall, sound as a church, on a sloping bank, and the savage perceiving it, leaned his left ear on his left hand, and nodded sideways, to intimate to all whom it might concern that she was asleep, and no shamming. Being left to himself, the savage had a dance, all alone. Just as he left off, the maiden woke up, rubbed her eyes, got off the bank, and had a dance all alone too — such a dance that the savage looked on in ecstasy all the while; and when it was done, plucked from a neighbouring tree some botanical curiosity, resembling a small pickled cabbage, and offered it to the maiden, who at first wouldn't have it, but, on the savage's shedding tears, relented. Then the savage jumped for joy; then the maiden jumped for rapture at the sweet smell of the pickled cabbage. Then the savage and the maiden danced violently together, and, finally, the savage dropped down on one knee, and the maiden stood on one leg upon his other knee, thus concluding the ballet and leaving the spectators in a state of pleasing uncertainty, whether she would ultimately marry the savage, or return to her friends.

“Very well indeed,” said Mr. Crummles; “bravo!”

“Bravo!” cried Nicholas, resolved to make the best of everything. “Beautiful!”

“This, sir,” said Mr. Vincent Crummles, bringing the maiden forward, “this is the infant phenomenon — Miss Ninetta Crummles.”

“Your daughter?”

“My daughter — my daughter, the idol of every place we go into, sir. We have had complimentary letters about this girl, sir, from the nobility and gentry of almost every town in England.”

“I am not surprised at that; she must be quite a genius.”

“Quite a —— !” Mr. Crummles stopped: language was not powerful enough to describe that infant phenomenon. “I’ll tell you what, sir,” he said; “the talent of this child is not to be imagined. She must be seen, sir — seen — to be ever so faintly appreciated. There; go to your mother, my dear.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Mr. Vincent Crummles, who had been writing on a piece of paper, “we’ll call *The Mortal Struggle* tomorrow at ten; everybody for the procession. *Intrigue* and *Ways and Means*, you’re all up in, so we shall only want one rehearsal. Everybody at ten, if you please.”

“On Monday morning we shall read a new piece,” said Mr. Crummles; “the name’s not known yet, but everybody will have a good part. Mr. Johnson will take care of that.”

“Hallo!” said Nicholas, starting. “I ——”

“On Monday morning,” repeated Mr. Crummles, raising his voice, to drown the unfortunate Mr. Johnson’s remonstrance; “that’ll do, ladies and gentlemen.”

The ladies and gentlemen required no second notice to quit; and in a few minutes, the theatre was deserted, save by the Crummles family, Nicholas, and Smike.

“Upon my word,” said Nicholas, taking the manager aside, “I don’t think I can be ready by Monday.”

“Pooh, pooh.”

“But really I can’t. My invention is not accustomed to these demands, or possibly I might produce ——”

“Invention! what the devil’s that got to do with it!” cried the manager, hastily.

“Everything, my dear sir.”

“Nothing, my dear sir,” retorted the manager, with evident impatience. “Do you understand French?”

“Perfectly well.”

“Very good,” said the manager, opening the table drawer and giving a roll of paper from it to Nicholas. “There!



Just turn that into English, and put your name on the title page."

Nicholas smiled and pocketed the play.

"What are you going to do about your lodgings?" said Mr. Crummles.

Nicholas could not help thinking that, for the first week, it would be an uncommon convenience to have a turn-up bedstead in the pit, but he merely remarked that he had not turned his thoughts that way.

"Come home with me, then, and my boys shall go with you after dinner and show you the most likely place."

The offer was not to be refused; Nicholas and Mr. Crummles gave Mrs. Crummles an arm each and walked up the street in stately array. Smike, the boys, and the Phenomenon went home by a shorter cut.

Mr. Crummles lived in Saint Thomas's Street at the house of a pilot, who sported a boat-green door with window frames of the same colour, and had the little finger of a drowned man on his parlour mantel shelf, with other maritime and natural curiosities. He displayed also a brass knocker, a brass plate, and a brass bell handle, all very bright and shining; and had a mast, with a vane on the top of it, in his back yard.

"You are welcome," said Mrs. Crummles, turning round to Nicholas when they reached the bow-windowed front room on the first floor.

Nicholas bowed his acknowledgments and was unfeignedly glad to see the cloth laid.

"We have but a shoulder of mutton with onion sauce," said Mrs. Crummles, in the same charnel-house voice; "but such as our dinner is, we beg you to partake of it."

"You are very good, I shall do it ample justice."

"Vincent," said Mrs. Crummles, "what is the hour?"

"Five minutes past dinner time."

Mrs. Crummles rang the bell. "Let the mutton and onion sauce appear."

The servant who attended disappeared, and after a short interval reappeared with the festive banquet. Nicholas and the infant phenomenon opposed each other at the pembroke table,<sup>1</sup> and Smike and the Master Crummleses dined on the sofa bedstead.

"Are they very theatrical people here?" asked Nicholas.

"No," replied Mr. Crummles, shaking his head, "far from it — far from it."

"I pity them," observed Mrs. Crummles.

"So do I," said Nicholas, "if they have no relish for theatrical entertainments, properly conducted."

"Then they have none, sir," rejoined Mr. Crummles. "To the infant's benefit last year, on which occasion she repeated three of her most popular characters, and also appeared in *The Fairy Porcupine*, as originally performed by her, there was a house of no more than four pound twelve."

"Is it possible?" cried Nicholas.

"And two pound of that was trust, pa," said the Phenomenon.

"And two pounds of that was trust," repeated Mr. Crummles. "Mrs. Crummles herself has played to mere handfuls."

"But they are always a taking audience, Vincent," said the manager's wife.

"Most audiences are, when they have good acting — real good acting — the regular thing," replied Mr. Crummles, forcibly.

"Do you give lessons, ma'am?" inquired Nicholas.

"I do."

"There is no teaching here, I suppose?"

"There has been; I have received pupils here. I imparted

<sup>1</sup> A table with drop leaves.

tuition to the daughter of a dealer in ships' provision; but it afterwards appeared that she was insane when she first came to me. It was very extraordinary that she should come, under such circumstances."

Not feeling quite so sure of that, Nicholas thought it best to hold his peace.

"Let me see," said the manager cogitating after dinner. "Would you like some nice little part with the infant?"

"You are very good," replied Nicholas, hastily; "but I think perhaps it would be better if I had somebody of my own size at first, in case I should turn out awkward. I should feel more at home perhaps."

"True, perhaps you would. And you could play up to the infant, in time, you know."

"Certainly," replied Nicholas, devoutly hoping that it would be a very long time before he was honoured with this distinction.

"Then I'll tell you what we'll do," said Mr. Crummles. "You shall study Romeo when you've done that piece — don't forget to throw the pump and tubs in by the by — yes, that'll do very well. Rover too — you might get up Rover while you were about it, and Cassio, and Jeremy Diddler. You can easily knock them off; one part helps the other so much. Here they are, cues and all."

With these hasty general directions Mr. Crummles thrust a number of little books into the faltering hands of Nicholas and, bidding his eldest son go with him and show where lodgings were to be had, shook him by the hand, and wished him good night.

There is no lack of comfortable furnished apartments in Portsmouth, and no difficulty in finding some that are proportionate to very slender finances; but the former were too good, and the latter too bad, and they went into so many houses and came out unsuited, that Nicholas seriously began



to think he should be obliged to ask permission to spend the night in the theatre, after all.

Eventually, however, they stumbled upon two small rooms up three pair of stairs, or rather two pair and a ladder, at a tobacconist's shop, on the Common Hard, a dirty street leading down to the dockyard. These Nicholas engaged, only too happy to have escaped any request for payment of a week's rent beforehand.

"There! Lay down our personal property, Smike," he said, after showing young Crummles downstairs. "We have fallen upon strange times, and heaven only knows the end of them, but I am tired with the events of these three days and will postpone reflection till tomorrow — if I can."

Nicholas was up early in the morning; but he had scarcely begun to dress when he heard footsteps ascending the stairs, and was presently saluted by the voices of Mr. Folair the pantomimist and Mr. Lenville the tragedian, two important actors in Mr. Crummles's company whom Nicholas had met the day before.

"House, house, house!" cried Mr. Folair.

"What, ho! within there!" said Mr. Lenville, in a deep voice.

"Confound these fellows!" thought Nicholas; "they have come to breakfast, I suppose. "I'll open the door directly, if you'll wait an instant."

The gentlemen entreated him not to hurry himself and, to beguile the interval, had a fencing bout with their walking sticks on the very small landing place to the unspeakable discomposure of all the other lodgers downstairs.

"Here, come in," said Nicholas, when he had completed his dressing. "In the name of all that's horrible, don't make that noise outside."

"An uncommon snug little box this," said Mr. Lenville,

stepping into the front room, and taking his hat off, before he could get in at all. "Pernicious snug."

"For a man at all particular in such matters, it might be a trifle too snug," said Nicholas; "for although it is, undoubtedly, a great convenience to be able to reach anything you want from the ceiling or the floor, or either side of the room, without having to move from your chair, still these advantages can only be had in an apartment of the most limited size."

"It isn't a bit too confined for a single man," returned Mr. Lenville. "That reminds me — my wife, Mr. Johnson, — I hope she'll have some good part in this piece of yours."

"I glanced at the French copy last night," said Nicholas. "It looks very good, I think."

"What do you mean to do for me, old fellow?" asked Mr. Lenville, poking the struggling fire with his walking stick, and afterwards wiping it on the skirt of his coat. "Anything in the gruff and grumble way?"

"You turn your wife and child out of doors," said Nicholas; "and in a fit of rage and jealousy stab your eldest son in the library."

"Do I though!" exclaimed Mr. Lenville. "That's very good business."

"After which you are troubled with remorse till the last act, and then you make up your mind to destroy yourself. But, just as you are raising the pistol to your head, a clock strikes — ten."

"I see," cried Mr. Lenville. "Very good."

"You pause, you recollect to have heard a clock strike ten in your infancy. The pistol falls from your hand — you are overcome — you burst into tears, and become a virtuous and exemplary character for ever afterwards."

"Capital!" said Mr. Lenville. "That's a sure card, a

sure card. Get the curtain down, with a touch of nature like that, and it'll be a triumphant success."

"Is there anything good for me?" inquired Mr. Folair, anxiously.

"Let me see," said Nicholas. "You play the faithful and attached servant; you are turned out of doors with the wife and child."

"Always coupled with that infernal Phenomenon," sighed Mr. Folair; "and we go into poor lodgings where I won't take any wages and talk sentiment, I suppose?"

"Why — yes," replied Nicholas: "that is the course of the piece."

"I must have a dance of some kind, you know," said Mr. Folair. "You'll have to introduce one for the Phenomenon, so you'd better make a *pas de deux*, and save time."

"There's nothing easier than that," said Mr. Lenville, observing the disturbed looks of the young dramatist.

"Upon my word I don't see how it's to be done," rejoined Nicholas.

"Why, isn't it obvious?" reasoned Mr. Lenville. "Gadzooks, who can help seeing the way to do it? — you astonish me! You get the distressed lady, and the little child, and the attached servant into the poor lodgings, don't you? — Well, look here. The distressed lady sinks into a chair and buries her face in her pocket handkerchief — 'What makes you weep, mama?' says the child. 'Don't weep, mama, or you'll make me weep too!' — 'And me!' says the faithful servant, rubbing his eyes with his arm. 'What can we do to raise your spirits, dear mama?' says the little child. 'Aye, what can we do?' says the faithful servant. 'Oh, Pierre!' says the distressed lady; 'would that I could shake off these painful thoughts.' — 'Try, ma'am, try,' says the faithful servant; 'rouse yourself, ma'am; be amused.' — 'I will,' says the lady, 'I will learn to suffer with fortitude. Do you re-



member that dance, my honest friend, which in happier days you practised with this sweet angel? It never failed to calm my spirits then. Oh! let me see it once again before I die! ’ — There it is (cue for the band) before I die — and off they go. That’s the regular thing; isn’t it, Tommy? ”

“That’s it,” replied Mr. Folair. “The distressed lady, overpowered by old recollections, faints at the end of the dance, and you close it with a picture.”

Profiting by these and other lessons, which were the result of the personal experience of the two actors, Nicholas willingly gave them the best breakfast he could; and when he at length got rid of them, applied himself to his task, pleased to find that it was so much easier than he had at first supposed. He worked very hard all day and did not leave his room until the evening, when he went down to the theatre, whither Smike had repaired before him to go on with another gentleman as a general rebellion.

At last, the orchestra left off, and the curtain rose upon the new piece. The first scene, in which there was nobody particular, passed off calmly enough, but when Nicholas came on for his crack scene with Mrs. Crummles, what a clapping of hands there was! When Mrs. Crummles (who was his unworthy mother) sneered, and called him “presumptuous boy,” and he defied her, what a tumult of applause came on! When he quarreled with the other gentleman about the young lady and, producing a case of pistols, said that, if he was a gentleman, he would fight him in that drawing-room until the furniture was sprinkled with blood of one, if not of two — how boxes, pit, and gallery joined in one most vigorous cheer! When he called his mother names, because she wouldn’t give up the young lady’s property, and she, relenting, caused him to relent likewise and fall down on one knee and ask her blessing, how the ladies in the audience sobbed! When he was hid behind the curtain in the

dark and the wicked relation poked a sharp sword in every direction, save where his legs were plainly visible, what a thrill of anxious fear ran through the house! His air, his figure, his walk, his look, everything he said or did, was the subject of commendation. There was a round of applause every time he spoke. And when, at last, in the pump-and-tub scene, the blue fire was lighted and all the unemployed members of the company came in and tumbled down in various directions — not because that had anything to do with the plot, but in order to finish off with a tableau — the audience (who had by this time increased considerably) gave vent to such a shout of enthusiasm as had not been heard in those walls for many and many a day.

The new piece, being a decided hit, was announced for every evening of the performance until further notice, and the evenings when the theatre was closed were reduced from three in the week to two. Nor were these the only tokens of extraordinary success, for on the succeeding Saturday Nicholas received thirty shillings.

They began making preparations to play *Romeo and Juliet*. Nicholas, having to play Romeo for the first time on the ensuing evening, contrived to slip away in the midst of a temporary confusion. To this act of desertion he was led not only by his own inclinations but by his anxiety on account of Smike, who, having to sustain the character of the Apothecary, had been as yet wholly unable to get any more of the part into his head than the general idea that he was very hungry, which — perhaps from old recollections — he had acquired with great aptitude.

“I don’t know what’s to be done, Smike,” said Nicholas, laying down the book. “I am afraid you can’t learn it, my poor fellow.”

“I am afraid not,” said Smike, shaking his head. “I think if you — but that would give you so much trouble.”

“What? Never mind me.”

“I think, if you were to keep saying it to me in little bits, over and over again, I should be able to recollect it from hearing you.”

“Do you think so! Well said. Let us see who tires first. Not I, Smike, trust me. Now then. ‘Who calls so loud?’”

“‘Who calls so loud?’” said Smike.

“‘Who calls so loud?’” repeated Nicholas.

“‘Who calls so loud?’” cried Smike.

Thus they continued to ask each other who called so loud over and over again; and when Smike had that by heart, Nicholas went to another sentence, and so on, until at midnight poor Smike found to his unspeakable joy that he really began to remember something about the text.

Early in the morning they went to it again, and Smike, rendered more confident by the progress he had already made, got on faster and with better heart. As soon as he began to acquire the words pretty freely, Nicholas showed him how low he must come in with both hands spread out upon his stomach, and how he must occasionally rub it, in compliance with the established form by which people on the stage always denote that they want something to eat. After the morning’s rehearsal they went to work again, nor did they stop, except for a hasty dinner, until it was time to go to the theatre at night.

Never had master a more anxious, humble, docile pupil. Never had pupil a more patient, unwearying, considerate, kind-hearted master.

As soon as they were dressed, and at every interval when he was not upon the stage, Nicholas renewed his instructions. They prospered well. The Romeo was received with hearty plaudits and unbounded favour, and Smike was pronounced unanimously, alike by audience and actors, the very prince and prodigy of Apothecaries.



## CHAPTER XV

THE agitation she had undergone rendered Kate Nickleby unable to resume her duties at the dressmaker's for three days, at the expiration of which interval she went at the accustomed hour with languid steps to the temple of fashion where Madame Mantalini reigned paramount and supreme.

The ill will of Miss Knag had lost nothing of its virulence meantime. The young ladies still scrupulously shrank from all companionship with their denounced associate; and when that exemplary female, Miss Knag, arrived a few minutes afterwards, she was at no pains to conceal the displeasure with which she regarded Kate's return.

"Upon my word!" said Miss Knag, as the satellites flocked round to relieve her of her bonnet and shawl; "I should have thought some people would have had spirit enough to stop away altogether, when they know what an incumbrance their presence is to right-minded persons. But it's a queer world; oh! it's a queer world!"

"Well, Miss Nickleby, child," said Madame Mantalini, when Kate presented herself; "are you quite well again?"

"A great deal better, thank you."

"I wish I could say the same."

"Are you ill? I am very sorry for that."

"Not exactly ill, but worried, child — worried."

"I am still more sorry to hear that; bodily illness is more easy to bear than mental."

"Ah! and it's much easier to talk than to bear either," said madame, rubbing her nose with much irritability of manner. "There, get to your work, child, and put the things in order, do."

While Kate was wondering within herself what these symptoms of unusual vexations meant, Mr. Mantalini put

the tips of his whiskers, and, by degrees, his head, through the half-opened door, and cried in a soft voice —

“ Is my life and soul there? ”

“ No,” replied his wife.

“ How can it say so, when it is blooming in the front room like a little rose in a demnition flower pot. May its Poppet come in and talk? ”

“ Certainly not. You know I never allow you here. Go along! ”

The Poppet, however, encouraged perhaps by the relenting tone of this reply, ventured to rebel and, stealing into the room, made towards Madame Mantalini on tiptoes, blowing her a kiss as he came along.

“ Why will it vex itself and twist its little face into bewitching nutcrackers? ” said Mantalini, putting his left arm round the waist of his life and soul, and drawing her towards him with his right.

“ Oh! I can't bear you,” said his wife.

“ Not — eh, not bear me! Fibs, fibs. It couldn't be. There's not a woman alive that could tell me such a thing to my face — to my own face.” Mr. Mantalini stroked his chin as he said this and glanced complacently at an opposite mirror.

“ Such destructive extravagance,” resumed his wife, in a low tone.

“ All in its joy at having gained such a lovely creature, such a little Venus, such a demd, enchanting, bewitching, engrossing, captivating little Venus.”

“ See what a situation you have placed me in! ” she urged.

“ No harm will come, no harm shall come, to its own darling. It is all over; there will be nothing the matter; money shall be got in, and if it don't come in fast enough, old Nickleby shall stump up again, or have his jugular separated if he

dares to vex and hurt the little —— ” Mr. Mantalini disposed of all the accusations of his wife with kisses, and they went upstairs to breakfast very happily.

Kate was busy arranging the room when she was startled by two officers suddenly entering, who came to collect Mr. Mantalini's bills or take the furniture of the establishment. He had spent all the cash of his wife and had then borrowed on the furniture.

Poor Madame Mantalini wrung her hands for grief and rang the bell for her husband; which done she fell into a chair and a fainting fit. Mr. Mantalini sauntered in, thrust his hands down to the bottom of his pockets, whistled a bar or two, swore an oath or two and, sitting astride upon a chair, asked with great composure,

“ What's the demd total? ”

“ Fifteen hundred and twenty-seven pound, four and ninepence ha' penny,” said one of the officers.

“ The halfpenny be demd,” said Mr. Mantalini, impatiently.

“ By all means, if you wish it, and the ninepence too,” said the same officer.

“ It don't matter to us if the fifteen hundred and twenty-seven pound went along with it, that I know on,” observed the other officer.

“ Not a button,” said his companion. “ Wot's to be done — anything? Is it only a small crack, or a out-and-out smash? A break-up of the constitution is it — werry good. Wot's the good of the lady afretting herself? ” as Madame Mantalini sobbed. “ A good half of wot's here isn't paid for, I des-say, and wot a consolation oughtn't that to be to her feelings! ”

With these remarks both officers proceeded to take an inventory of everything in the place.



“ My cup of happiness’s sweetener,” said Mantalini, approaching his wife.

“ Oh! don’t speak to me! ” replied his wife sobbing. “ You have ruined me, and that’s enough! ”

Mr. Mantalini, who had doubtless well considered his part, no sooner heard these words pronounced in a tone of grief and severity than he recoiled several paces, assumed an expression of mental agony, rushed headlong from the room, and was soon afterwards heard to slam the door of an upstairs dressing room with great violence.

“ Miss Nickleby,” cried Madame Mantalini, when this sound met her ear, “ hurry, for heaven’s sake; he will destroy himself! I spoke unkindly to him, and he cannot bear it from me. Alfred, my darling Alfred.”

With such exclamations, she hurried upstairs, followed by Kate, who, although she did not quite participate in the fond wife’s apprehensions, was a little flurried, nevertheless. The dressing-room door being hastily flung open, Mr. Mantalini was disclosed to view, with his shirt collar thrown back, putting a fine edge to a breakfast knife by means of his razor strop.

“ Ah! ” cried Mr. Mantalini, “ interrupted! ” and whisk went the breakfast knife into Mr. Mantalini’s dressing-gown pocket, while Mr. Mantalini’s eyes rolled wildly and his hair floating in wild disorder, mingled with his whiskers.

“ Alfred,” cried his wife, flinging her arms about him, “ I didn’t mean to say it, I didn’t mean to say it! ”

“ Ruined! Have I brought ruin upon the best and purest creature that ever blest a demnition vagabond! Demmit, let me go.” At the crisis of his ravings Mr. Mantalini made a pluck at the breakfast knife and, being restrained by his wife’s grasp, attempted to dash his head against the wall — taking very good care to be at least six feet from it.

“ Compose yourself, my own angel,” said madame. “ It

was nobody's fault; it was mine as much as yours; we shall do very well yet. Come, Alfred, come."

Mr. Mantalini did not think proper to come to, all at once; but after calling several times for poison and requesting some lady or gentleman to blow his brains out, gentler feelings came upon him, and he wept pathetically. In this softened frame of mind he did not oppose the capture of the knife — which, to tell the truth, he was rather glad to be rid of, as an inconvenient and dangerous article for a pocket — and finally he allowed himself to be led away by his affectionate partner.

After a delay of two or three hours, the young ladies were informed that their services would be dispensed with until further notice, and at the expiration of two days, the name of Mantalini appeared in the list of bankrupts. Miss Nickleby received an intimation through the post-office on the same morning that the business would be, in future, carried on under the name of Miss Knag and that her assistance would no longer be required.

"Well, mama," said Kate, "what would you recommend now?"

"Recommend!" cried Mrs. Nickleby. "Isn't it obvious, my dear that of all occupations in this world for a young lady situated as you are that of companion to some amiable lady is the very thing for which your education, and manners, and personal appearance, and everything else, exactly qualify you?"

The truth then came out. Mrs. Nickleby had that very morning seen an advertisement in the newspaper, announcing that a married lady was in want of a genteel young person as companion.

"And I say," exclaimed Mrs. Nickleby, laying the paper down in triumph, "that if your uncle don't object, it's well worth the trial."

Mr. Ralph Nickleby offered no objections but, on the contrary, highly approved of the suggestion; neither did he express any great surprise at Mantalini's sudden failure; indeed, it would have been strange if he had, inasmuch as it had been procured and brought about chiefly by himself. So Miss Nickleby and her mother went off in quest of the woman who had advertised for a companion.

At Mrs. Witterly's door Kate Nickleby knocked with a trembling hand. The door was opened by a big footman with his head floured, or chalked, or painted in some way (it didn't look genuine powder). Receiving the card of introduction he gave it to a little page, so little, indeed, that his body would not hold, in ordinary array, the number of small buttons which are indispensable to a page's costume; and they were consequently obliged to be stuck on four abreast. This young gentleman took the card upstairs on a salver and, pending his return, Kate and her mother were shown into a dining room of rather dirty and shabby aspect, and so comfortably arranged as to be adapted to almost any purpose rather than eating and drinking.

Mrs. Witterly gave audience in the drawing-room, where was everything proper and necessary, including curtains and furniture of a roseate hue to shed a delicate bloom on Mrs. Witterly's complexion, and a little dog to snap at stranger's legs for Mrs. Witterly's amusement, and the page to hand chocolate for Mrs. Witterly's refreshment. The lady had a face of sweet insipidity and engaging paleness. There was a faded look about her, and about the furniture, and about the house. She was reclining on a sofa in such a very un-studied attitude that she might have been taken for an actress all ready for the first scene in a ballet and only waiting for the drop curtain to go up.

“Place chairs.”

The page placed them.



“Leave the room, Alphonse.”

The page left it; but if ever an Alphonse carried plain Bill in his face and figure, that page was the boy.

“I have ventured to call from having seen your advertisement,” said Kate, after a few seconds of awkward silence.

“Yes, one of my people put it in the paper — yes.”

“I thought, perhaps, that if you had not already made a final choice, you would forgive me for troubling you with an application.”

“Yes,” drawled Mrs. Witterly again.

“If you have already made a selection —— ”

“O dear no, I am not so easily suited. I really don’t know what to say. You have never been a companion before, have you?”

Mrs. Nickleby, who had been eagerly watching her opportunity, answered before Kate could reply, “Not to any stranger, ma’am, but she has been a companion to me for some years. I am her mother.”

“Oh! I apprehend you,” said Mrs. Witterly.

“I assure you, ma’am,” said Mrs. Nickleby, “that I very little thought at one time that it would be necessary for my daughter to go out into the world at all. Her poor dear papa was an independent gentleman and would have been at this moment if he had but listened to my constant entreaties and —— ”

“Dear mama,” said Kate in a low voice.

“My dear Kate, if you will allow me to speak, I shall take the liberty of explaining to this lady —— ”

“I think it is almost unnecessary, mama.”

And notwithstanding all the frowns and winks with which Mrs. Nickleby intimated that she was going to say something which would clinch the business at once, Kate maintained her point by an expressive look and for once Mrs. Nickleby was stopped upon the brink of an oration.

“What are your accomplishments?” asked Mrs. Witterly, with her eyes shut.

Kate mentioned her principal acquirements, and Mrs. Nickleby checked them all off, one by one, on her fingers, having calculated the number before she came in. Luckily the two calculations agreed, so Mrs. Nickleby had no excuse for talking.

“You have a good disposition?” asked Mrs. Witterly, opening her eyes for an instant, and shutting them again.

“I hope so.”

“And have a highly respectable reference for everything, have you?”

Kate replied that she had, and laid her uncle’s card upon the table.

“Have the goodness to draw your chair a little nearer, and let me look at you; I am so very near-sighted that I can’t quite discern your features.”

Kate complied, though with some embarrassment, and Mrs. Witterly took a languid survey of her countenance, which lasted two or three minutes.

“I like your countenance,” said the lady, ringing a little bell. “Alphonse, request your master to come here.”

The page disappeared on this errand, and after a short interval, during which not a word was spoken on either side, opened the door for an important gentleman of about eight-and-thirty, with a very light head of hair, who leaned over Mrs. Witterly for a little time and conversed with her in whispers.

“Oh,” he said, turning round, “yes. This is a most important matter. Mrs. Witterly is of a very excitable nature, very delicate, very fragile, a hothouse plant, an exotic.”

“Oh! Henry, my dear,” interposed Mrs. Witterly.

“You are, my love, you know you are; one breath——” said Mr. Witterly, blowing an imaginary feather away. “Pho! you’re gone!”

The lady sighed.

“Your soul is too large for your body,” said Mr. Witterly. “Your intellect wears you out; all the medical men say so. There is not a physician who is not proud of being called in to you. What is their unanimous declaration? ‘My dear doctor,’ said I to Doctor Snuffim, in this very room, the very last time he came. ‘What is my wife’s complaint? Tell me all. I can bear it. Is it nerves?’ ‘My dear fellow,’ he said, ‘be proud of that woman; make much of her. She is an ornament to the fashionable world. Her complaint is *soul*. It swells, expands, dilates — the blood fires, the pulse quickens, the excitement increases’ — Whew!” Here Mr. Witterly, who had flourished his right hand to within something less than an inch of Mrs. Nickleby’s bonnet, drew it hastily back again, and blew his nose as fiercely as if it had been done by some violent machinery.

It was finally arranged that a decisive answer should be sent to Miss Nickleby within two days. The page then showed them down as far as the staircase window, and the big footman, relieving guard at that point, piloted them in perfect safety to the street door.

“They are very distinguished people, evidently,” said Mrs. Nickleby, as she took her daughter’s arm.

“Do you think so, mama?” was all Kate’s reply.

The answer — not to Kate’s great joy — was favourable; and at the expiration of a week she went, with all her movables and valuables, to Mrs. Witterly’s mansion.

## CHAPTER XVI

THE place was a handsome suite of private apartments in Regent street: the time was three o’clock in the afternoon: the persons were Lord Frederick Verisopht, and his friend Sir Mulberry Hawk. A couple of billiard balls



all mud and dirt, two battered hats, a champagne bottle with a soiled glove twisted round the neck, a broken cane, a card case without the top, an empty purse, a watch guard snapped asunder, a handful of silver, mingled with fragments of half-smoked cigars, and their stale and crumbled ashes — these and many other tokens of riot and disorder hinted at the nature of last night's gentlemanly frolics.

Lord Frederick Verisopht was the first to speak. Dropping his slippered feet on the ground and yawning heavily, he struggled into a sitting posture and turned his dull languid eyes towards his friend, to whom he called in a drowsy voice.

“Hallo!” replied Sir Mulberry, turning round.

“Are we going to lie here all da-a-y?” said the lord.

“I don't know that we're fit for anything else yet awhile, at least. I haven't a grain of life in me this morning.”

“Life! I feel as if there would be nothing so snug and comfortable as to die at once.”

“Then why don't you die?” said Sir Mulberry Hawk.

With which inquiry he turned his face away and seemed to occupy himself in an attempt to fall asleep.

His hopeful friend and pupil drew a chair to the breakfast table and tried to eat but, finding that impossible, lounged to the window, then loitered up and down the room with his hand to his fevered head, and finally threw himself again on his sofa, and roused his friend once more.

“What the devil's the matter?” groaned Sir Mulberry, sitting upright on the couch.

Although Sir Mulberry said this with ill humour, he did not seem to feel himself quite at liberty to remain silent; for after stretching himself very often, and declaring with a shiver that it was “infernal cold,” he made an experiment at the breakfast table, and proving more successful than his less-seasoned friend, remained there.

“Suppose,” said Sir Mulberry, pausing with a morsel on

the point of his fork, "suppose we go back to the subject of little Nickleby, eh?"

"Which little Nickleby; the money lender or the ga-a-l?"

"You take me, I see. The girl, of course."

"You promised me you'd find her out," said Lord Frederick.

"So I did, but I have thought further of the matter since then. You distrust me in the business — you shall find her out yourself."

"Na-ay."

"But I say yes, you shall find her out yourself. Don't think that I mean, when you can — I know as well as you that, if I did, you could never get sight of her without me. No. I say you shall find her out — shall — and I'll put you in the way."

"Now, curse me, if you ain't a real, deyvlish, downright friend."

"I'll tell you how. She was at that dinner as a bait for you," said Sir Mulberry.

"No! What the dey ——"

"As a bait for you; old Nickleby told me so himself."

"What a fine old cock it is! A noble rascal!" said Lord Frederick.

"Yes, he knew she was a smart little creature ——"

"Smart! Upon my soul, Hawk, she's a perfect beauty — a — picture, a statue, a — a — upon my soul she is!"

"Well," replied Sir Mulberry, shrugging his shoulders and manifesting an indifference, whether he felt it or not; "that's a matter of taste; if mine doesn't agree with yours, so much the better."

"Confound it! You were thick enough with her that day, anyhow. I could hardly get in a word."

"Well enough for once, well enough for once, but not worth the trouble of being agreeable to again. If you seri-

ously want to follow up the niece, tell the uncle that you must know where she lives and how she lives, and with whom, or you are no longer a customer of his. He'll tell you fast enough."

"Why didn't you say this before?"

"I didn't know it, in the first place," answered Sir Mulberry carelessly; "and in the second, I didn't believe you were so very much in earnest."

(Now, the truth was that, in the interval which had elapsed since the dinner at Ralph Nickleby's, Sir Mulberry Hawk had been trying by every means in his power to discover where Kate had disappeared.)

Thus reasoned Sir Mulberry, and in pursuance of this reasoning he and his friend soon afterward repaired to Ralph Nickleby's, there to execute a plan of operations made by Sir Mulberry himself, avowedly to promote his friend's object, but really to attain his own.

They found Ralph at home, and alone. As he led them into the drawing-room, the recollection of the scene which had taken place there seemed to occur to him, for he cast a curious look at Sir Mulberry, who bestowed upon him no other acknowledgment than a careless smile.

They had a short conference upon some money matters then in progress, which were scarcely disposed of when the lordly dupe (in pursuance of his friend's instructions) requested with some embarrassment to speak to Ralph alone.

"Alone, eh?" cried Sir Mulberry, affecting surprise. "Oh, very good. I'll walk into the next room here. Don't keep me long, that's all."

So saying, Sir Mulberry took up his hat, and humming a fragment of a song disappeared through the door of communication between the two drawing-rooms and closed it after him.

"Now, my lord," said Ralph, "what is it?"



“Nickleby,” said his client, throwing himself along the sofa on which he had been previously seated, so as to bring his lips nearer to the old man’s ear, “what a pretty girl your niece is!”

“Is she, my lord? Maybe—maybe. I don’t trouble my head with such matters.”

“You know she’s a deyv’lish fine girl. You must know that, Nickleby. Come, don’t deny that.”

“Yes, I believe she is considered so. Indeed, I know she is. If I did not, you are an authority on such points, and your taste, my lord—on all points, indeed—is undeniable.”

Nobody but the young man to whom these words were addressed could have been deaf to the sneering tone in which they were spoken, or blind to the look of contempt by which they were accompanied. But Lord Frederick Verisopht was both and took them to be complimentary.

“Well, p’raps you’re a little right, and p’raps you’re a little wrong—a little of both, Nickleby. I want to know where this beauty lives that I may have another peep at her, Nickleby.”

“Really——”

“Don’t talk so loud,” cried the other, achieving the great point of his lesson to a miracle. “I don’t want Hawk to hear.”

“You know he is your rival, do you?”

“He always is, and I want to steal a march upon him. Ha, ha, ha! He’ll cut up so rough, Nickleby, at our talking together without him. Where does she live, Nickleby, that’s all? Only tell me where she lives, Nickleby.”

“He bites,” thought Ralph. “He bites.”

“Eh, Nickleby, eh? Where does she live?”

“Really, my lord,” said Ralph, rubbing his hands slowly over each other, “I must think before I tell you.”

“No, not a bit of it, Nickleby; you mustn’t think at all. Where is it?”

“No good can come of your knowing; she has been virtuously and well brought up; to be sure she is handsome, poor, unprotected! Poor girl, poor girl.”

Ralph ran over this brief summary of Kate’s condition as if it were merely passing through his own mind and he had no intention to speak aloud; but the shrewd, sly look which he directed at his companion as he delivered it gave this poor assumption the lie.

“I tell you I only want to see her. A ma-an may look at a pretty woman without harm, mayn’t he? Now, where does she live? You know you’re making a fortune out of me, Nickleby, and upon my soul nobody shall ever take me to anybody else, if you only tell me this.”

“As you promise that, my lord, and as I am most anxious to oblige you, and as there’s no harm in it — no harm — I’ll tell you. But you had better keep it to yourself, my lord; strictly to yourself.” Ralph pointed to the adjoining room as he spoke, and nodded expressively.

The young lord, feigning to be equally impressed with the necessity of this precaution, Ralph disclosed the present address and occupation of his niece, observing that from what he heard of the family they appeared very ambitious to have distinguished acquaintances and that a lord could, doubtless, introduce himself with great ease, if he felt disposed.

“Your object being only to see her again,” said Ralph, “you could effect it at any time you chose by that means.”

Lord Frederick acknowledged the hint with a great many squeezes of Ralph’s hard, horny hand and, whispering that they would now do well to close the conversation, called to Sir Mulberry Hawk that he might come back.

“I thought you had gone to sleep,” said Sir Mulberry, reappearing with an ill-tempered air.

“Sorry to detain you, but Nickleby has been so ama-azingly funny that I couldn’t tear myself away.”

“No, no,” said Ralph; “it was all his lordship. You know what a witty, humorous, elegant, accomplished man Lord Frederick is. Mind the step, my lord — Sir Mulberry, pray give way.”

With such courtesies as these, and many low bows and the same cold sneer upon his face all the while, Ralph busied himself in showing his visitors downstairs.

There had been a ring at the bell a few moments before, which was answered by Newman Noggs just as they reached the hall. In the ordinary course of business Newman would have either admitted the newcomer in silence, or have requested him or her to stand aside while the gentleman passed out. But he no sooner saw who it was than he cried in a loud and sonorous voice: “Mrs. Nickleby!”

“Mrs. Nickleby!” cried Sir Mulberry Hawk, as his friend looked back, and stared him in the face.

It was, indeed, that well-intentioned lady, who, having received an offer for the empty house in the city directed to the landlord, had brought it post-haste to Mr. Nickleby without delay.

“Nobody you know,” said Ralph. “Step into the office, my — my — dear. I’ll be with you directly.”

“Nobody I know!” cried Sir Mulberry Hawk, advancing to the astonished lady. “Is this Mrs. Nickleby — the mother of Miss Nickleby — the delightful girl that I had the happiness of meeting in this house the very last time I dined here! But no;” said Sir Mulberry, stopping short.

“No, it can’t be. There is the same cast of features, the same indescribable air of — but no, no. This lady is too young for that.”



“ I think you can tell the gentleman, brother-in-law, if it concerns him to know,” said Mrs. Nickleby, acknowledging the compliment with a graceful bend, “ that Kate Nickleby is my daughter.”

“ Her daughter, my lord! ” cried Sir Mulberry, turning to his friend. “ This lady’s daughter, my lord.”

“ My lord! ” thought Mrs. Nickleby. “ Well, I never did —— ! ”

“ This, then, my lord,” said Sir Mulberry, “ is the lady to whose obliging marriage we owe so much happiness. This lady is the mother of sweet Miss Nickleby. Do you observe the extraordinary likeness, my lord? Nickleby — introduce us.”

Ralph did so, in a kind of desperation.

“ Upon my soul, it’s a most delightful thing,” said Lord Frederick, pressing forward: “ How de do? ”

Mrs. Nickleby was too much flurried by these uncommonly kind salutations, and her regrets at not having on her other bonnet, to make any immediate reply, so she merely continued to bend and smile, and betray great agitation.

“ A-and how is Miss Nickleby? ” said Lord Frederick. “ Well, I hope? ”

“ She is quite well, I’m obliged to you, my lord,” returned Mrs. Nickleby, recovering. “ Quite well. She wasn’t well for some days after that day she dined here, and I can’t help thinking that she caught cold in that hackney coach coming home. Hackney coaches, my lord, are such nasty things, that it’s almost better to walk at any time; for although I believe a hackney coachman can be transported <sup>1</sup> for life if he has a broken window, still they are so reckless that they nearly all have broken windows. I once had a swelled face for six weeks, my lord, from riding in a hackney coach — I think

<sup>1</sup> Transportation or banishment to a colony was a punishment inflicted by the English until 1808.

it was a hackney coach," said Mrs. Nickleby, reflecting, "though I'm not quite certain whether it wasn't a chariot; at all events, I know it was dark green, with a very long number, beginning with a nought and ending with a nine — no, beginning with a nine and ending with a nought — that was it."

Having pretty well run herself out by this time, Mrs. Nickleby stopped as suddenly as she had started off and repeated that Kate was quite well. "Indeed, I don't think she ever was better, since she had the whooping cough, scarlet fever, and measles, all at the same time, and that's the fact."

"Is that letter for me?" growled Ralph, pointing to the little packet Mrs. Nickleby held in her hand.

"For you, brother-in-law, and I walked all the way up here on purpose to give it you."

"All the way up here!" cried Sir Mulberry, seizing upon the chance of discovering where Mrs. Nickleby had come from. "What a confounded distance! How far do you call it now?"

"How far do I call it! Let me see. It's just a mile from our door to the Old Bailey."

"No, no. Not so much as that," urged Sir Mulberry.

"Oh! It is indeed, I appeal to his lordship," said Mrs. Nickleby.

"I should decidedly say it was a mile," remarked Lord Frederick, with a solemn aspect.

"It must be; it can't be a yard less," said Mrs. Nickleby. "All down Newgate Street, all down Cheapside, all up Lombard Street, down Gracechurch Street, and along Thames Street, as far as Spigwiffin's Wharf. Oh! It's a mile."

"Yes, on second thoughts I should say it was," replied Sir Mulberry. "But you don't surely mean to walk all the way back?"

"Oh, no, I shall go back in an omnibus. I didn't travel

about in omnibuses, when my poor dear husband was alive, brother-in-law. But as it is, you know —— ”

“ Yes, yes, ” replied Ralph impatiently, “ and you had better get back before dark. ”

“ Thank you, brother-in-law, so I had. I think I had better say good bye, at once. ”

“ Not stop and — rest? ” said Ralph, who seldom offered refreshments unless something was to be got by it.

“ Oh dear me, no, ” returned Mrs. Nickleby, glancing at the dial.

“ Lord Frederick, ” said Sir Mulberry, “ we are going Mrs. Nickleby’s way. We’ll see her safe to the omnibus? ”

“ By all means. Ye-es. ”

“ Oh! I really couldn’t think of it! ” said Mrs. Nickleby.

But Sir Mulberry Hawk and Lord Frederick were peremptory in their politeness, and leaving Ralph, who seemed to think that he looked less ridiculous as a mere spectator than he would have done if he had taken any part in these proceedings, they quitted the house with Mrs. Nickleby between them. That good lady was in a perfect ecstasy of satisfaction with the attentions shown her by two titled gentlemen and with the conviction that Kate might now pick and choose at least between two large fortunes and most unexceptionable husbands.

As she was carried away for the moment by an irresistible train of thought all connected with her daughter’s future greatness, Sir Mulberry Hawk and his friend exchanged glances over the top of the bonnet which the poor lady so much regretted not having left at home and proceeded to dilate with great rapture, but much respect, on the many perfections of Miss Nickleby.

“ What a delight, what a comfort, what a happiness, this amiable girl must be to you, ” said Sir Mulberry, throwing into his voice an indication of the warmest feeling.



“She is indeed, sir, she is the sweetest-tempered, kindest-hearted daughter — and so clever!”

“She looks clayver,” said Lord Frederick Verisopht, with the air of a judge of cleverness.

“I assure you she is, my lord,” returned Mrs. Nickleby.

Meanwhile, Ralph walked to and fro in his little back office, troubled in mind by what had just occurred.

“I wish I had never done this, and yet it will keep this boy to me while there is money to be made. Selling a girl — throwing her in the way of temptation, and insult, and coarse speech. Nearly two thousand pounds profit from him already, though. Pshaw! match-making mothers do the same thing every day.”

He sat down and told the chances, for and against, on his fingers.

“If I had not put them in the right track today, this foolish woman would have done so. Well, if her daughter is as true to herself as she should be from what I have seen, what harm ensues? A little teasing, a little humbling, a few tears. Yes,” said Ralph, aloud, as he locked his iron safe. “She must take her chance. She must take her chance.”

Mrs. Nickleby had not felt so proud and important for many a day as when, on reaching home, she gave herself wholly up to the pleasant visions which had accompanied her on her way thither. Lady Mulberry Hawk — that was the prevalent idea. Lady Mulberry Hawk — On Tuesday last, at St. George’s Hanover Square, by the Right Reverend the Bishop of Llandaff, Sir Mulberry Hawk, of Mulberry Castle, North Wales, to Catherine, only daughter of the late Nicholas Nickleby, Esquire, of Devonshire. “Upon my word!” cried Mrs. Nickleby, “it sounds very well.”

She was preparing her frugal dinner next day, still occupied with the same ideas — a little softened down perhaps

by sleep and daylight — when the girl who attended her rushed into the room and announced that two gentlemen were waiting in the passage for permission to walk upstairs.

“ Bless my heart! ” cried Mrs. Nickleby, hastily arranging her cap and dress, “ if it should be — dear me, standing in the passage all this time — why don’t you go and ask them to walk up, you stupid thing? ”

While the girl was gone on this errand, Mrs. Nickleby hastily swept into a cupboard all vestiges of eating and drinking, which she had scarcely done, and seated herself with looks as collected as she could assume, when two gentlemen, both perfect strangers, presented themselves.

“ How do you *do*? ” said one gentleman, laying great stress on the last word of inquiry.

“ How *do* you do? ” said the other gentleman, altering the emphasis, as if to give variety to the salutation.

Mrs. Nickleby curtseyed and smiled, and curtseyed again, and remarked, rubbing her hands as she did so, that she hadn’t the — really — the honour to —

“ To know us,” said the first gentleman. “ The loss has been ours, Mrs. Nickleby. Has the loss been ours, Pyke? ”

“ It has, Pluck.”

“ We have regretted it very often, I believe, Pyke? ” said the first gentleman.

“ Very often, Pluck.”

“ But now,” said the first gentleman, “ now we have the happiness we have pined and languished for. Have we pined and languished for this happiness, Pyke, or have we not? ”

“ You know we have, Pluck.”

“ You hear him, ma’am? ” said Mr. Pluck, looking round; “ you hear the unimpeachable testimony of my friend Pyke — that reminds me — formalities, formalities, must not be

neglected in civilized society. Pyke — Mrs. Nickleby.”

Mr. Pyke laid his hand upon his heart, and bowed low.

“Whether I shall introduce myself with the same formality,” said Mr. Pluck — “Whether I shall say myself that my name is Pluck, or whether I shall ask my friend Pyke (who, being now regularly introduced, is competent to the office) to state for me, Mrs. Nickleby, that my name is Pluck; whether I shall claim your acquaintance on the plain ground of the strong interest I take in your welfare, or whether I shall make myself known to you as the friend of Sir Mulberry Hawk — these, Mrs. Nickleby, are considerations which I leave to you to determine.”

“Any friend of Sir Mulberry Hawk’s requires no better introduction to me,” observed Mrs. Nickleby, graciously.

“It is delightful to hear you say so,” said Mr. Pluck, drawing a chair close to Mrs. Nickleby, and seating himself. “It is refreshing to know that you hold my excellent friend, Sir Mulberry, in such high esteem. A word in your ear, Mrs. Nickleby. When Sir Mulberry knows it, he will be a happy man — I say, Mrs. Nickleby, a happy man. Pyke, be seated.”

“My good opinion,” said Mrs. Nickleby, and the poor lady exulted in the idea that she was marvellously sly, “my good opinion can be of very little consequence to a gentleman like Sir Mulberry.”

“Of little consequence!” exclaimed Mr. Pluck. “Pyke, of what consequence to our friend, Sir Mulberry, is the good opinion of Mrs. Nickleby?”

“Of what consequence?” echoed Pyke.

“Aye, is it of the greatest consequence?” repeated Pluck.

“Of the very greatest consequence,” replied Pyke.

“Mrs. Nickleby cannot be ignorant,” said Mr. Pluck, “of the immense impression which that sweet girl has ——”

“Pluck! beware!”



“Pyke is right,” muttered Mr. Pluck, after a short pause; “I was not to mention it. Pyke is very right. Thank you, Pyke.”

“Well now, really!” thought Mrs. Nickleby within herself. “Such delicacy as that I never saw!”

Mr. Pluck, after feigning to be in a condition of great embarrassment for some minutes, resumed the conversation by entreating Mrs. Nickleby to take no heed of what he had said — to consider him imprudent, rash, injudicious. The only stipulation he would make in his own favour was that she should give him credit for the best intentions.

“But when,” said Mr. Pluck, “when I see so much sweetness and beauty on the one hand, and so much ardour and devotion on the other, I — pardon me, Pyke, I didn’t intend to resume that theme. Change the subject, Pyke.”

“We promised Sir Mulberry and Lord Frederick,” said Pyke, “that we’d call this morning and inquire whether you took any cold last night.”

“Not the least in the world, sir, with many thanks to his lordship and Sir Mulberry for doing me the honour to inquire; not the least — which is the more singular, as I really am very subject to colds, indeed — very subject. I had a cold once — I think it was in the year eighteen hundred and seventeen — let me see, four and five are nine, and — yes, eighteen hundred and seventeen, that I thought I never should get rid of — actually and seriously that I thought I never should get rid of. I was only cured at last by a remedy that I don’t know whether you ever happened to hear of, Mr. Pluck. You have a gallon of water as hot as you can possibly bear it, with a pound of salt and sixpen’wr’t’h of the finest bran, and sit with your head in it for twenty minutes every night just before going to bed; at least, I don’t mean your head — your feet. It’s a most extraordinary cure — a most

extraordinary cure. I used it for the first time, I recollect, the day after Christmas Day, and by the middle of April following the cold was gone. It seems quite a miracle when you come to think of it, for I had had it ever since the beginning of September."

"What an afflicting calamity!" said Mr. Pyke.

"Perfectly horrid!" exclaimed Mr. Pluck.

"But it's worth the pain of hearing, only to know that Mrs. Nickleby recovered from it, isn't it, Pluck?" cried Mr. Pyke.

"That is the circumstance which gives it such a thrilling interest," replied Mr. Pyke.

"But come," said Pyke, as if suddenly recollecting himself; "we must not forget our mission in the pleasure of this interview. We come on a mission, Mrs. Nickleby."

"On a mission," exclaimed that good lady, to whose mind a definite proposal of marriage for Kate at once presented itself in lively colours.

"From Sir Mulberry," replied Pyke. "You must be very dull here."

"Rather dull, I confess," said Mrs. Nickleby.

"We bring the compliments of Sir Mulberry Hawk, and a thousand entreaties that you'll take a seat in a private box at the play tonight," said Mr. Pluck.

"Oh dear! I never go out at all, never."

"And that is the very reason, my dear Mrs. Nickleby, why you should go out tonight," retorted Mr. Pluck. "Pyke, entreat Mrs. Nickleby."

"Oh, please decide to go!" said Pyke.

"You positively must," urged Pluck.

"You are very kind," said Mrs. Nickleby, "but ——"

"There's not a but in the case, my dear Mrs. Nickleby," remonstrated Mr. Pluck; "not such a word in the vocabulary. Your brother-in-law joins us, Lord Frederick joins us, Sir

Mulberry joins us — a refusal is out of the question. Sir Mulberry sends a carriage for you — twenty minutes before seven to the moment — you'll not be so cruel as to disappoint the whole party, Mrs. Nickleby?"

"You are so very pressing that I scarcely know what to say," replied the worthy lady.

"Say nothing; not a word, not a word, my dearest madam," urged Mr. Pluck. "Mrs. Nickleby," said that excellent gentleman, lowering his voice, "there is the most trifling, the most excusable breach of confidence in what I am about to say; and yet if my friend Pyke there overheard it — such is that man's delicate sense of honour, Mrs. Nickleby, — he'd have me out before dinner time, in a duel."

Mrs. Nickleby cast an apprehensive glance at the war-like Pyke, who had walked to the window; and Mr. Pluck, squeezing her hand, went on:

"Your daughter has made a conquest — a conquest on which I may congratulate you. Sir Mulberry, my dear ma'am, Sir Mulberry is her devoted slave. Hem!"

"Hah!" cried Mr. Pyke, at this juncture snatching something from the chimneypiece with a theatrical air. "What is this! what do I behold!"

"What do you behold, my dear fellow?" asked Mr. Pluck.

"It is the face, the countenance, the expression," cried Mr. Pyke, falling into his chair with a miniature in his hand; "feebly portrayed, imperfectly caught, but still the face, the countenance, the expression."

"I recognise it at this distance!" exclaimed Mr. Pluck, in a fit of enthusiasm. "Is it not, my dear madam, the faint similitude of ——"

"It is my daughter's portrait," said Mrs. Nickleby, with great pride. And so it was. And little Miss La Creevy had brought it home for inspection only two nights before.

Mr. Pyke no sooner ascertained that he was quite right



in his conjecture than he launched into the most extravagant praises of the divine original and in the warmth of his enthusiasm kissed the picture a thousand times, while Mr. Pluck pressed Mrs. Nickleby's hand to his heart and congratulated her on the possession of such a daughter, with so much earnestness and affection that the tears stood, or seemed to stand, in his eyes. Poor Mrs. Nickleby, who had listened in a state of enviable complacency at first, became at length quite overpowered by these tokens of regard for the family. Even the servant girl, who had peeped in at the door, remained rooted to the spot in astonishment at the ecstasies of the two friendly visitors.

By degrees these raptures subsided, and Mrs. Nickleby went on to entertain her guests with a lament over her fallen fortunes and a picturesque account of her old house in the country, comprising a full description of the different apartments, not forgetting the little storeroom, and a lively recollection of how many steps you went down to get into the garden, and which way you turned when you came out at the parlour door, and what capital fixtures there were in the kitchen. This last reflection naturally conducted her into the wash-house, where she stumbled upon the brewing utensils, among which she might have wandered for an hour, if the mere mention of those implements had not, by an association of ideas, instantly reminded Mr. Pyke that he was "amazing thirsty."

"And I'll tell you what," said Mr. Pyke; "if you'll send round to the public house for a pot of mild half-and-half, positively and actually I'll drink it."

And positively and actually Mr. Pyke did drink it, and Mr. Pluck helped him.

"At twenty minutes before seven, then," said Mr. Pyke, rising, "the coach will be here. One more look — one little look — at that sweet face. Ah! here it is. Unmoved, un-

changed!" This by the way was a very remarkable circumstance, miniatures being liable to so many changes of expression. "Oh, Pluck! Pluck!"

Mr. Pluck made no other reply than kissing Mrs. Nickleby's hand with a great show of feeling and attachment; Mr. Pyke having done the same, both gentlemen hastily withdrew.

Mrs. Nickleby had never felt so satisfied with her own sharp-sightedness as she did that day. She had found it all out the night before. She had never seen Sir Mulberry and Kate together — never even heard Sir Mulberry's name — and yet hadn't she said to herself from the very first that she saw how the case stood? And what a triumph it was, for there was now no doubt about it. If these flattering attentions to herself were not sufficient proofs, Sir Mulberry's confidential friend had let the secret escape in so many words. "I am quite in love with that dear Mr. Pluck, I declare I am," she concluded to herself.

Punctual to its time that evening came the promised vehicle, which was no hackney coach but a private chariot, having behind it a footman, whose legs, although somewhat large for his body, might, as mere abstract legs, have set themselves up for models at the Royal Academy. It was quite exhilarating to hear the clash and bustle with which he banged the door and jumped up behind, after Mrs. Nickleby was in.

At the theatre entrance there was more banging and more bustle, and there were also Messrs. Pyke and Pluck waiting to escort her to her box.

Mrs. Nickleby had scarcely been put away behind the curtain of the box in an armchair, when Sir Mulberry and Lord Frederick Verisopht arrived, arrayed from the crowns of their heads to the tips of their gloves in the most elegant and costly manner. Sir Mulberry was a little hoarser than on the previous day, and Lord Frederick looked rather sleepy

and queer, from which tokens, as well as from the circumstance of their both being to a trifling extent unsteady on their legs, Mrs. Nickleby concluded that they had taken dinner.

“We have been — we have been — toasting your lovely daughter, Mrs. Nickleby,” whispered Sir Mulberry, sitting down behind her.

“You are very kind, Sir Mulberry.”

“No, no, upon my soul! It’s you that’s kind, upon my soul it is. It was so kind of you to come tonight.”

“So very kind of you to invite me, you mean, Sir Mulberry,” replied Mrs. Nickleby, tossing her head and looking prodigiously sly.

“I am so anxious to know you, so anxious to cultivate your good opinion, so desirous that there should be a delicious kind of harmonious family understanding between us that you mustn’t think I’m disinterested in what I do. I’m infernal selfish; I am — upon my soul I am.”

“I am sure you can’t be selfish, Sir Mulberry; you have much too open and generous a countenance for that.”

“What an extraordinary observer you are!” said Sir Mulberry Hawk.

“Oh no, indeed, I don’t see very far into things, Sir Mulberry,” replied Mrs. Nickleby, in a tone of voice which left the baronet to infer that she saw very far indeed.

“I am quite afraid of you,” said the baronet. “Upon my soul,” repeated Sir Mulberry, looking round to his companions; “I am afraid of Mrs. Nickleby. She is so immensely sharp.”

Messrs. Pyke and Pluck shook their heads mysteriously and observed together that they had found that out long ago, upon which Mrs. Nickleby laughed delightedly, and Sir Mulberry laughed, and Pyke and Pluck roared.

“But where’s my brother-in-law, Sir Mulberry? I



shouldn't be here without him. I hope he's coming."

"Pyke," said Sir Mulberry, taking out his toothpick and lolling back in his chair, as if he were too lazy to invent a reply to this question. "Where is Ralph Nickleby?"

"Pluck," said Pyke, imitating the baronet's action and turning the lie over to his friend, "where's Ralph Nickleby?"

Mr. Pluck was about to return some evasive reply, when the bustle caused by a party entering the next box seemed to attract the attention of all four gentlemen, who exchanged glances of much meaning. The new party beginning to converse together, Sir Mulberry suddenly assumed the character of a most attentive listener, and implored his friends not to breathe — not to breathe.

"Why not?" said Mrs. Nickleby. "What is the matter?"

"Hush!" replied Sir Mulberry, laying his hand on her arm. "Lord Frederick, do you recognize the tones of that voice?"

"Deyvle take me if I didn't think it was the voice of Miss Nickleby."

"Lor, my lord!" cried Miss Nickleby's mama, thrusting her head round the curtain. "Why actually — Kate, my dear, Kate."

"You here, mama! Is it possible!"

"Possible, my dear? Yes."

"Why, who — who on earth is that you have with you, Mama?" said Kate, shrinking back as she caught sight of a man smiling and kissing his hand.

"Who do you suppose, my dear?" replied Mrs. Nickleby, bending towards Mrs. Witterly, and speaking a little louder for that lady's edification.

"There's Mr. Pyke, Mr. Pluck, Sir Mulberry Hawk, and Lord Frederick Verisopht."

"Gracious Heaven!" thought Kate, hurriedly. "How comes she in such society!"

Now Kate thought thus so hurriedly, and the surprise was so great and brought back so forcibly the recollection of what had passed at Ralph's delectable dinner that she turned extremely pale and appeared greatly agitated, which symptoms being observed by Mrs. Nickleby, were at once set down by that acute lady as being caused by violent love. But although she was delighted by this discovery, it did not lessen her motherly anxiety in Kate's behalf. Accordingly, she left her own box to hasten into the next one. Mrs. Witterly, keenly alive to the glory of having a lord and a baronet among her visiting acquaintances, lost no time in signing to Mr. Witterly to open the door, and thus it was that in less than thirty seconds Mrs. Nickleby's party had made an irruption into Mrs. Witterly's box, which it filled to the very door.

"My dear Kate," said Mrs. Nickleby, kissing her daughter affectionately, "how ill you looked a moment ago! You quite frightened me, I declare!"

"It was a mere fancy, mama — the — the — reflection of the lights perhaps," replied Kate, glancing nervously round, and finding it impossible to whisper any caution or explanation.

"Don't you see Sir Mulberry Hawk, my dear?"

Kate bowed slightly and, biting her lip, turned her head towards the stage.

But Sir Mulberry Hawk was not to be so easily repulsed, for he advanced with extended hand; and Mrs. Nickleby officiously informing Kate of this circumstance, she was obliged to extend her own. Sir Mulberry detained it while he murmured a profusion of compliments, which Kate, remembering what had passed between them, rightly considered as so many aggravations of the insult he had already put upon her. Then followed the recognition of Lord Frederick Verisopht, and then the greeting of Mr. Pyke,

and then that of Mr. Pluck, and finally, to complete the young lady's mortification, she was compelled, at Mrs. Witterly's request, to perform the ceremony of introducing the odious persons, whom she regarded with the utmost indignation and abhorrence.

"Mrs. Witterly is delighted," said Mr. Witterly, rubbing his hands; "delighted, my lord, I am sure, with this opportunity of contracting an acquaintance which, I trust, my lord, we shall improve. Julia, my dear, you must not allow yourself to be too much excited, you must not. Indeed you must not. Mrs. Witterly is of a most excitable nature, Sir Mulberry; the snuff of a candle, the wick of a lamp, the bloom on a peach, the down on a butterfly. You might blow her away, my lord; you might blow her away."

Sir Mulberry seemed to think that it would be a great convenience if the lady *could* be blown away. He said, however, that the delight was mutual, and Lord Frederick added that it was mutual, whereupon Messrs. Pyke and Pluck were heard to murmur from the distance that it was very mutual indeed.

"I take an interest, my lord," said Mrs. Witterly, with a faint smile, "such an interest in the drama."

"Ye-es. It's very interesting," replied Lord Frederick.

"I'm always ill after Shakespeare," said Mrs. Witterly. "I scarcely exist the next day; I find the reaction so very great after a tragedy, my lord, and Shakespeare is such a delicious creature."

"Ye-es!" replied Lord Frederick. "He was a clayver man."

"Do you know, my lord," said Mrs. Witterly, after a long silence, "I find I take so much more interest in his plays after having been to that dear little dull house he was born in! Were you ever there, my lord?"

"No, nayver."



“Then really you ought to go, my lord,” returned Mrs. Witterly, in very languid and drawling accents. “I don’t know how it is, but after you’ve seen the place and written your name in the little book, somehow or other you seem to be inspired; it kindles up quite a fire within one.”

“Ye-es! I shall certainly go there.”

“Julia, my life,” interposed Mr. Witterly, “you are deceiving his lordship — unintentionally, my lord, she is deceiving you. It is your poetical temperament, my dear — your ethereal soul — your fervid imagination, which throws you into a glow of genius and excitement. There is nothing in the place, my dear — nothing, nothing.”

“I think there must be something in the place,” said Mrs. Nickleby, who had been listening in silence; “for soon after I was married, I went to Stratford with my poor dear Mr. Nickleby, in a post-chaise from Birmingham — was it a post-chaise though!” said Mrs. Nickleby, considering; “yes, it must have been a post-chaise, because I recollect remarking at the time that the driver had a green shade over his left eye; — in a post-chaise from Birmingham, and after we had seen Shakespeare’s tomb and birthplace, we went back to the inn there, where we slept that night, and I recollect that all night long I dreamt of nothing but a black gentleman, at full length, in plaster-of-Paris, with a lay-down collar tied with two tassels, leaning against a post and thinking; and when I woke in the morning and described him to Mr. Nickleby, he said it was Shakespeare just as he had been when he was alive, which was very curious indeed.”

When Mrs. Nickleby had brought this interesting anecdote to a close, Pyke and Pluck, ever zealous in their patron’s cause, proposed the adjournment of some of the party into the next box; and with so much skill were the preliminaries adjusted that Kate, despite all she could say or do to the contrary, had no alternative but to allow herself to be led

away by Sir Mulberry Hawk. Her mother and Mr. Pluck accompanied them, but the worthy lady, pluming herself upon her discretion, took particular care not so much as to look at her daughter during the whole evening and to seem wholly absorbed in the jokes and conversation of Mr. Pluck, who, having been appointed sentry over Mrs. Nickleby for that especial purpose, neglected no possible opportunity of engrossing her attention.

Lord Frederick Verisopht remained in the next box to be talked to by Mrs. Witterly, and Mr. Pyke was in attendance to throw in a word or two when necessary. As to Mr. Witterly, he was sufficiently busy in the body of the house, informing such of his friends and acquaintances as happened to be there that those two gentlemen upstairs whom they had seen in conversation with Mrs. W. were the distinguished Lord Frederick Verisopht and his most intimate friend, the gay Sir Mulberry Hawk.

The evening came to an end at last, but Kate had yet to be escorted downstairs by the detested Sir Mulberry; and so skillfully were the manoeuvres of Messrs. Pyke and Pluck conducted, that she and the baronet were the last of the party, and were, even without an appearance of effort or design — left at some little distance behind.

“Don’t hurry, don’t hurry,” said Sir Mulberry, as Kate hastened on, and attempted to release her arm.

She made no reply, but still pressed forward.

“Nay, then ——” coolly observed Sir Mulberry, stopping her outright.

“You had best not detain me, sir!” said Kate, angrily.

“And why not? My dear girl, now why do you keep up this show of displeasure?”

“Show! How dare you presume to speak to me, sir — to address me — to come into my presence?”

“You look prettier in a passion, Miss Nickleby,” said Sir

Mulberry Hawk, stooping down, the better to see her face.

“I told you that I hold you in the bitterest detestation and contempt. If you find any attraction in looks of disgust and aversion, you — let me rejoin my friends instantly. What ever considerations may have withheld me so far, I will disregard them all, and take a course that even *you* might feel, if you do not immediately allow me to proceed.”

Sir Mulberry smiled, and still looking in her face and retaining her arm, walked towards the door.

“If no regard for my sex or helpless situation will induce you to stop this coarse and unmanly persecution,” said Kate, scarcely knowing, in the tumult of her passions, what she said, “I have a brother who will resent it dearly one day.”

“Upon my soul!” exclaimed Sir Mulberry, as though quietly communing with himself and passing his arm round her waist as he spoke, “she looks more beautiful, and I like her better in this mood, than when her eyes are cast down and she is in perfect repose!”

How Kate reached the lobby where her friends were waiting she never knew, but she hurried across it without at all regarding them, disengaged herself suddenly from her companion, sprang into the coach, and throwing herself into its darkest corner burst into tears.

Messrs. Pyke and Pluck, knowing their cue, at once threw the party into great commotion by shouting for the carriages and getting up a violent quarrel with sundry inoffensive bystanders. In the midst of this tumult they put the affrighted Mrs. Nickleby in her chariot, and having got her safely off, turned their thoughts to Mrs. Witterly, whose attention also they had now effectually distracted from the young lady, by throwing her into a state of the utmost bewilderment and consternation. At length, the conveyance in which Mrs. Witterly had come rolled off, too, with its load, and the four



worthies, being left alone under the portico, enjoyed a hearty laugh together.

“There,” said Sir Mulberry, turning to his noble friend, “didn’t I tell you last night that if we could find where they were going by bribing a servant through my fellow, and then establish ourselves close by with the mother, these people’s house would be our own? Why here it is, done in four-and-twenty hours.”

“Ye-es,” replied the dupe. “But I have been tied to the old woman all ni-ight.”

“Hear him!” said Sir Mulberry, turning to his two friends. “Hear this discontented grumbler. Isn’t it enough to make a man swear never to help him in his plots and schemes again. Isn’t it an infernal shame?”

Pyke asked Pluck whether it was not an infernal shame, and Pluck asked Pyke; but neither answered.

“Isn’t it the truth? Wasn’t it so?” demanded Lord Frederick.

“Wasn’t it so!” repeated Sir Mulberry. “How would you have had it? How could we have got a general invitation at first sight to visit at their home — come when you like, go when you like, stop as long as you like, do what you like — if you, the lord, had not made yourself agreeable to the foolish mistress of the house? Do *I* care for this girl, except as your friend? Haven’t I been sounding your praises in her ears and bearing her pretty sulks and peevishness all night for you? What sort of stuff do you think I’m made of? Would I do this for every man? Don’t I deserve even gratitude in return?”

“You’re a deyvlish good fellow,” said the poor young lord, taking his friend’s arm. “Upon my life, you’re a deyvlish good fellow, Hawk.”

“And I have done right, have I?” demanded Sir Mulberry.

“Quite ri-ght.”

“And like a poor, silly, good-natured, friendly dog as I am, eh?”

“Ye-es, ye-es, like a friend,” replied the other.

“Well, then, I’m satisfied,” replied Sir Mulberry.

With these words he took his companion’s arm and led him away, turning half round as he did so and bestowing a wink and a contemptuous smile on Messrs. Pike and Pluck, who, cramming their handkerchiefs into their mouths to denote their silent enjoyment of the proceedings, followed their patron and his victim at a little distance.

## CHAPTER XVII

**T**HE next morning brought reflection with it, as morning usually does; but widely different was the train of thought it awakened in the different persons who had been so unexpectedly brought together on the preceding evening, by the active agency of Messrs. Pyke and Pluck.

The reflections of Sir Mulberry Hawk turned upon Kate Nickleby, and were, in brief, that she was undoubtedly handsome; that her coyness must be easily conquerable by a man of his address and experience.

The reflections of Mrs. Nickleby were of the proudest and most complacent kind. Under the influence of her very agreeable delusion she straightway sat down and wrote a long letter to Kate, in which she expressed her entire approval of the admirable choice she had made and extolled Sir Mulberry to the skies.

Poor Kate was well nigh distracted on the receipt of four closely written and closely crossed sides of congratulation on the very subject which had prevented her closing her eyes all night, and kept her weeping and watching in her room. Still

worse and more trying was the necessity of rendering herself agreeable to Mrs. Witterly, who, being in low spirits after the fatigue of the preceding night, of course expected her companion to be in the best of spirits possible. As to Mr. Witterly, he went about all day in a tremor of delight at having shaken hands with a lord and having actually asked him to come to see him in his own house. The lord himself, not being troubled to any inconvenient extent with the power of thinking, regaled himself with the conversation of Messrs. Pyke and Pluck, who sharpened their wit by a plentiful indulgence in various costly stimulants at his expense.

It was four in the afternoon, and Mrs. Witterly reclined, according to custom, on the drawing-room sofa, while Kate read aloud a new novel in three volumes, entitled *The Lady Flabella*, which Alphonse had procured from the library that very morning. It was a production admirably suited to a lady labouring under Mrs. Witterly's complaint, seeing that there was not a line in it, from beginning to end, which could awaken the smallest excitement in any person breathing.

Kate read on.

"Close the book, Miss Nickleby," said Mrs. Witterly. "I can hear nothing more today. I should be sorry to disturb the impression of that sweet description. Close the book."

Kate complied, not unwillingly; and as she did so, Mrs. Witterly, raising her glass with a languid hand, remarked that she looked pale.

"It was the fright of that — that noise and confusion last night," said Kate.

"How very odd!" exclaimed Mrs. Witterly, with a look of surprise. And certainly, when one comes to think of it, it was very odd that anything should have disturbed a companion.

"How did you come to know Lord Frederick and those



other delightful men, child?" asked Mrs. Witterly, still eyeing Kate through her glass.

"I met them at my uncle's," said Kate, vexed to feel that she was colouring deeply, but unable to keep down the blood which rushed to her face whenever she thought of that man.

"Have you known them long?"

"No, not very."

"I was very glad of the opportunity which that respectable person, your mother, gave us of being known to them. Some friends of ours were on the very point of introducing us, which makes it quite remarkable."

This was said lest Miss Nickleby should grow conceited on the honour and dignity of having known four great people (for Pyke and Pluck were included among the delightful men) whom Mrs. Witterly did not know. But as the circumstance had made no impression one way or other upon Kate's mind, the force of the observation was quite lost upon her.

"They asked permission to call. I gave it to them, of course," said the lady of the house.

"Do you expect them today?" Kate ventured to inquire.

Mrs. Witterly's answer was lost in the noise of a tremendous rapping at the street door, and before it had ceased to vibrate, there drove up a handsome cabriolet, out of which leaped Sir Mulberry Hawk and his friend Lord Frederick. This was seen through the window.

"They are here now," said Kate, rising and hurrying away.

"Miss Nickleby!" cried Mrs. Witterly, perfectly aghast at a companion's attempting to leave the room without her permission. "Pray don't think of going."

"You are very good! But ——"

"For goodness's sake, don't agitate me by making me speak so much; dear me, Miss Nickleby, I beg ——"

It was in vain for Kate to protest, for the footsteps of the knockers, whoever they were, were already on the stairs. She resumed her seat, and had scarcely done so, when the page darted into the room and announced, Mr. Pyke, and Mr. Pluck, and Lord Frederick Verisopht, and Sir Mulberry Hawk.

“The most extraordinary thing in the world,” said Mr. Pluck, saluting both ladies with the utmost cordiality; “the most extraordinary thing. As Lord Frederick and Sir Mulberry drove up to the door, Pyke and I had that instant knocked.”

“That instant knocked,” said Pyke.

“No matter how you came, so that you are here,” said Mrs. Witterly, who, by dint of lying on the same sofa for three years and a half, had got up a little pantomime of graceful attitudes, and now threw herself into the most striking of the series to astonish the visitors. “I am delighted, I am sure.”

“And how is Miss Nickleby?” said Sir Mulberry Hawk, accosting Kate, in a low voice; not so low, however, but that it reached the ears of Mrs. Witterly.

“Why, she complains of suffering from the fright of last night. I am sure I don’t wonder at it, for my nerves are quite torn to pieces.”

“And yet you look,” observed Sir Mulberry, turning round, “and yet you look——”

“Beyond everything,” said Mr. Pyke, coming to his patron’s assistance. Of course, Mr. Pluck said the same.

“I am afraid Sir Mulberry is a flatterer, my lord,” said Mrs. Witterly turning to that young gentleman, who had been sucking the head of his cane in silence and staring at Kate.

“Oh, deyvlish!” replied my lord. Having given utterance to which remarkable sentiment, he occupied himself as before.

“Neither does Miss Nickleby look the worse,” said Sir Mulberry, bending his bold gaze upon her. “She was always handsome, but upon my soul, ma’am, you seem to have imparted some of your own good looks to her besides.”

To judge from the glow which suffused the poor girl’s countenance after this speech, Mrs. Witterly might, with some show of reason, have been supposed to have imparted to it some of that artificial bloom which decorated her own. Mrs. Witterly admitted, though not with the best grace in the world, that Kate did look pretty. She began to think, too, that Sir Mulberry was not quite so agreeable a person as she had at first supposed him; for although a skillful flatterer is a most delightful companion if you can keep him all to yourself, his taste becomes very doubtful when he takes to complimenting other people.

“Pyke,” said the watchful Mr. Pluck, observing the effect which the praise of Miss Nickleby had produced.

“Well, Pluck.”

“Is there anybody,” demanded Mr. Pluck, mysteriously, “anybody you know, whom Mrs. Witterly’s profile reminds you of?”

“Reminds me of! Of course there is.”

“Who do you mean?” said Pluck, in the same mysterious manner. “The D. of B.?”

“The C. of B.,” replied Pyke, with the faintest trace of a grin lingering in his countenance. “The beautiful sister is the countess, not the duchess.”

“True, the C. of B. The resemblance is wonderful!”

“Perfectly startling!” said Mr. Pyke.

Here was a state of things! Mrs. Witterly was declared, upon the testimony of two veracious and competent witnesses, to be the very picture of a countess! This was one of the consequences of getting into good society. Why, she might have moved among grovelling people for twenty years



and never heard of it. How could she indeed? What did they know about countesses!

The two gentlemen having by the greediness with which this little bait was swallowed tested the extent of Mrs. Witterly's appetite for flattery proceeded to administer that commodity in very large doses, thus affording to Sir Mulberry Hawk an opportunity of pestering Miss Nickleby with questions and remarks to which she was absolutely obliged to make some reply. Meanwhile Lord Frederick enjoyed unmolested the full flavour of the gold knob at the top of his cane, as he would have done to the end of the interview if Mr. Witterly had not come home and caused the conversation to turn to his favourite topic.

"My lord," said Mr. Witterly, "I am delighted — honoured — proud. Be seated again, my lord, pray. I am proud, indeed; most proud."

It was to the secret annoyance of his wife that Mr. Witterly said all this, for, although she was bursting with pride and arrogance, she would have had the illustrious guests believe that their visit was quite a common occurrence and that they had lords and baronets to see them every day in the week. But Mr. Witterly's feelings were beyond the power of suppression.

"It is an honour, indeed! Julia, my soul, you will suffer for this tomorrow."

"Suffer!" cried Lord Frederick.

"The reaction, my lord, the reaction," said Mr. Witterly. "This violent strain upon the nervous system over, my lord, what ensues? A sinking, a depression, a lowness, a lassitude, a debility. My lord, if Dr. Tumley Snuffim, her doctor, was to see that delicate lady at this moment, he would not give a — a — this for her life." In illustration of which remark, Mr. Witterly took a pinch of snuff from his box, and jerked it lightly into the air as an emblem of instability.

“Mrs. Witterly,” said her husband, “is Dr. Tumley Snuffim’s favourite patient. I believe I may venture to say that Mrs. Witterly is the first person who took the new medicine which is supposed to have destroyed a family at Kensington Gravel Pits. I believe she has. If I am wrong, Julia, my dear, you will correct me.”

“I believe I was,” said Mrs. Witterly, in a faint voice.

As there appeared to be some doubt in the mind of his patron how he could best join in this conversation, the indefatigable Mr. Pyke threw himself into the breach, and, by way of saying something to the point, inquired — with reference to the aforesaid medicine — whether it was nice?

“No, sir, it was not. It had not even that recommendation,” said Mr. W.

“Mrs. Witterly is quite a martyr,” observed Pyke, with a complimentary bow.

“I think I am,” said Mrs. Witterly, smiling.

“I think you are, my dear Julia,” replied her husband, in a tone which seemed to say that he was not vain, but still must insist upon their privileges. “If anybody, my lord,” added Mr. Witterly, wheeling round to the nobleman, “will produce to me a greater martyr than Mrs. Witterly, all I can say is that I shall be glad to see that martyr, whether male or female — that’s all, my lord.”

Pyke and Pluck promptly remarked that certainly nothing could be fairer than that; and the call having been by this time protracted to a very great length, they obeyed Sir Mulberry’s look and rose to go. This brought Sir Mulberry himself and Lord Frederick on their legs also. Many protestations of friendship were exchanged, and the visitors departed with renewed assurances that at all times and seasons the mansion of the Witterly’s would be honoured by receiving them beneath its roof.

After this day they came at all times and seasons. They

dined there one day, supped the next, dined again on the next, and were constantly to and fro on all days. They made parties to visit public places and met by accident. And upon all these occasions Miss Nickleby was exposed to the constant and unremitting persecution of Sir Mulberry Hawk, — there seemed no escape from his insulting presence. She had no intervals of peace or rest, except at those hours when she could sit in her solitary room and weep over the trials of the day. These conditions were consequences naturally flowing from the well-laid plans of Sir Mulberry, and their able execution by Pyke and Pluck. For a fortnight matters went on in this way.

As the odious Sir Mulberry Hawk attached himself to Kate with less and less disguise, Mrs. Witterly began to grow jealous of the superior attractions of Miss Nickleby. The dreadful idea that Lord Frederick Verisopht also was somewhat taken with Kate and that she, Mrs. Witterly, was quite a secondary person finally dawned upon that lady's mind. Then she became possessed with a large quantity of highly proper indignation and felt it her duty, as a married lady and a moral member of society, to mention the circumstance to "the young person" without delay.

Accordingly Mrs. Witterly broke ground one morning during a pause in the novel reading.

"Miss Nickleby, I wish to speak to you very gravely. I am sorry to do it, upon my word, I am very sorry; but you leave me no alternative, Miss Nickleby." Here Mrs. Witterly tossed her head — not passionately, only virtuously — and remarked, with some appearance of excitement, that she feared that palpitation of the heart was coming on again.

"Your behaviour, Miss Nickleby, is very far from pleasing me — very far. I am very anxious indeed that you should do well, but you may depend upon it, Miss Nickleby, you will not if you go on as you do."



“Ma’am!” exclaimed Kate, proudly.

“Don’t agitate me by speaking in that way, Miss Nickleby; don’t, or you’ll compel me to ring the bell.”

Kate looked at her, but said nothing.

“You needn’t suppose that your looking at me in that way, Miss Nickleby, will prevent my saying what I am going to say, which I feel to be a religious duty. You needn’t direct your glances towards me. I am not Sir Mulberry, no, nor Lord Frederick Verisopht, Miss Nickleby; nor am I Mr. Pyke, nor Mr. Pluck either.” Kate looked at her again, but less steadily than before and, resting her elbow on the table, covered her eyes with her hand.

“If such things had been done when I was a young girl, I don’t suppose anybody would have believed it.”

“I don’t think they would,” murmured Kate. “I do not think anybody would believe, without actually knowing it, what I seem doomed to undergo!”

“Don’t talk to me of being doomed to undergo, Miss Nickleby, if you please. I will not be answered, Miss Nickleby. I am not accustomed to be answered, nor will I permit it for an instant. Do you hear?” she added, waiting with some apparent inconsistency for an answer.

“I do hear you, ma’am, with surprise; with greater surprise than I can express.”

“I have always considered you a particularly well-behaved young person of healthy appearance and neat in your dress and so forth. I have taken an interest in you, as I do still, considering that I owe a sort of duty to that respectable old female, your mother. For these reasons, Miss Nickleby, I must tell you once for all that I must insist upon your immediately altering your very forward behaviour to the gentlemen who visit at this house. It really is not becoming,” said Mrs. Witterly, closing her chaste eyes as she spoke “it is improper, quite improper.”

“ Oh! ” cried Kate, “ is not this, is not this too cruel, too hard to bear! Is it not enough that I should have suffered as I have, night and day; that I should almost have sunk in my own estimation from very shame of having been brought into contact with such people; but must I also be exposed to this unjust and most unfounded charge! ”

“ You will have the goodness to recollect, Miss Nickleby, that when you use such terms as ‘ unjust ’ and ‘ unfounded, ’ you charge me, in effect, with stating that which is untrue. ”

“ I do; I say it is vilely, grossly, wilfully untrue. Is it possible that any one of my own sex can have sat by and not have seen the misery these men have caused me! Is it possible that you, ma’am, can have been present and failed to mark the insulting freedom that their every look showed? Is it possible that you can have avoided seeing that these libertines, in their utter disrespect for you and utter disregard of all gentlemanly behaviour, and almost of decency, have had but one object in introducing themselves here, and that the furtherance of their designs upon a friendless, helpless girl, who, without this humiliating confession, might have hoped to receive from one so much her senior something like womanly aid and sympathy? I do not — I cannot believe it! ”

If poor Kate had possessed the slightest knowledge of the world, she certainly would not have ventured upon such an injudicious speech as this. Its effect was precisely what a more experienced observer would have foreseen. Mrs. Witterly received the attack upon her veracity with exemplary calmness and listened with the most heroic fortitude to Kate’s account of her own sufferings. But allusions being made to her being held in disregard by the gentlemen, she evinced violent emotion, and this blow was no sooner followed up by the remark concerning her seniority than she fell back upon the sofa, uttering dismal screams.

“What is the matter!” cried Mr. Witterly, bouncing into the room. “Heavens, what do I see! Julia! Julia! Look up, my life, look up!”

But Julia looked down most perseveringly and screamed still louder! So Mr. Witterly rang the bell and danced in a frenzied manner round the sofa on which Mrs. Witterly lay, uttering perpetual cries for Dr. Tumley Snuffim, and never once leaving off to ask for any explanation of the scene before him.

“Run for Dr. Snuffim,” cried Mr. Witterly, menacing the page with both fists. “I knew it, Miss Nickleby,” he said, looking round with an air of melancholy triumph, “that society has been too much for her. This is all soul, you know, every bit of it.” With this assurance Mr. Witterly took up the prostrate form of Mrs. Witterly and carried her bodily off to bed.

After Dr. Tumley Snuffim had paid his visit and looked in with the report, that, through a merciful Providence, Mrs. Witterly had gone to sleep, Kate hastily attired herself for walking and, leaving word that she would return within a couple of hours, hurried away towards her uncle’s house.

It had been a good day with Ralph Nickleby, quite a lucky day. He walked to and fro in his little back room with his hands clasped behind him, adding up in his own mind all the sums that had been, or would be, netted from the business done since morning.

“Very good!” said Ralph, in allusion, no doubt, to some proceeding of the day. “Who’s that?”

“Me,” said Newman Noggs, looking in. “Your niece.”

“What of her?” asked Ralph sharply.

“She’s here.”

“Here?”

Newman jerked his head towards his little room to signify that she was waiting there.



“What does she want?”

“I don’t know. Shall I ask?” he added quickly.

“No, show her in! Stay.” He hastily put away a padlocked cashbox that was on the table, and substituted in its stead an empty purse. “There, now she may come in.”

Newman, with a grim smile at this manoeuvre, beckoned the young lady to advance, and having placed a chair for her, retired, looking stealthily over his shoulder at Ralph, as he limped slowly out.

“Well,” said Ralph, roughly enough, but still with something more of kindness in his manner than he would have exhibited towards anybody else. “Well, my — dear. What now?”

Kate raised her eyes, which were filled with tears, and with an effort to master her emotion strove to speak, but in vain. So drooping her head again, she remained silent. Her face was hidden from his view, but Ralph could see that she was weeping.

“I can guess the cause of this!” thought Ralph, after looking at her for some time in silence. “I can — I can — guess the cause. Well! Well!” — for the moment quite disconcerted, as he watched the anguish of his beautiful niece. “Where is the harm? Only a few tears; and it’s an excellent lesson for her, an excellent lesson.”

“What is the matter?” asked Ralph, drawing a chair opposite and sitting down.

He was rather taken aback by the sudden firmness with which Kate looked up and answered him.

“The matter which brings me to you, sir, is one which should call the blood up into your cheeks and make you burn to hear, as it does me to tell. I have been wronged; my feelings have been outraged, insulted, wounded past all healing, and by your friends.”

“Friends! *I* have no friends, girl,” said Ralph sternly.

“By the men I saw here, then. If they were no friends of yours, and you knew what they were — oh, the more shame on you, uncle, for bringing me among them. To have subjected me to what I was exposed to here, through any misplaced confidence or imperfect knowledge of your guests, would have required some strong excuse; but if you did it — as I now believe you did — knowing them well, it was most dastardly and cruel.”

Ralph drew back in utter amazement at this plain speaking and regarded Kate with the sternest look. But she met his gaze proudly and firmly; and although her face was very pale, it looked more noble and handsome, lighted up as it was, than it had ever appeared before.

“There is some of that boy’s blood in you, I see,” said Ralph, speaking in his hardest tones, as something in the flashing eye reminded him of Nicholas at their last meeting.

“I hope there is! I should be proud to know it. I am young, uncle, and all the difficulties and miseries of my situation have kept it down, but I have been roused today beyond all endurance, and come what may, I will not, as I am your brother’s child, bear these insults longer.”

“What insults, girl?”

“Remember what took place here, and ask yourself. Uncle, you must — I am sure you will — release me from such vile and degrading companionships as I am exposed to now. I do not mean,” said Kate, hurrying to the old man and laying her arm upon his shoulder, “I do not mean to be angry and violent — I beg your pardon if I have seemed so, dear uncle, — but you cannot tell what the heart of a young girl is — I have no right to expect you should; but when I tell you that I am wretched, and that my heart is breaking, I am sure you will help me. I am sure, I am sure you will!”

Ralph looked at her for an instant, then turned away

his head, and beat his foot nervously upon the ground.

“I have gone on day after day,” said Kate, bending over him and timidly placing her little hand in his, “in the hope that this persecution would cease. I have gone on day after day, compelled to assume the appearance of cheerfulness when I was most unhappy. I have had no counsellor, no adviser, no one to protect me. Mama supposes that these are honourable men, rich and distinguished, and how can I — how can I undeceive her — when she is so happy in these little delusions, which are the only happiness she has? The lady with whom you placed me is not the person to whom I could confide matters of so much delicacy, and I have come at last to you, the only friend I have at hand — almost the only friend I have at all — to entreat and implore you to assist me.”

“How can I assist you, child?” said Ralph, rising from his chair and pacing up and down the room in his old attitude.

“You have influence with one of these men, I *know*; would not a word from you induce them to desist from this unmanly course?”

“No, at least — that — I can’t say it, if it would.”

“Can’t say it!”

“No,” said Ralph, coming to a dead stop and clasping his hands more tightly behind him. “I can’t say it.”

Kate fell back a step or two and looked at him, as if in doubt whether she had heard aright.

“We are connected in business,” said Ralph, poising himself alternately on his toes and heels and looking coolly in his niece’s face, “in business, and I can’t afford to offend them. What is it, after all? We have all our trials, and this is one of yours. Some girls would be proud to have such gallants at their feet.”

“Proud!”

“I don’t say,” rejoined Ralph, raising his forefinger, “but



that you do right to despise them; no, you show your good sense in that, as indeed I knew from the first you would. Well. In all other respects you are comfortably bestowed. It's not much to bear. If this young lord does dog your footsteps and whisper his drivelling inanities in your ears, what of it? It's a dishonourable passion. So be it; it won't last long. Some other novelty will spring up one day, and you will be released. In the meantime —— ”

“In the meantime, I am to be the scorn of my own sex and the toy of the other; justly condemned by all women of right feeling and despised by all honest and honourable men; sunken in my own esteem and degraded in every eye that looks upon me. No, not if I work my fingers to the bone, not if I am driven to the roughest and hardest labour. Do not mistake me. I will not disgrace your recommendation. I will remain in the house in which it placed me, until I am entitled to leave it by the terms of my engagement; though, mind, I see these men no more! When I leave it, I will hide myself from them and you, and, striving to support my mother by hard service, I will live, at least, in peace, and trust in God to help me.”

With these words, she waved her hand and left the room, leaving Ralph Nickleby motionless as a statue.

The surprise with which Kate, as she closed the room door, beheld, close beside it, Newman Noggs standing bolt upright in a little niche in the wall, almost occasioned her to call aloud. But, Newman laying his fingers upon his lips, she had the presence of mind to refrain.

“Don't,” said Newman, gliding out of his recess and accompanying her across the hall. “Don't cry, don't cry.” Two very large tears, by the by, were running down Newman's face as he spoke.

“I see how it is,” said poor Noggs, drawing from his pocket what seemed to be a very old duster, and wiping Kate's eyes

with it, as gently as if she were an infant. "You're giving way now. Yes, yes, very good; that's right, I like that. It was right not to give way before him. Yes, yes! Ha, ha, ha! Oh, yes. Poor thing!"

With these disjointed exclamations, Newman wiped his own eyes with the aforementioned duster and, limping to the street door, opened it to let her out.

"Don't cry any more," whispered Newman. "I shall see you soon. Ha! ha! ha! And so shall somebody else too. Yes, yes. Ho! ho!"

## CHAPTER XVIII

**T**HE unexpected success with which his experiment at Portsmouth had been received induced Mr. Crummles to prolong his entertainment in that town two weeks longer than he had originally intended to stay. During this time Nicholas impersonated a vast variety of characters with undiminished success and attracted so many people to the theatre who had never been seen there before that a benefit was considered by the manager a very promising speculation. Nicholas assenting to the terms proposed, the benefit<sup>1</sup> was had, and by it he realised twenty pounds.

Possessed of this unexpected wealth, his first act was to enclose to honest John Browdie the amount of his friendly loan, which he accompanied with many expressions of gratitude and esteem and many cordial wishes for his matrimonial happiness. To Newman Noggs he forwarded one half of the sum he had realised, entreating him to take an opportunity of handing it to Kate in secret and conveying to her the

<sup>1</sup> A special performance the receipts of which are given some particular player or other person. The practice still occurs sometimes in large cities.

warmest assurances of his love and affection. He made no mention of the way in which he had employed himself, merely informing Newman that a letter addressed to him under his assumed name at the post office, Portsmouth, would readily find him, and entreating that worthy friend to write full particulars of the situation of his mother and sister and an account of all the grand things that Ralph Nickleby had done for them since his departure from London.

“You are out of spirits,” said Smike, on the night after the letter had been sent.

“Not I!” rejoined Nicholas, with assumed gaiety, for the confession would have made Smike miserable all night; “I was thinking about my sister, Smike.”

“Sister!”

“Aye.”

“Is she like you?”

“Why, so they say,” replied Nicholas, laughing, “only a great deal handsomer.”

“She must be very beautiful,” said Smike, after thinking a little while, with his hands folded together, and his eyes bent upon his friend.

“Anybody who didn’t know you as well as I do, my dear fellow, would say you were an accomplished courtier,” said Nicholas.

“I don’t even know what that is,” replied Smike, shaking his head. “Shall I ever see your sister?”

“To be sure; we shall all be together one of these days — when we are rich, Smike.”

“How is it that you, who are so kind and good to me, have nobody to be kind to you? I cannot make that out.”

“Why, it is a long story, and one you would have some difficulty in comprehending, I fear. I have an enemy — you understand what that is?”

“Oh, yes, I understand that.”



“ Well, it is owing to him. He is rich, and not so easily punished as your old enemy, Mr. Squeers. He is my uncle, but he is a villain, and has done me wrong.”

“ Has he, though? ” asked Smike, bending eagerly forward. “ What is his name? Tell me his name.”

“ Ralph — Ralph Nickleby.”

“ Ralph Nickleby,” repeated Smike. “ Ralph. I’ll get that name by heart.”

Nicholas bore his triumph, as he had his success in the little world of the theatre, with the utmost moderation and good humour.

“ Well, Smike,” said Nicholas one night when the play was over, and he had almost finished dressing to go home, “ is there any letter yet? ”

“ Yes, I got this one from the post office.”

“ From Newman Noggs,” said Nicholas, casting his eye upon the cramped direction; “ it’s no easy matter to make his writing out. Let me see — let me see.”

By studying over the letter for half an hour, he contrived to make himself master of the contents, which were certainly not of a nature to set his mind at ease. Newman took upon himself to send back the ten pounds, observing that neither Mrs. Nickleby nor Kate was in actual want of money at the moment and that a time might shortly come when Nicholas might want it more. He entreated him not to be alarmed at what he was about to say. There was no bad news — they were in good health — but he thought circumstances might occur, or were occurring, which would render it absolutely necessary that Kate should have her brother’s protection; and if so, Newman said, he would write to him to that effect, either by the next post or the next but one.

Nicholas read this passage very often, and the more he thought of it, the more he began to fear some treachery upon the part of Ralph. Once or twice he felt tempted to go to

London at all hazards without an hour's delay, but a little reflection assured him that, if such a step were necessary, Newman would have spoken out and told him so at once.

"At all events I should prepare them here for the possibility of my going away suddenly. I should lose no time in doing that." As the thought occurred to him, he took up his hat and hurried to the green door.

Mr. Vincent Crummles was no sooner acquainted with the public announcement which Nicholas had made relative to the probability of his shortly ceasing to be a member of the company than he evinced many tokens of grief and consternation and, in the extremity of his despair, even held out certain vague promises of a speedy increase in his regular salary for acting and also more pay for his work as a theatrical writer. Finding Nicholas bent upon quitting the society (for he had now determined that, even if no further tidings came from Newman, he would, at all hazards, ease his mind by going to London and ascertaining the exact position of his sister), Mr. Crummles had to content himself by calculating the chances of his coming back again and taking prompt and energetic measures to make the most of him before he went away.

"Let me see," said Mr. Crummles, taking off his outlaw's wig, the better to arrive at a cool-headed view of the whole case. "Let me see. This is Wednesday night. We'll have posters out the first thing in the morning, announcing positively your last appearance for tomorrow."

"But perhaps it may not be my last appearance, you know; unless I am summoned away, I should be sorry to inconvenience you by leaving before the end of the week."

"So much the better; we can have positively your last appearance, on Thursday — reëngagement for one night more, on Friday — and, yielding to the wishes of numerous influential patrons, who were disappointed in obtaining seats,

the very last on Saturday. That ought to bring three very decent houses."

"Then I am to make three last appearances, am I?" inquired Nicholas, smiling.

"Yes," rejoined the manager, scratching his head with an air of some vexation; "three is not enough, and it's very bungling and irregular not to have more, but if we can't help it, we can't, so there's no use in talking."

Next day the posters appeared, and the public were informed, in all the colours of the rainbow, that Mr. Johnson would have the honour of making his last appearance that evening. It was stated that an early application for places was requested, in consequence of the extraordinary overflow attendant on his performances. This was said, because it is generally a hopeless endeavour to attract people to a theatre unless they can be first brought to believe that they will never get into it.

He went through his part in the two last pieces as briskly as he could, and having been received with unbounded favour and unprecedented applause — so said the bills for next day, which had been printed an hour or two before — he took Smike's arm and walked home to bed.

With the post next morning came a letter from Newman Noggs, very inky, very short, very dirty, very small, and very mysterious, urging Nicholas to return to London instantly; not to lose an instant; to be there at night if possible.

"I will! Heaven knows I have remained here for the best and sorely against my will; but even now I may have dallied too long. What can have happened? Smike, my good fellow, here — take my purse. Put our things together, and pay what little debts we owe — quick, and we shall be in time for the morning coach. I will only tell them that we are going, and will return to you immediately."



So saying, he took his hat, and hurrying away to the lodgings of Mr. Crummles, applied his hand to the knocker with such hearty good will that he awakened that gentleman, who was still in bed.

The door being opened, Nicholas ran upstairs, without any ceremony, and bursting into the darkened sitting room found that the two Master Crummleses had sprung out of the sofa-bedstead and were putting on their clothes with great rapidity, under the impression that it was the middle of the night, and the next house was on fire.

Before he could undeceive them, Mr. Crummles came down in a flannel gown and nightcap; and to him Nicholas briefly explained that circumstances had occurred which rendered it necessary for him to go to London immediately.

“So good-by,” said Nicholas; “good-by, good-by.”

He was half-way downstairs before Mr. Crummles had sufficiently recovered his surprise to gasp out something about the posters.

“I can’t help it; set whatever I may have earned this week against them, or if that will not repay you, say at once what will. Quick, quick.”

“We’ll cry quits about that,” returned Crummles. “But can’t we have one last night more?”

“Not an hour — not a minute,” replied Nicholas, impatiently.

“Won’t you stop to say something to Mrs. Crummles?” asked the manager, following him down to the door.

“I couldn’t stop if it were to prolong my life a score of years. Here, take my hand, and with it my hearty thanks. — Oh! that I should have been fooling here!”

Accompanying these words with an impatient stamp upon the ground, he tore himself from the manager’s detaining grasp and, darting rapidly down the street, was out of sight in an instant.

“Dear me, dear me,” said Mr. Crummles, looking wistfully towards the point at which he had just disappeared; “if he only acted like that, what a deal of money he’d draw! He should have kept upon this circuit; he’d have been very useful to me. But he don’t know what’s good for him. He is an impetuous youth. Young men are rash, very rash.”

Mr. Crummles being in a moralising mood, might possibly have moralised for some minutes longer if he had not mechanically put his hand towards his waistcoat pocket, where he was accustomed to keep his snuff. The absence of any pocket at all in the usual direction suddenly recalled to his recollection the fact that he had no waistcoat on; and this leading him to a contemplation of the extreme scantiness of his attire, he shut the door abruptly and retired upstairs with great precipitation.

Smike had made good speed while Nicholas was absent, and with his help everything was soon ready for their departure. They scarcely stopped to take a morsel of breakfast, and in less than half an hour arrived at the coach office, quite out of breath with the haste they had made to reach it in time. There were yet a few minutes to spare, so, having secured the places, Nicholas hurried to a store near by and bought Smike a greatcoat. It would have been rather large for a substantial yeoman, but the shopman saying (and with considerable truth) that it was a most uncommon fit, Nicholas would have purchased it in his impatience if it had been twice the size.

As they hurried up to the coach, which was now in the open street and all ready for starting, Nicholas was greatly astonished to find himself suddenly clutched in a close and violent embrace which nearly took him off his legs; nor was his amazement at all lessened by hearing the voice of Mr. Crummles exclaim, “It is he — my friend, my friend!”





“ Farewell, my noble, my lion-hearted boy ! ”



“ Bless my heart,” cried Nicholas, struggling in the manager’s arms, “ what are you about? ”

The manager made no reply, but strained him to his breast again, exclaiming as he did so, “ Farewell, my noble, my lion-hearted boy! ”

In fact, Mr. Crummles, who could never lose any opportunity for professional display, had turned out for the express purpose of taking a public farewell of Nicholas; and to render it the more imposing, he was now, to that young gentleman’s most profound annoyance, inflicting upon him a rapid succession of stage embraces, which, as everybody knows, are performed by the embracer’s laying his or her chin on the shoulder of the object of affection and looking over it. This Mr. Crummles did in the highest style of melodrama, pouring forth at the same time all the most dismal forms of farewell he could think of, out of the stock pieces. Nor was this all, for the elder Master Crummles was going through a similar ceremony with Smike; while the Master Percy Crummles, with a very little second-hand camlet cloak, worn theatrically over his left shoulder, stood by, in the attitude of an attendant officer.

The lookers-on laughed very heartily; and as it was as well to put a good face upon the matter, Nicholas laughed too when he had succeeded in disengaging himself. Rescuing the astonished Smike, he climbed up to the coach roof after him, and kissed his hand in honour of the absent Mrs. Crummles as they rolled away.

In blissful unconsciousness that his nephew was hastening at the utmost speed of four good horses towards his sphere of action and that every passing minute diminished the distance between them, Ralph Nickleby sat that morning occupied in his customary avocations, and yet unable to prevent his thoughts wandering from time to time back to the interview which had taken place between himself and his niece on the previous day.

“I am not a man to be moved by a pretty face; there is a grinning skull beneath it, and men like me who look and work below the surface see that, and not its delicate covering. And yet I almost like the girl, or should if she had been less proudly and squeamishly brought up. If the boy were drowned or hanged, and the mother dead, this house should be her home. I wish they were, with all my soul.”

Notwithstanding the deadly hatred which Ralph felt towards Nicholas, and the bitter contempt with which he sneered at poor Mrs. Nickleby — notwithstanding the baseness with which he had behaved, and was then behaving, and would behave again if his interest prompted him, towards Kate herself — still there was, strange though it may seem, something humanising and even gentle in his thoughts at that moment. He thought of what his home might be if Kate were there. Gold, for the instant, lost its lustre in his eyes, for there were countless treasures of the heart which it could never purchase.

A very slight circumstance was sufficient to banish such reflections from the mind of such a man. As Ralph looked vacantly out across the yard towards the window of the other office, he became suddenly aware of the earnest observation of Newman Noggs, who, feigned to be mending a pen with a rusty fragment of a knife, but was in reality staring at his employer with a countenance of the closest and most eager scrutiny.

Ralph exchanged his dreamy posture for his accustomed business attitude, the face of Newman disappeared, and the train of thought took to flight.

After a few minutes, Ralph rang his bell. Newman answered the summons, and Ralph raised his eyes stealthily to his face, as if he almost feared to read there a knowledge of his recent thoughts.

There was not the smallest speculation, however, in the

countenance of Newman Noggs. If it be possible to imagine a man, with two eyes in his head, and both wide open, looking in no direction whatever, and seeing nothing, Newman appeared to be that man while Ralph Nickleby regarded him.

“How now?” growled Ralph.

“Oh!” said Newman, throwing some intelligence into his eyes all at once, and dropping them on his master, “I thought you rang.” With which laconic remark Newman turned round and hobbled away.

“Stop!”

Newman stopped; not at all disconcerted.

“I did ring.”

“I knew you did.”

“Then why do you offer to go if you know that?”

“I thought you rang to say you didn’t ring. You often do.”

“How dare you pry, and peer, and stare at me, sirrah?”

“Stare! at you! Ha, ha!” which was all the explanation Newman deigned to offer.

“Be careful, sir. Do you see this parcel?”

“It’s big enough.”

“Carry it into the City; to Cross, in Broad Street, and leave it there — quick. Do you hear?”

Newman executed his commission with great promptitude and despatch, but as he returned and had got so far homewards as the Strand, he began to loiter with the uncertain air of a man who has not quite made up his mind whether to halt or go straight forwards. After a very short consideration, the former inclination prevailed, and making towards the point he had had in his mind, Newman knocked a modest double knock, or rather a nervous single one, at Miss La Creevy’s door.

It was opened by a strange servant, on whom the odd



figure of the visitor did not make the most favourable impression, for she no sooner saw him than she nearly closed it and, placing herself in the narrow gap, inquired what he wanted. But Newman, merely uttering the word "Noggs," as if it were some magic word at sound of which bolts would fly back and doors open, pushed briskly past and gained the door of Miss La Creevy's sitting room before the astonished servant could offer any opposition.

"Walk in, if you please," said Miss La Creevy, in reply to the sound of Newman's knuckles, and in he walked.

"Bless us!" cried Miss La Creevy, starting, as Newman bolted in. "What did you want, sir?"

"You have forgotten me," said Newman, with an inclination of the head. "I wonder at that. That nobody should remember me who knew me in other days is natural enough; but there are few people who, seeing me once, forget me now." He glanced as he spoke, at his shabby clothes and paralytic leg, and slightly shook his head.

"I did forget you, I declare," said Miss La Creevy, rising to receive Newman, who met her half-way, "and I am ashamed of myself for doing so; for you are a kind, good creature, Mr. Noggs. Sit down and tell me all about Miss Nickleby. Poor dear thing! I haven't seen her for this many a week."

"How's that?"

"Why I have been out in the country for quite a while visiting my brother, Mr. Noggs, or I should have seen her very often. Kate Nickleby is my dearest friend."

"Have you seen the old lady?"

"You mean Mrs. Nickleby? Then I tell you what, Mr. Noggs, if you want to keep in the good books in that quarter, you had better not call her the 'old lady' any more, for I suspect she wouldn't be best pleased to hear you. Yes, I went there the night before last, but she was quite on the

high ropes about something, and was so grand and mysterious that I couldn't make anything of her; so, to tell you the truth, I took it into my head to be grand too and came away in state. I thought she would have come round again before this, but she hasn't been here."

"About Miss Nickleby ——" said Newman.

"Why, she was here twice while I was away. I was afraid she mightn't like to have me calling on her among those great folks in what's-its-name place, so I thought I'd wait a day or two, and if I didn't see her, write."

"Ah!" exclaimed Newman, cracking his fingers.

"However, I want to hear all the news about them from you; how is the old rough-and-tough monster of Golden Square? Well, of course; such people always are. I don't mean how is he in health, but how is he going on — how is he behaving himself?"

"Blast him!" cried Newman, dashing his cherished hat on the floor; "like a false hound."

"Gracious, Mr. Noggs, you quite terrify me!" exclaimed Miss La Creevy, turning pale, as Newman darted about the room, shaking his fist.

"I should have spoilt his features yesterday afternoon if I could have afforded it," said Newman, moving restlessly about, "I was very near it. I was obliged to put my hands in my pockets and keep 'em there very tight. I shall do it some day in that little back parlour, I know I shall. I should have done it before now, if I hadn't been afraid of making bad worse. I shall double-lock myself in with him and have it out before I die, I'm quite certain of it."

"I shall scream if you don't compose yourself, Mr. Noggs, I'm sure I shan't be able to help it."

"Never mind," rejoined Newman, "Mr. Nicholas is coming tonight; I wrote to tell him. Ralph Nickleby little thinks I know; he little thinks I care. Cunning scoundrel! he don't

think that. Not he, not he. Never mind, I'll thwart him — I, Newman Noggs. Ho, ho, the rascal! ”

Newman faithfully related all that had passed in the interview between Kate and her uncle, prefacing his narrative with a statement of his previous suspicions on the subject and his reasons for forming them and concluding with a communication of the step he had taken in secretly writing to Nicholas.

If Ralph Nickleby had happened to make his appearance in the room at that moment, there is some doubt whether he would not have found Miss La Creevy a more dangerous opponent than even Newman Noggs himself.

“ She won't stop where she is, after tonight,” said Newman. “ That's a comfort.”

“ Stop! ” cried Miss La Creevy, “ she should have left there weeks ago.”

“ — If we had known of this,” rejoined Newman. “ But we didn't. Nobody could properly interfere but her mother or brother. The mother's weak — poor thing — weak. The dear young man will be here tonight.”

“ Heart alive! He will do something desperate, Mr. Noggs, if you tell him all at once.”

Newman left off rubbing his hands and assumed a thoughtful look.

“ Depend upon it,” said Miss La Creevy, earnestly, “ if you are not very careful in breaking the truth to him, he will do some violence upon his uncle or one of these men that will bring some terrible calamity upon his own head and grief and sorrow to us all.”

“ I never thought of that,” rejoined Newman, his countenance falling more and more. “ I came to ask you to receive his sister in case he brought her here, but —— ”

“ But this is a matter of much greater importance,” interrupted Miss La Creevy, “ that you might have been sure of



before you came, for the end of this nobody can foresee, unless you are very guarded and careful."

"What can I do?" cried Newman, scratching his head with an air of great vexation and perplexity. "If he was to talk of shooting 'em all, I should be obliged to say, 'Certainly. Serve 'em right.'"

Miss La Creevy could not suppress a small shriek on hearing this, and instantly set about extorting a solemn pledge from Newman that he would use his utmost endeavours to pacify the wrath of Nicholas, which, after some demur, was conceded. They then consulted together on the safest and surest mode of communicating to Nicholas the circumstances which had rendered his presence necessary.

"He must have time to cool before he can possibly do anything," said Miss La Creevy. "That's of the greatest consequence. He must not be told until late at night."

"But he'll be in town between six and seven this evening. I can't keep it from him when he asks me."

"Then you must go out, Mr. Noggs; you can easily have been kept away by business and must not return till nearly midnight."

"Then he'll come straight here," retorted Newman.

"So I suppose," observed Miss La Creevy; "but he won't find me at home, for I'll go straight to the City the instant you leave me, make up matters with Mrs. Nickleby, and take her away to the theatre, so that he may not even know where his sister lives."

Upon further discussion, this appeared the safest and most feasible mode of proceeding that could possibly be adopted. Therefore it was finally determined that matters should be so arranged. Newman, after listening to many supplementary cautions and entreaties, took his leave of Miss La Creevy and trudged back to Golden Square, ruminating as he went upon a vast number of possibilities and impossibilities

which crowded upon his brain and arose out of the conversation that had just terminated.

## CHAPTER XIX.

LONDON at last!" cried Nicholas, throwing back his greatcoat and rousing Smike from a long nap. "It seemed to me as though we should never reach it."

"And yet you came along at a tidy pace, too," observed the coachman, looking over his shoulder at Nicholas with no very pleasant expression.

"Ay, I know that, but I have been very anxious to be at my journey's end, and that makes the way seem long."

Nicholas engaged beds for himself and Smike at the inn where the coach stopped, and repaired, without the delay of another moment, to the lodgings of Newman Noggs; for his anxiety and impatience had increased with every succeeding minute, and were almost beyond control.

There was a fire in Newman's garret and a candle had been left burning; the floor was cleanly swept, the room was as comfortably arranged as such a room could be, and meat and drink were placed in order upon the table. Everything bespoke the affectionate care and attention of Newman Noggs, but Newman himself was not there.

"Do you know what time he will be home?" inquired Nicholas, tapping at the door of Newman's front neighbour.

"Ah, Mr. Johnson!" said Crowl, presenting himself. "Welcome, sir, — how well you're looking! I never could have believed —"

"Pardon me — my question — I am extremely anxious to know."

"Why, he has a troublesome affair of business, and will not be home before twelve o'clock. He was very unwilling to

go, I can tell you, but there was no help for it. However, he left word that you were to make yourself comfortable till he came back and that I was to entertain you, which I shall be very glad to do."

In proof of his readiness to exert himself for the general entertainment, Mr. Crowl drew a chair to the table, and helping himself plentifully to the cold meat, invited Nicholas and Smike to follow his example.

Disappointed and uneasy, Nicholas could touch no food; so after he had seen Smike comfortably established at the table, he walked out and left Smike to detain Newman in case he returned first.

As Miss La Creevy had anticipated, Nicholas betook himself straight to her house. Finding her from home, he debated within himself for some time whether he should go to his mother's residence. Finally persuaded, however, that Newman would not have solicited him to return unless there was some strong reason which required his presence at home, he resolved to go there, and hastened eastwards with all speed.

Mrs. Nickleby would not be at home, the girl said, until past twelve, or later. She believed Miss Nickleby was well, but she didn't live at home now, nor did she come home except very seldom. She couldn't say where she was stopping, but it was not at Madame Mantalini's. She was sure of that.

With his heart beating violently and apprehending he knew not what disaster, Nicholas returned to where he had left Smike. Newman had not been home. He wouldn't be, till twelve o'clock; there was no chance of it. Was there no possibility of sending to fetch him if it were only for an instant, or forwarding to him one line of writing to which he might return a verbal reply? That was quite impracticable. He was not at Golden Square and probably had been sent to execute some commission at a distance.

Nicholas tried to remain quietly where he was, but he felt



so nervous and excited that he could not sit still. He seemed to be losing time unless he was moving. It was an absurd fancy, he knew, but he was wholly unable to resist it. So he took up his hat and rambled out again.

He strolled westward this time, pacing the long streets with hurried footsteps, and agitated by a thousand misgivings and apprehensions which he could not overcome. He passed into Hyde Park, now silent and deserted, and increased his rate of walking as if in hope of leaving his thoughts behind. They crowded upon him more thickly, however, especially the one idea that was always uppermost, that some stroke of ill-fortune must have occurred, so calamitous in its nature that all were fearful of disclosing it to him. The old question arose again and again — what could it be? Nicholas walked till he was weary, but was not one bit the wiser; and indeed he came out of the park at last a great deal more confused and perplexed than he had gone into it.

He had taken scarcely anything to eat or drink since early in the morning, and felt quite worn out and exhausted. As he returned languidly towards the point from which he had started, along one of the thoroughfares which lie between Park Lane and Bond Street, he passed a handsome hotel, before which he stopped mechanically, and walked into the coffee room.

It was very handsomely furnished. The walls were ornamented with the choicest specimens of French paper, enriched with a gilded cornice of elegant design. The floor was covered with a rich carpet; and two superb mirrors, one above the chimney piece and one at the opposite end of the room reaching from floor to ceiling, multiplied the other beauties and added new ones of their own to enhance the general effect. There was rather a noisy party of four gentlemen in a box by the fireplace, and only two other persons present — both elderly gentlemen, and both alone.

Observing all this in the first glance with which a stranger surveys a place that is new to him, Nicholas sat himself down in the box next to the noisy party, with his back towards them, took up a newspaper, and began to read.

He had not read twenty lines, and was in truth half-dozing, when he was startled by the mention of his sister's name. "Little Kate Nickleby" were the words that caught his ear. He raised his head in amazement, and as he did so, saw by the reflection in the opposite glass, that two of the party behind him had risen and were standing before the fire. "It must have come from one of them," thought Nicholas. He waited to hear more with a countenance of some indignation, for the tone of speech had been anything but respectful; and the appearance of the individual whom he presumed to have been the speaker was coarse and swaggering.

This person was standing with his back to the fire, conversing with a younger man, who stood with his back to the company, wore his hat, and was adjusting his shirt collar. They spoke in whispers, now and then bursting into a loud laugh, but Nicholas could catch no repetition of the words, nor anything sounding at all like the words which had attracted his attention.

At length the two resumed their seats, and more wine being ordered, the party grew louder in their mirth. Still there was no reference made to anybody with whom he was acquainted, and Nicholas became persuaded that his excited fancy had either imagined the sounds altogether or converted some other words into the name which had been so much in his thoughts.

"It is remarkable too," thought Nicholas; "if it had been 'Kate' or 'Kate Nickleby,' I should not have been so much surprised, but 'Little Kate Nickleby'!"

At that instant —

“Little Kate Nickleby!” cried the voice behind him.

“I was right,” muttered Nicholas, as the paper fell from his hand. “And it was the man I supposed.”

“As there was a proper objection to drinking her in heel-taps,<sup>1</sup> we’ll give her the first glass in the new magnum. Little Kate Nickleby!”

“Little Kate Nickleby,” cried the other three. And the glasses were set down empty.

Keenly alive to the tone and manner of this slight and careless mention of his sister’s name in a public place, Nicholas fired at once; but he kept himself quiet by a great effort, and did not even turn his head.

“The jade! She’s a true Nickleby — a worthy imitator of her old uncle Ralph — she hangs back to be more sought after — so does he; nothing to be got out of Ralph unless you follow him up, and then the money comes doubly welcome, and the bargain doubly hard, for you’re impatient and he isn’t. Oh! infernal cunning.”

“Infernal cunning,” echoed two voices.

“I am afraid that the old woman has grown jea-a-lous, and locked her up. Upon my soul it looks like it,” said the younger man.

“If they quarrel and little Nickleby goes home to her mother, so much the better; I can do anything with the old lady. She’ll believe anything I tell her,” answered the other.

“Egad, that’s true. Ha, ha, ha! Poor deyvle!”

The laugh was taken up by the two voices which always came in together and became general at Mrs. Nickleby’s expense. Nicholas turned burning hot with rage, but he commanded himself for the moment, and waited to hear more.

What he heard need not be repeated here. Suffice it that as the wine went round he heard enough to acquaint him

<sup>1</sup> A small portion of liquor left in a glass after drinking.



with the characters and designs of those whose conversation he overheard, to possess him with the full extent of Ralph's villainy, and the real reason of his own presence being required in London. He heard all this and more. He heard his sister's sufferings derided, and her virtuous conduct jeered at and brutally misconstrued; he heard her name bandied from mouth to mouth, and herself made the subject of coarse and insolent wagers, free speech, and licentious jesting.

The man who had spoken first led the conversation and indeed almost engrossed it, being only stimulated from time to time by some slight observation from one or other of his companions. To him then Nicholas addressed himself when he was sufficiently composed to stand before the party and force the words from his parched and scorching throat.

"Let me have a word with you, sir."

"With me, sir?" retorted Sir Mulberry Hawk, eyeing him in disdainful surprise.

"I said with you."

"A mysterious stranger, upon my soul!" exclaimed Sir Mulberry, raising his wine glass to his lips and looking round upon his friends.

"Will you step apart with me for a few minutes, or do you refuse?"

Sir Mulberry merely paused in the act of drinking and bade him either name his business or leave the table.

Nicholas drew a card from his pocket and threw it before him.

"There, sir; my business you will guess."

A momentary expression of astonishment, not unmingled with some confusion, appeared in the face of Sir Mulberry as he read the name; but he subdued it in an instant and, tossing the card to Lord Frederick Verisopht, who sat opposite, drew a toothpick from a glass before him and very leisurely applied it to his mouth.

“Your name and address?” said Nicholas, turning paler as his passion kindled.

“I shall give you neither.”

“If there is a gentleman in this party,” said Nicholas, looking round and scarcely able to make his white lips form the words, “he will acquaint me with the name and residence of this man.”

There was a dead silence.

“I am the brother of the young lady who has been the subject of conversation here. I denounce this person as a liar and impeach him as a coward. If he has a friend here, he will save him the disgrace of the paltry attempt to conceal his name — an utterly useless one — for I will find it out, nor leave him until I have.”

Sir Mulberry looked at him contemptuously and, addressing his companions, said —

“Let the fellow talk. I have nothing serious to say to boys of his station; and his pretty sister shall save him a broken head, if he talks till midnight.”

“You are a base and spiritless scoundrel, and shall be proclaimed so to the world. I will know you; I will follow you home if you walk the streets till morning.”

Sir Mulberry’s hand involuntarily closed upon the decanter, and he seemed for an instant about to launch it at the head of his challenger. But he only filled his glass and laughed in derision.

Nicholas sat himself down, directly opposite to this man and, summoning the waiter, said,

“Do you know that person’s name?”

Sir Mulberry laughed again, and two voices which had always spoken together, echoed the laugh, but rather feebly.

“That gentleman, sir?” replied the waiter, who, no doubt, knew his cue and answered with just as little respect and just as much impertinence as he could safely show: “no, sir, I do not, sir.”

“Here, you, sir!” cried Sir Mulberry, as the man was retiring. “Do you know that person’s name?”

“Name, sir? No, sir.”

“Then you’ll find it there,” said Sir Mulberry, throwing Nicholas’s card towards him, “and when you have made yourself master of it, put that piece of pasteboard in the fire.”

The man grinned, and, looking doubtfully at Nicholas, compromised the matter by sticking the card in the chimney glass. Having done this, he retired. Nicholas folded his arms, and, biting his lip, sat perfectly quiet, expressing by his manner the determination of following Sir Mulberry home.

It was evident from the tone in which the younger member of the party appeared to remonstrate with his friend that he objected to this course of proceeding and urged him to comply with the request which Nicholas had made. Sir Mulberry, however, who was not quite sober and who was in a sullen and dogged state of obstinacy, soon silenced his weak young friend and seemed to insist on being left alone. However this might have been, the young gentleman and the two who had always spoken together actually rose to go after a short interval and presently retired, leaving their friend alone with Nicholas.

It will be very readily supposed that to one in the condition of Nicholas the minutes appeared to move with leaden wings indeed and that their progress did not seem the more rapid from the monotonous ticking of a French clock or the shrill sound of its little bell which told the quarters. But there he sat; and in his old seat on the opposite side of the room reclined Sir Mulberry Hawk, with his legs upon the cushion, and his handkerchief thrown negligently over his knees, finishing his bottle of claret with the utmost coolness and indifference.

Thus they remained in perfect silence for upwards of an



hour — Nicholas would have thought for three hours at least, but that the little bell had only gone four times. Twice or thrice he looked angrily and impatiently round; but Sir Mulberry was in the same attitude, putting his glass to his lips from time to time and looking vacantly at the wall, as if he were wholly ignorant of the presence of any living person.

At length he yawned, stretched himself, and rose, walked coolly to the glass and, having surveyed himself therein, turned round and honoured Nicholas with a long and contemptuous stare. Nicholas stared again with right good will; Sir Mulberry shrugged his shoulders, smiled slightly, rang the bell, and ordered the waiter to help him on with his greatcoat.

The man did so, and held the door open.

“Don’t wait,” said Sir Mulberry, and they were alone again.

Sir Mulberry took several turns up and down the room, whistling carelessly all the time, stopped to finish the last glass of claret which he had poured out a few minutes before, walked again, put on his hat, adjusted it by the glass, drew on his gloves, and, at last, walked slowly out. Nicholas, who had been fuming and chafing until he was nearly wild, darted from his seat, and followed him so closely that before the door had swung upon its hinges after Sir Mulberry’s passing out they stood side by side in the street together.

There was a private cabriolet in waiting. The groom opened the apron and jumped out to the horse’s head.

“Will you make yourself known to me?” asked Nicholas in a suppressed voice.

“No,” replied the other fiercely and confirming the refusal with an oath. “No.”

“If you trust to your horse’s speed, you will find yourself mistaken. I will accompany you. By heaven I will, if I hang on to the footboard!”

“ You shall be horsewhipped if you do.”

“ You are a villain.”

“ You are an errand boy for aught I know.”

“ I am the son of a country gentleman, your equal in birth and education and your superior, I trust, in everything besides. I tell you again, Miss Nickleby is my sister. Will you or will you not answer for your unmanly and brutal conduct? ”

“ To a proper champion — yes. To you — no,” returned Sir Mulberry, taking the reins in his hand. “ Stand out of the way, dog. William, let go her head.”

“ You had better not,” cried Nicholas, springing on the step as Sir Mulberry jumped in, and catching at the reins. “ He has no command over the horse, mind. You shall not go — you shall not, I swear, till you have told me who you are.”

The groom hesitated, for the mare, who was a high-spirited animal and thoroughbred, plunged so violently that he could scarcely hold her.

“ Leave go, I tell you! ” thundered his master.

The man obeyed. The animal reared and plunged as though it would dash the carriage into a thousand pieces, but Nicholas, blind to all sense of danger, and conscious of nothing but his fury, still maintained his place and his hold upon the reins.

“ Will you unclasp your hand? ”

“ Will you tell me who you are? ”

“ No! ”

“ No! ”

In less time than the quickest tongue could tell it these words were exchanged, and Sir Mulberry, shortening his whip, applied it furiously to the head and shoulders of Nicholas. It was broken in the struggle; Nicholas gained the heavy handle, and with it laid open one side of his

antagonist's face from the eye to the lip. He saw the gash, knew that the mare had darted off at a wild mad gallop; a hundred lights danced in his eyes, and he felt himself flung violently upon the ground.

He was giddy and sick, but staggered to his feet directly, roused by the loud shouts of the men who were tearing up the street, and screaming to those ahead to clear the way. He was conscious of a torrent of people rushing quickly by — looking up, could discern the cabriolet whirled along the foot pavement with frightful rapidity — then heard a loud cry, the smashing of some heavy body, and the breaking of glass — and then the crowd closed in in the distance, and he could see or hear no more.

The general attention had been entirely directed from himself to the person in the carriage, and he was quite alone. Rightly judging that under such circumstances it would be madness to follow, he turned down a by-street in search of the nearest coach stand, finding after a minute or two that he was reeling like a drunken man, and aware for the first time of a stream of blood that was trickling down his face and breast.

## CHAPTER XX

**S**MIKE and Newman Noggs sat before the fire, listening anxiously to every footstep on the stairs, and the slightest sound that stirred within the house, for the approach of Nicholas. Time had worn on, and it was growing late. He had promised to be back in an hour, and his prolonged absence began to excite considerable alarm.

At length a coach was heard to stop, and Newman ran out to light Nicholas up the stairs. Beholding him in the trim described at the conclusion of the last chapter, he stood aghast in wonder and consternation.



“Don't be alarmed,” said Nicholas, hurrying him back into the room. “There is no harm done beyond what a basin of water can repair.”

“No harm!” cried Newman, passing his hands hastily over the back and arms of Nicholas, as if to assure himself that he had broken no bones. “What have you been doing?”

“I know all; I have heard a part and guessed the rest. But before I remove one jot of these stains, I must hear the whole from you. My resolution is taken. Now, my good friend, speak out; for the time for any palliation or concealment is past, and nothing will avail Ralph Nickleby now.”

“Your clothes are torn in several places; you walk lame, and I am sure are suffering pain. Let me see to your hurts first.”

“I have no hurts to see to beyond a little soreness and stiffness that will soon pass off. But if I had fractured every limb and still preserved my senses, you should not bandage one till you had told me what I have the right to know. Come,” giving his hand to Noggs. “You had a sister of your own, you told me once, who died before you fell into misfortune. Now think of her, and tell me, Newman.”

“Yes, I will, I will. I'll tell you the whole truth.”

Newman did so. Nicholas nodded his head from time to time, as it corroborated the particulars he had already gleaned; but he fixed his eyes upon the fire and did not look round once.

His recital ended, Newman insisted upon his young friend's stripping off his coat and allowing whatever injuries he had received to be properly tended. Nicholas, after some opposition, at length consented and, while some pretty severe bruises on his arms and shoulders were being rubbed with remedies which Newman borrowed from the different lodgers, related in what manner they had been received.

Nicholas arranged with Newman for his mother's imme-

diately leaving her present residence, and also for sending Miss La Creevy to break the intelligence to her. He then wrapped himself in Smike's greatcoat and went with him to the inn where they were to pass the night, and where (after writing a few lines to Ralph the delivery of which was to be intrusted to Newman next day) he endeavored to obtain the repose of which he stood so much in need.

Although Nicholas experienced some pain on first awakening next morning, he sprang out of bed as the clock struck seven, with very little difficulty, and was soon as much on the alert as if nothing had occurred.

Merely looking into Smike's room and telling him that Newman Noggs would call for him very shortly, Nicholas descended into the street and, calling a hackney coach, bade the man drive to Mrs. Witterly's, according to the direction which Newman had given him on the previous night.

It was a quarter to eight when they reached her home. Nicholas began to fear that no one might be stirring at that early hour, when he was relieved by the sight of a female servant, employed in cleaning the door steps. By this functionary he was referred to the doubtful page, who appeared with dishevelled hair and a very warm and glossy face, as of a page who had just got out of bed.

By this young gentleman he was informed that Miss Nickleby was then taking her morning's walk in the gardens before the house. On the question being asked whether he could go and find her, the page desponded and thought not; being stimulated with a shilling, the page grew hopeful and thought he could.

“Say to Miss Nickleby that her brother is here and in great haste to see her.”

The plated buttons disappeared with an alacrity most unusual to them, and Nicholas paced the room in a state of feverish agitation which made the delay even of a minute

insupportable. He soon heard a light footstep which he well knew, and before he could advance to meet her, Kate had fallen on his neck and was crying uncontrollably for a few moments as she clung to him.

“My darling girl,” said Nicholas as he embraced her, “how pale you are!”

“I have been so unhappy here, dear brother,” sobbed poor Kate, “so very, very miserable. Do not leave me here, dear Nicholas, or I shall die of a broken heart.”

“I will leave you nowhere, never again, Kate,” said Nicholas, greatly affected in spite of himself as he folded her to his heart. “Tell me that I acted for the best. Tell me that we parted because I feared to bring misfortune on your head, that it was a trial to me no less than to yourself, and that if I did wrong it was in ignorance of the world and unknowingly.”

“Why should I tell you what we know so well? Nicholas — dear Nicholas — how can *you* give way!” for he could not control his voice and for a moment seemed overcome with grief.

This question was most opportunely put, for at that instant Mr. Witterly walked in, and to him Kate introduced her brother, who at once announced his purpose. They had both become calm at the entrance of this man.

“The quarter’s notice,” said Mr. Witterly, with the gravity of a man on the right side, “is not yet half expired. Therefore ——”

“Therefore,” interposed Nicholas, “the quarter’s salary must be lost, sir. You will excuse this extreme haste, but circumstances require that I should immediately remove my sister, and I have not a moment’s time to lose. Whatever she brought here I will send for, if you will allow me, in the course of the day.”

Mr. Witterly bowed, but offered no opposition to Kate’s immediate departure; with which, indeed, he was rather



gratified than otherwise, Dr. Tumley Snuffim having given it as his opinion that she rather disagreed with Mrs Witterly's constitution.

"With regard to the trifle of salary that is due," said Mr. Witterly, "I will ——" here he was interrupted by a violent fit of coughing — "I will — owe it to Miss Nickleby."

"If you please," said Nicholas. And once more offering a hurried apology for so sudden a departure, he hurried Kate into the vehicle and bade the man drive with all speed into the City.

Nicholas sent Kate upstairs a few minutes before him, that his unlooked-for appearance might not alarm his mother, and when the way had been paved, presented himself with much duty and affection. Newman had not been idle, for there was a little cart at the door, and their few belongings were being hurried out already.

Now, Mrs. Nickleby was not the sort of person to be told anything in a hurry, or rather to comprehend anything on a short notice. Wherefore, although the good lady had been subjected to a full hour's preparation by little Miss La Creevy, and was now addressed in most lucid terms both by Nicholas and his sister, she was in a state of singular bewilderment and confusion and could by no means be made to comprehend the necessity of such hurried proceedings.

"Why don't you ask your uncle, my dear Nicholas, what he can possibly mean by it?"

"My dear mother, the time for talking has gone by. There is but one step to take, and that is to cast him off with the scorn and indignation he deserves. Your own honour and good name demand that. After the discovery of his vile proceedings, you should not be beholden to him one hour, even for the shelter of these bare walls."

"To be sure," said Mrs. Nickleby, crying bitterly, "he is a brute, a monster; and the walls are very bare, and want

painting too, and I have had this ceiling white-washed at the expense of eighteenpence, which is a very distressing thing, considering that it is so much gone into your uncle's pocket. I never could have believed it — never."

"Nor I, nor anybody else."

"Lord bless my life! To think that that Sir Mulberry Hawk should be such an abandoned wretch as Miss La Creevy says he is, Nicholas, my dear, when I was congratulating myself every day on his being an admirer of our dear Kate's, and thinking what a thing it would be for the family if he was to become connected with us, and use his interest to get you some profitable government place. There are very good places to be got about the court, I know; for a friend of ours (Mr. Cropley, at Exeter, my dear Kate, you recollect) he had one, and I know that it was the chief part of his duty to wear silk stockings, and a bagwig like a black watch pocket; and to think that it should come to this after all — oh, dear, dear, it's enough to kill one, that it is." With which expressions of sorrow, Mrs. Nickleby gave fresh vent to her grief and wept piteously.

As Nicholas and his sister were by this time compelled to superintend the removal of the few articles of furniture, Miss La Creevy devoted herself to the consolation of the matron and observed with great kindness of manner that she must really make an effort and cheer up.

"Oh, I dare say, Miss La Creevy," returned Mrs. Nickleby, with a petulance not unnatural in her unhappy circumstances, "it's very easy to say cheer up, but if you had as many occasions to cheer up as I have had — and there," said Mrs. Nickleby, stopping short, "think of Mr. Pyke and Mr. Pluck, two of the most perfect gentlemen that ever lived, what am I to say to them — what can I say to them? Why, if I was to say to them, 'I'm told your friend Sir Mulberry is a base wretch,' they'd laugh at me."

“They will laugh no more at us, I take it,” said Nicholas, advancing. “Come, mother, there is a coach at the door, and until Monday, at all events, we will return to our old quarters.”

“Where everything is ready, and a hearty welcome into the bargain,” added Miss La Creevy. “Now, let me go with you downstairs.”

But Mrs. Nickleby was not to be so easily moved. First she insisted on going upstairs to see that nothing had been left, and then on going downstairs to see that everything had been taken away; and when she was getting into the coach, she had a vision of a forgotten coffee-pot by the back-kitchen hob and, after she was shut in, a dismal recollection of a green umbrella behind some unknown door. At last Nicholas, in a condition of absolute despair, ordered the coachman to drive away, and in the jerk of a sudden starting, Mrs. Nickleby lost a shilling among the straw, which fortunately confined her attention to the coach until it was too late to remember anything else.

Having seen everything safely out, discharged the servant, and locked the door, Nicholas jumped into a cabriolet and drove to a place near Golden Square where he had appointed to meet Noggs, and so quickly had everything been done that it was barely half-past nine when he reached the place of meeting.

“Here is the letter for Ralph,” said Nicholas, “and here the key. When you come to me this evening, not a word of last night. Ill news travels fast, and they will know it soon enough. Have you heard if he was much hurt.”

Newman shook his head.

“I will ascertain that, myself, without loss of time.”

“You had better take some rest. You are fevered and ill,” said Noggs.

Nicholas waved his hand carelessly, and concealing the



indisposition he really felt, now that the excitement which had sustained him was over, took a hurried farewell of Newman Noggs, and left him.

Newman was not three minutes' walk from Golden Square, but in the course of that three minutes he took the letter out of his hat and put it in again twenty times at least. First the front, then the back, then the sides, then the superscription, then the seal were objects of Newman's admiration. Then he held it at arm's length as if to take in the whole at one delicious survey, and then he rubbed his hands, in a perfect ecstasy with his commission.

He reached the office, hung his hat on the accustomed peg, laid the letter and key upon the desk, and waited impatiently until Ralph Nickleby should appear. After a few minutes, the well-known creaking of his boots was heard on the stairs, and then the bell rang.

"Has the post come in?"

"No."

"Any other letters?"

"One." Newman eyed him closely, and laid it on his desk with the key.

"What's this?" asked Ralph, taking up the key.

"Left with the letter; — a boy brought them — quarter of an hour ago, or less."

Ralph opened the letter and read:

You are known to me now. There are no reproaches I could heap upon your head which would carry with them one thousandth part of the grovelling shame that this assurance will awaken even in your breast.

Your brother's widow and her orphan child spurn the shelter of your roof and shun you with disgust and loathing. Your kindred renounce you, for they know no shame but the ties of blood which bind them in name to you.

You are an old man, and I leave you to the grave. May every recollection of your life cling to your false heart and cast their darkness on your death bed.

Ralph Nickleby read this letter twice and, frowning heavily, fell into a fit of musing. The paper fluttered from his hand and dropped upon the floor, but he clasped his fingers, as if he held it still.

Suddenly, he started from his seat and, thrusting it all crumpled into his pocket, turned furiously to Newman Noggs, as though to ask him why he lingered. But Newman stood unmoved, with his back towards him, following up, with the worn and blackened stump of an old pen some figures in an interest table which was pasted against the wall, and apparently quite abstracted from every other object.

## CHAPTER XXI

**W**HAT a demnition long time you have kept me ringing at this confounded old cracked teakettle of a bell, every tinkle of which is enough to throw a strong man into blue convulsions, upon my life and soul, oh demmit," said Mr. Mantalini to Newman Noggs, scraping his boots, as he spoke, on Ralph Nickleby's scraper.

"I didn't hear the bell more than once," replied Newman.

"Then you are most immensely and outrageously deaf, as deaf as a demnition post."

Mr. Mantalini had got by this time into the passage, and was making his way to the door of Ralph's office with very little ceremony, when Newman interposed his body and, hinting that Mr. Nickleby was unwilling to be disturbed, inquired whether the client's business was of a pressing nature.

"It is most demnebly particular. It is to melt some scraps of dirty paper into bright, shining, chinking, tinkling, demd mint sauce."

Newman uttered a significant grunt and, taking Mr. Man-

talini's proffered card, limped with it into his master's office. As he thrust his head in at the door, he saw that Ralph had resumed the thoughtful posture into which he had fallen after perusing his nephew's letter, and that he seemed to have been reading it again, as he once more held it open in his hand. The glance was but momentary, for Ralph, being disturbed, turned to demand the cause of the interruption.

As Newman stated it, the cause himself swaggered into the room and, grasping Ralph's horny hand with uncommon affection, vowed that he had never seen him looking so well in all his life.

"There is quite a bloom upon your demd countenance," said Mr. Mantalini, seating himself unbidden and arranging his hair and whiskers. "You look quite juvenile and jolly, demmit!"

"We are alone," returned Ralph, tartly. "What do you want with me?"

"Good!" cried Mr. Mantalini, displaying his teeth. "What did I want! Ha, ha! Very good. What did I want. Ha, ha. Oh dem!"

"What do you want, man?" demanded Ralph, sternly.

"Demnition discount," returned Mr. Mantalini, with a grin, and shaking his head waggishly.

"Money is scarce."

"Demd scarce, or I shouldn't want it."

"The times are bad, and one scarcely knows whom to trust," continued Ralph. "I don't want to do business just now; in fact, I would rather not; but as you are a friend — how many bills have you there?"

"Two."

"What is the gross amount?"

"Demd trifling. Five-and-seventy."

"And the dates?"



“Two months, and four.”

“I’ll do them for you — mind, for you; I wouldn’t for many people — for five-and-twenty pounds,” said Ralph, deliberately.

“Oh demmit!” cried Mr. Mantalini, whose face lengthened considerably at this handsome proposal.

“Why, that leaves you fifty. What would you have? Let me see the names.”

“You are so demd hard, Nickleby.”

“Let me see the names,” replied Ralph, impatiently extending his hand for the bills. “Well! They are not sure, but safe enough. Do you consent to the terms, and will you take the money? I don’t want you to do so. I would rather you didn’t.”

“Demmit, Nickleby, can’t you ——”

“No, I can’t. Will you take the money — down, mind; no delay, no going into the City and pretending to negotiate with some other party who has no existence and never had. Is it a bargain, or is it not?”

Ralph pushed some papers from him as he spoke and carelessly rattled his cash box, as though by mere accident. The sound was too much for Mr. Mantalini. He closed the bargain directly it reached his ears, and Ralph told the money out upon the table.

Scarcely had he done so, and Mr. Mantalini had not yet gathered it all up, when a ring was heard at the bell, and immediately afterwards Newman ushered in no less a person than Madame Mantalini, at sight of whom Mr. Mantalini evinced considerable discomposure, and swept the cash into his pocket with remarkable alacrity.

“Oh, you are here,” said Madame Mantalini, tossing her head.

“Yes, my life and soul, I am,” replied her husband, dropping on his knees, and pouncing with kittenlike playfulness

upon a stray sovereign. "I am here, my soul's delight, upon Tom Tiddler's ground, picking up the demnition gold and silver."

"I am ashamed of you," said Madame Mantalini, with much indignation.

"Ashamed? Of me, my joy? It knows it is talking demd charming sweetness, but naughty fibs. It knows it is not ashamed of its own popolorum tibby."

Madame Mantalini only looked scornful in reply, and, turning to Ralph, begged him to excuse her intrusion.

"Which is entirely attributable," said madame, "to the gross misconduct and most improper behaviour of Mr. Mantalini."

"Of me, my essential juice of pineapple! "

"Of you," returned his wife. "But I will not swallow it. I will not submit to be ruined by the extravagance and profligacy of any man. I call Mr. Nickleby to witness the course I intend to pursue with you."

"Pray don't call me to witness anything, ma'am," said Ralph. "Settle it between yourselves, settle it between yourselves."

"No, but I must beg you as a favour to hear me give him notice of what it is my fixed intention to do — my fixed intention, sir," repeated Madame Mantalini, darting an angry look at her husband.

"Will she call me 'sir'! Me who dote upon her with the demdest ardour! She, who coils her fascinations round me like a pure and angelic rattlesnake! It will be all up with my feelings; she will throw me into a demd state."

"Don't talk of feelings, sir. You don't consider mine."

"I do not consider yours, my soul! "

"No."

And notwithstanding various blandishments on the part of Mr. Mantalini, Madame Mantalini still said no, and said

it too with such determined and resolute ill temper that Mr. Mantalini was clearly taken aback.

“His extravagance, Mr. Nickleby, is beyond all bounds.”

“I should scarcely have supposed it.”

“I assure you, Mr. Nickleby, however, that it is. It makes me miserable. I am under constant apprehensions and in constant difficulty. And even this,” wiping her eyes, “is not the worst. He took some papers of value out of my desk this morning without asking my permission.”

Mr. Mantalini groaned slightly and buttoned his trousers pocket.

“I am obliged since our last misfortunes to pay Miss Knag a great deal of money for having her name in the business, and I really cannot afford to encourage him in all his wastefulness. As I have no doubt that he came straight here, Mr. Nickleby, to convert the papers I have spoken of, into money, and as you have assisted us very often before, I wish you to know the determination at which his conduct has compelled me to arrive.”

Mr. Mantalini groaned once more from behind his wife's bonnet, and fitting a sovereign into one of his eyes, winked the other at Ralph. Having achieved this performance with great dexterity, he whipped the coin into his pocket, and groaned again with increased penitence.

“I have made up my mind to allowance him.”

“To do what, my joy?” inquired Mr. Mantalini, but his wife did not answer him. She was looking at Ralph and prudently abstaining from the slightest glance at her husband, lest his many graces should induce her to falter in her resolution.

She repeated, “I am going to put him upon a fixed allowance; and I say that if he has a hundred and twenty pounds a year for his clothes and pocket money, he may consider himself a very fortunate man.”



Mr. Mantalini waited to hear the amount; but when it reached his ears, he cast his hat and cane upon the floor, and drawing out his pocket handkerchief, gave vent to his feelings in a dismal moan.

“Demnition! But no. It is a demd horrid dream. It is not reality. No!”

Comforting himself with this assurance, Mr. Mantalini closed his eyes and waited patiently till such time as he should wake up.

“A very judicious arrangement,” observed Ralph with a sneer, “if your husband will keep within it, ma’am — as no doubt he will.”

“Demmit! it is a horrid reality. She is sitting there before me. There is the graceful outline of her form; it cannot be mistaken — there is nothing like it. The two countesses had no outlines at all, and the dowager’s was a demd outline. Why is she so excruciatingly beautiful that I cannot be angry with her, even now?”

“You have brought it all upon yourself, Alfred,” still reproachfully, but in a softened tone.

“I am a demd villain! I will fill my pockets with change for a sovereign in halfpence and drown myself in the Thames; but I will not be angry with her even then, for I will put a note in the twopenny post as I go along to tell her where the body is. She will be a lovely widow. I shall be a body. Some handsome women will cry; she will laugh demnebly.”

“Alfred, you cruel, cruel creature,” said Madame Mantalini, sobbing at the dreadful picture.

“She calls me cruel — me — me — who for her sake will become a demd, damp, moist, unpleasant body!”

“You know it almost breaks my heart, even to hear you talk of such a thing.”

“Can I live to be mistrusted? Have I cut my heart into a demd extraordinary number of little pieces and given them

all away, one after another, to the same little engrossing demnition captivator, and can I live to be suspected by her! Demmit, no, I can't."

"Ask Mr. Nickleby whether the sum I have mentioned is not a proper one," reasoned Madame Mantalini.

"I don't want any sum. I shall require no demd allowance. I will be a body."

On this repetition of Mr. Mantalini's fatal threat, Madame Mantalini wrung her hands and implored the interference of Ralph Nickleby; and after a great quantity of tears and talking and several attempts on the part of Mr. Mantalini to reach the door, preparatory to straightway committing violence upon himself, that gentleman was prevailed upon, with difficulty, to promise that he wouldn't be a body. This great point attained, Madame Mantalini argued the question of the allowance, and Mr. Mantalini did the same, taking occasion to show that he could live with uncommon satisfaction upon bread and water, and go clad in rags, but that he could not support existence with the additional burden of being mistrusted by the object of his most devoted and disinterested affection. This brought fresh tears into Madame Mantalini's eyes, having just begun to open to some few of the demerits of Mr. Mantalini, but they were only open a very little way, and could be easily closed again. The result was that, without quite giving up the allowance question, Madame Mantalini postponed its further consideration; and Ralph saw clearly enough that Mr. Mantalini had gained a fresh lease on his easy life and that, for some time longer at all events, his degradation and downfall were postponed.

"But it will come soon enough," thought Ralph; "all love — bah! That I should use the cant of boys and girls — is fleeting enough; though that which has its sole root in the admiration of a whiskered face like that of yonder baboon perhaps lasts the longest, as it originates in the greater

blindness and is fed by vanity. Meantime the fools bring grist to my mill, so let them live out their day, and the longer it is, the better."

These agreeable reflections occurred to Ralph Nickleby, as sundry small caresses and endearments, supposed to be unseen, were exchanged between the objects of his thoughts.

"If you have nothing more to say, my dear, to Mr. Nickleby," said Madame Mantalini, "we will take our leave. I am sure we have detained him much too long already."

Mr. Mantalini answered, in the first instance, by tapping Madame Mantalini several times on the nose, and then by remarking, in words, that he had nothing more to say.

"Demmit! I have, though," he added, almost immediately, drawing Ralph into a corner. "Here's an affair about your friend Sir Mulberry. Such a demd extraordinary out-of-the-way kind of thing as never was."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you know, demmit?"

"I see by the paper that he was thrown from his cabriolet last night and severely injured and that his life is in some danger, but I see nothing extraordinary in that. Accidents are not miraculous events when men live hard and drive after dinner."

"Whew!" cried Mr. Mantalini in a long shrill whistle. "Then don't you know how it was?"

"Not unless it was as I have just supposed," replied Ralph, shrugging his shoulders carelessly, as if to give his questioner to understand that he had no curiosity upon the subject.

"Demmit, you amaze me!"

Ralph shrugged his shoulders again, as if it were no great feat to amaze Mr. Mantalini, and cast a wistful glance at the face of Newman Noggs, which had several times appeared



behind a couple of panes of glass in the room door; it being part of Newman's duty, when unimportant people called, to make various feints of supposing that the bell had rung for him to show them out, by way of gentle hint to such visitors that it was time to go.

"Don't you know," said Mr. Mantalini, taking Ralph by the button, "that it wasn't an accident at all, but a demd, furious, manslaughter attack made upon him by your nephew?"

"What!" snarled Ralph, clenching his fists and turning a livid white.

"Demmit, Nickleby, you're as great a tiger as he is," said Mantalini, alarmed at these demonstrations.

"Go on, tell me what you mean. What is this story? Who told you? Speak, do you hear me?"

"Gad, Nickleby," said Mr. Mantalini, retreating towards his wife, "what a demneble fierce old evil genius you are! You're enough to frighten my life and soul out of her little delicious wits — flying all at once into such a blazing, ravaging, raging passion as never was, demmit!"

"Pshaw," rejoined Ralph, forcing a smile. "It is but manner."

"It is a demd uncomfortable, private-madhouse-sort of manner," said Mr. Mantalini, picking up his cane.

Ralph affected to smile, and once more inquired from whom Mr. Mantalini had derived his information.

"From Pyke. And a demd fine, pleasant, gentlemanly dog it is."

"And what said he?" asked Ralph, knitting his brows.

"That it happened this way — that your nephew met him at a coffeehouse, fell upon him with the most demneble ferocity, followed him to his cab, swore he would ride home with him, if he rode upon the horse's back or hooked himself on to the horse's tail, smashed his countenance, which is a

demd fine countenance in its natural state, frightened the horse, pitched out Sir Mulberry and himself, and —— ”

“ And was killed? ” interposed Ralph with gleaming eyes. “ Was he? Is he dead? ”

Mantalini shook his head.

“ Ugh,” said Ralph, turning away. “ Then he has done nothing. Stay! ” he added, looking around again. “ He broke a leg or an arm, or put his shoulder out, or fractured his collar bone, or ground a rib or two? His neck was saved for the halter, but he got some painful and slow-healing injury for his trouble? Did he? You must have heard that, at least.”

“ No,” rejoined Mantalini, shaking his head again. “ Unless he was dashed into such little pieces that they blew away, he wasn’t hurt, for he went off as quiet and comfortable as — as — as demnition,” said Mr. Mantalini, rather at a loss for a simile.

“ And what,” said Ralph, hesitating a little, “ what was the cause of the quarrel? ”

“ You are the demdest, knowing hand,” replied Mr. Mantalini, in an admiring tone, “ the cunningest, rümmest, superlativest old fox — oh dem! — to pretend now not to know that it was the little bright-eyed niece — the softest, sweetest, prettiest —— ”

“ Alfred! ” interposed Madame Mantalini.

“ She is always right,” rejoined Mr. Mantalini, soothingly; “ and when she says it is time to go, it is time, and go she shall; and when she walks along the streets with her own tulip, the women shall say with envy, she has got a demd fine husband; and the men shall say with rapture, he has got a demd fine wife; and they shall both be right and neither wrong, upon my life and soul — oh demmit! ”

With which remarks, and many more no less intellectual and to the purpose, Mr. Mantalini kissed the fingers of his

gloves to Ralph Nickleby, and drawing his lady's arm through his, led her mincingly away.

"So, so," muttered Ralph, dropping into his chair, "this devil is loose again and thwarting me, as he was born to do, at every turn. He told me once there should be a day of reckoning between us, sooner or later. I'll make him a true prophet, for it shall surely come."

"Are you at home?" asked Newman, suddenly popping in his head.

"No."

Newman withdrew his head, but thrust it in again.

"You're quite sure you're not at home, are you?"

"What does the idiot mean?"

"He has been waiting nearly ever since they first came in, and may have heard your voice, that's all," said Newman, rubbing his hands.

"Who has?"

The necessity of a reply was superseded by the unlooked-for entrance of a third party — the individual in question — who made a great many shambling bows and sat himself down in an arm chair, with his hands on his knees, and his short black trousers drawn up so high in the legs by the exertion of seating himself that they scarcely reached below the tops of his Wellington Boots.

"Why, this is a surprise!" said Ralph, bending his gaze upon the visitor and half-smiling as he scrutinized him attentively. "I should know your face, Mr. Squeers."

"Ah! and you'd have know'd it better, sir, if it hadn't been for all that I've been agoing through. Just lift that little boy off the tall stool in the back office, and tell him to come in here, will you, my man?" said Squeers, addressing himself to Newman. "Oh, he's lifted hisself off! My son, sir, little Wackford. What do you think of him, sir, for a specimen of the Dotheboys Hall feeding? Ain't he fit to



bust out of his clothes, and start the seams, and make the very buttons fly off with his fatness? Here's flesh!" cried Squeers, turning the boy about, and indenting the plumpest parts of his figure with divers pokes and punches to the great discomposure of his son and heir. "Here's firmness; here's solidness! Why you can hardly get up enough of him between your finger and thumb to pinch him anywheres."

"He looks well, indeed," returned Ralph, who, for purposes of his own, seemed desirous to conciliate the schoolmaster. "But how is Mrs. Squeers, and how are you?"

"Mrs. Squeers, sir, is as she always is — a mother to them lads, and a blessing, and a comfort, and a joy to all them as knows her. One of our boys, gorging hisself with wittles and then turning ill — that's their way — got an abscess on him last week. To see how she operated upon him with a penknife! Oh Lor! What a member of society that woman is!"

"Have you quite recovered from that scoundrel's attack?" asked Ralph.

"I've only just done it, if I've done it now. I was one blessed bruise, sir," said Squeers, touching first the roots of his hair and then the toes of his boots, "from here to there. Vinegar and brown paper, there was a matter of half a ream of brown paper stuck upon me, from first to last. As I laid all of a heap in our kitchen, plastered all over, you might have thought I was a large brown paper parcel, chockfull of nothing but groans. Did I groan loud, Wackford, or did I groan soft?"

"Loud."

"Was the boys sorry to see me in such a dreadful condition, Wackford, or was they glad?"

"Gl ——"

"Eh?" cried Squeers, turning sharp round.

"Sorry."

“ Oh! ” said Squeers, catching him a smart box on the ear. “ Then take your hands out of your pockets, and don't stammer when you're asked a question. Hold your noise, sir, in a gentleman's office, or I'll run away from my family and never come back any more; and then what would become of all them precious and forlorn lads as would be let loose on the world without their best friend at their elbers? ”

“ Were you obliged to have medical attendance? ” inquired Ralph.

“ Ay, was I, and a precious bill the medical attendant brought in too; but I paid it, though.”

Ralph elevated his eyebrows in a manner which might be well expressive of either sympathy or astonishment, just as the beholder was pleased to take it.

“ Yes, I paid it, every farthing. I wasn't out of pocket by it after all, either.”

“ No? ”

“ Not a halfpenny. The fact is, we have only one extra with our boys, and that is for doctors when required — and not then, unless we're sure of our customers. Do you see? ”

“ I understand.”

“ Very good. Then after my bill was run up, we picked out five little boys (sons of small tradesmen, as was sure pay) that had never had the scarlet fever, and we sent one to a cottage where they'd got it, and he took it, and then we put the four others to sleep with him, and they took it, and then the doctor came and attended 'em once all round, and we divided my total among 'em, and added it on to their little bills, and the parents paid it. Ha! ha! ha! ”

“ And a good plan, too,” said Ralph, eyeing the schoomaster stealthily.

“ I believe you. We always do it.”

Ralph inquired what had brought him to town.

“ Some bothering law business,” replied Squeers, scratch-

ing his head, "connected with an action for what they call 'neglect of a boy.' I don't know what they would have. He had as good grazing, that boy had, as there is about us."

Ralph looked as if he did not quite understand the observation.

"Grazing. When a boy gets weak and ill and don't relish his meals, we give him a change of diet — turn him out, for an hour or so every day, into a neighbour's turnip field, or carrots, alternately, and let him eat as many as he likes. There an't better land in the county than this perverse lad grazed on, and yet he goes and catches cold and indigestion and what not, and then his friends brings a lawsuit against me! Now you'd hardly suppose people's ingratitude would carry them quite as far as that, would you?"

"A hard case, indeed."

"You don't say more than the truth when you say that. I don't suppose there's a man going as possesses the fondness for youth that I do."

After a long pause, during which Ralph appeared absorbed in contemplation, he finally broke silence by asking:

"Who is this boy that my nephew took with him?"

Squeers stated his name.

"Was he young or old, healthy or sickly, tractable or rebellious? Speak out, man," retorted Ralph.

"Why, he wasn't young, that is, not young for a boy, you know."

"That is, he was not a boy at all, I suppose?" interrupted Ralph.

"Well, he might have been nigh twenty. He wouldn't seem so old, though, to them as didn't know him, for he was a little wanting here," touching his forehead; "nobody at home, you know, if you knocked ever so often."

"And you did knock pretty often, I dare say?" muttered Ralph.



“ Pretty well,” returned Squeers with a grin.

“ When you wrote, you told me his friends had deserted him long ago and that you had not the faintest clue or trace to tell you who he was. Is that the truth? ”

“ It is, worse luck! It’s fourteen years ago, by the entry in my book, since a strange man brought him to my place one autumn night and left him there, paying five pound five, for his first quarter in advance. He might have been five or six year old at that time, not more.”

“ What more do you know about him? ”

“ Devilish little, I’m sorry to say. The money was paid for some six or eight year, and then it stopped. He had given an address in London, had this chap; but when it came to the point, of course, nobody knowed anything about him. So I kept the lad out of — out of —— ”

“ Charity? ”

“ Charity, to be sure, and when he begins to be useful in a certain sort of way, this young scoundrel of a Nickleby comes and carries him off. But the most vexatious and aggravating part of the whole affair is,” dropping his voice, and drawing his chair still closer to Ralph, “ that some questions have been asked about him at last; not of me, but in a round-about way, of people in our village. So that just when I might have had all arrears paid up and perhaps a present besides for putting him out to a farmer, or sending him to sea, so that he might never turn up to disgrace his parents — damme, if that villain of a Nickleby don’t collar him in open day and commit as good as highway robbery upon my pocket.”

“ We will both cry ‘ quits ’ with him before long,” said Ralph, laying his hand on the arm of the Yorkshire school-master.

“ Quits! Ah! and I should like to leave a small balance in his favour to be settled when he can. I only wish Mrs.

Squeers could catch hold of him. Bless her heart! She'd murder him, Mr. Nickleby. She would, as soon as eat her dinner."

"We will talk of this again. I must have time to think of it. To wound him through his own affections and fancies——. If I could strike him through this boy——"

"Strike him how you like, sir, only hit him hard enough, that's all. And with that, I'll say good morning. Here! — just chuck that little boy's hat off that corner peg, and lift him off the stool, will you?"

Bawling these requests to Newman Noggs, Mr. Squeers betook himself to the little back office, and fitted on his child's hat with parental anxiety, while Newman, with his pen behind his ear, sat stiff and immovable on his stool regarding the father and son by turns with a broad stare.

"He's a fine boy, an't he?" said Squeers, throwing his head a little on one side and falling back to the desk, the better to estimate the proportions of little Wackford.

"Very," said Newman.

"Pretty well swelled out, an't he?" pursued Squeers. "He has the fatness of twenty boys, he has."

"Ah!" replied Newman, suddenly thrusting his face into that of Squeers, "he has — the fatness of twenty! — more! He's got it all. God help the others. Ha, ha! Oh, Lord!"

Having uttered these fragmentary observations, Newman dropped upon his desk and began to write with most marvellous rapidity.

"Why, what does the man mean?" cried Squeers, colouring. "Is he drunk?"

Newman made no reply.

"Is he mad?" said Squeers.

But still Newman betrayed no consciousness of any presence save his own; so Mr. Squeers comforted himself by

saying that he was both drunk and mad; and with this parting observation, he led his hopeful son away.

## CHAPTER XXII

HAVING established his mother and sister in the apartment of the kind-hearted miniature painter, and ascertained that Sir Mulberry Hawk was in no danger of losing his life, Nicholas turned his thought to poor Smike, who, after breakfasting with Newman Noggs, had remained in a disconsolate state at that worthy creature's lodgings, waiting with much anxiety for further intelligence of his protector.

"As he will be one of our own little household wherever we live or whatever fortune is in reserve for us," thought Nicholas, "I must present the poor fellow in due form. They will be kind to him for his own sake, and if not to the full extent I could wish, they will stretch a point, I am sure, for mine." Nicholas said "they," but his misgivings were confined to one person. He was sure of Kate, but he knew his mother's peculiarities and was not quite so certain that Smike would find favour in the eyes of Mrs. Nickleby.

"However," thought Nicholas, as he departed on his benevolent journey, "she cannot fail to become attached to him when she knows what a devoted creature he is."

Smike, overjoyed to see his friend again, said, "I was afraid that you had fallen into some fresh trouble. The time seemed so long, at last, that I almost feared you were lost."

"Lost! You will not be rid of me so easily, I promise you. I shall rise to the surface many thousand times yet, and the harder the thrust that pushes me down, the more quickly I



shall rebound. Smike. But, come. My errand here is to take you home."

So saying, Nicholas took his companion by the arm and, pointing out various things to amuse and interest him as they went along, led the way to Miss La Creevy's house.

"And this, Kate," said Nicholas, entering the room where his sister sat alone, "is the faithful friend and affectionate fellow traveller whom I prepared you to receive."

Poor Smike was bashful, and awkward, and frightened enough, at first, but Kate advanced towards him so kindly and said, in such a sweet voice, how anxious she had been to see him after all her brother had told her, and how much she had to thank him for having comforted Nicholas so greatly in their very trying reverses, that he began to be doubtful whether he should shed tears or not, and became still more flurried. However, he managed to say, in a broken voice, that Nicholas was his only friend and that he would lay down his life to help him. Kate, although she was kind and considerate, seemed to be so wholly unconscious of his distress and embarrassment, that he recovered almost immediately and felt quite at home.

Then, Miss La Creevy came in; and to her Smike had to be presented also. Miss La Creevy was very kind, too.

At length the door opened again, and a lady in mourning came in. Nicholas, kissing the lady in mourning affectionately and calling her his mother, led her towards the chair from which Smike had risen when she entered the room.

"You are always kind-hearted and anxious to help the oppressed, my dear mother, so you will be favourably disposed towards him, I know."

"I am sure, my dear Nicholas," replied Mrs. Nickleby, looking very hard at her new friend and bending to him with something more of majesty than the occasion seemed to require, "I am sure any friend of yours has, as indeed he naturally ought to have, and must have, of course, a great

claim on me. It is a very great pleasure to me to be introduced to anybody you take an interest in. There can be no doubt about that; none at all; not the least in the world. At the same time I must say, Nicholas, my dear, as I used to say to your poor dear papa, when he would bring gentlemen home to dinner and there was nothing in the house, that if he had come the day before yesterday — no, I don't mean the day before yesterday — I should have said, perhaps, the year before last — we should have been better able to entertain him."

With which remarks, Mrs. Nickleby turned to her daughter and inquired, in an audible whisper, whether the gentleman was going to stay all night?

"Because if he is, Kate, my dear, I don't see that it's possible for him to sleep anywhere, and that's the truth."

Kate stepped gracefully forward, and without any show of annoyance or irritation breathed a few words into her mother's ear.

"La, Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, shrinking back, "how you do tickle one! Of course, I understand that, my love, without your telling me; and I said the same to Nicholas, and I am very much pleased. You didn't tell me, Nicholas, my dear," added Mrs. Nickleby, turning round, with an air of less reserve than she had before assumed, "what your friend's name is."

"His name, mother, is Smike."

The effect of this communication was by no means anticipated; but the name was no sooner pronounced than Mrs. Nickleby dropped upon a chair, and burst into a fit of crying.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed Nicholas, running to support her.

"It's so like Pyke, so exactly like Pyke. Oh! don't speak to me — I shall be better presently."

After exhibiting every symptom of slow suffocation, in

all its stages, and drinking about a teaspoonful of water from a full tumbler and spilling the remainder, Mrs. Nickleby was better, and remarked, with a feeble smile, that she was very foolish, she knew.

“It’s a weakness in our family, so, of course, I can’t be blamed for it. Your grandmama, Kate, was exactly the same — precisely. The least excitement, the slightest surprise — she fainted away directly.”

“Mr. Smike is from Yorkshire, Nicholas, my dear?” said Mrs. Nickleby, after dinner, and when she had been silent for some time.

“Certainly, mother. I see you have not forgotten his melancholy history.”

“O, dear, no. Ah! Melancholy indeed! You don’t happen, Mr. Smike, ever to have dined with the Grimble of Grimble Hall somewhere in the North Riding, do you? A very proud man, Sir Thomas Grimble, with six grown-up and most lovely daughters, and the finest park in the county.”

“My dear mother! Do you suppose that the unfortunate outcast of a Yorkshire school was likely to receive many cards of invitation from the nobility and gentry in the neighbourhood?”

“Really, my dear, I don’t know why it should be so very extraordinary. I know that when I was at school I always went at least twice every half-year to the Hawkineses at Taunton Vale, and they are much richer than the Grimbles, and connected with them in marriage; so, you see, it’s not so very unlikely after all.”

Having put down Nicholas in this triumphant manner, Mrs. Nickleby was suddenly seized with a forgetfulness of Smike’s real name, and an irresistible tendency to call him Mr. Slammons, which circumstance she attributed to the remarkable similarity of the two names in point of sound,



both beginning with an *S* and, moreover, being spelt with an *M*. But whatever doubt there might be on this point, there was none as to his being a most excellent listener, which circumstance had considerable influence in placing them on the very best terms and in inducing Mrs. Nickleby to express the highest opinion of his general deportment and disposition.

Thus the little circle remained on the most amicable and agreeable footing until the Monday morning, when Nicholas withdrew himself from it for a short time, seriously to reflect upon the state of his affairs and to determine, if he could, upon some course of life which would enable him to support those who were so entirely dependent upon his exertions.

“I’ll try the employment office again,” he said to himself.

As Nicholas stopped to look in at the window, an old gentleman happened to stop, too. Nicholas, carrying his eye along the window panes from left to right in search of some placard which should be applicable to his own case, caught sight of this old gentleman’s figure, and instinctively withdrew his eyes from the window, to observe the same more closely.

He was a sturdy old fellow in a broad-skirted blue coat, but what principally attracted the attention of Nicholas was the old gentleman’s eye — never was such a clear, twinkling, honest, merry, happy eye, as that, glancing from placard to placard; and Nicholas could not forbear raising his eyes to his face again. Grafted upon the quaintness and oddity of his appearance was something so indescribably engaging, and bespeaking so much worth, and there were so many little lights hovering about the corners of his mouth and eyes that it was not a mere amusement but a positive pleasure and delight to look at him.

This being the case, it is no wonder that the old man caught Nicholas in the act more than once. At such times, Nicholas

coloured and looked embarrassed: for the truth is, that he had begun to wonder whether the stranger could, by any possibility, be looking for a clerk or secretary. As the stranger was moving away, Nicholas caught his eye again, and, in the awkwardness of the moment, stammered out an apology.

“No offence. Oh, no offence!” said the old man.

This was said in such a hearty tone, and the voice was so exactly what it should have been from such a speaker, and there was such a cordiality in the manner, that Nicholas was emboldened to speak again.

“A great many opportunities here, sir!” he said, half-smiling as he motioned towards the window.

“A great many people willing and anxious to be employed have seriously thought so very often, I dare say,” replied the old man. “Poor fellows, poor fellows!”

He moved away, as he said this; but seeing that Nicholas was about to speak, good-naturedly slackened his pace, as if he were unwilling to cut him short.

“You were about to speak, young gentleman. What were you going to say?”

“Merely that I almost hoped — I mean to say, thought — you had some object in consulting those advertisements.”

“Ay, ay? What object now — what object?” returned the old man, looking slyly at Nicholas. “Did you think I wanted a situation now? Eh? Did you think I did?”

Nicholas shook his head.

“Ha, ha!” laughed the old gentleman, rubbing his hands and wrists as if he were washing them. “A very natural thought, at all events, after seeing me gazing at those bills. I thought the same of you, at first; upon my word, I did.”

“If you had thought so at last, too, sir, you would not have been far from the truth.”

“Eh?” cried the old man, surveying him from head to

foot. "What! Dear me! No, no. Well-behaved young gentleman reduced to such a necessity! No, no, no, no."

Nicholas bowed, and bidding him good morning, turned upon his heel.

"Stay," said the old man, beckoning him into a bye-street, where they could converse with less interruption. "What d'ye mean, eh?"

"Merely that your kind face and manner — both unlike any I have ever seen — tempted me into an avowal, which, to any other stranger in this wilderness of London, I should not have dreamed of making."

"Wilderness! Yes, it is, it is. Good! It is a wilderness. It was a wilderness to me once. I came here barefoot. I have never forgotten it. Thank God!" and he took his hat from his head and looked very grave.

"What's the matter? What is it? How did it all come about?" laying his hand on the shoulder of Nicholas, and walking him up the street. "You're — eh?" laying his finger on the sleeve of his black coat. "Who's it for, eh?"

"My father."

"Ah! Bad thing for a young man to lose his father. Widowed mother, perhaps?"

Nicholas sighed.

"Brothers and sisters too? Eh?"

"One sister."

"Poor thing, poor thing! You're a scholar too, I dare say?"

"I have been tolerably well educated."

"Fine thing, education, a great thing — a very great thing! I never had any. I admire it the more in others. A very great thing! Yes, yes. Tell me more of your history. Let me hear it all. No impertinent curiosity, — no, no-no."

There was something so earnest and guileless in the way in which this was said that Nicholas could not resist it. Among



men who have any sound and sterling qualities, there is nothing so contagious as pure openness of heart. Nicholas took the infection instantly and ran over the main points of his little history without reserve, merely suppressing names and touching as lightly as possible upon his uncle's treatment of Kate. The old man listened with great attention; and when he had concluded, drew his arm eagerly through his own.

“Don't say another word. Not another word! Come along with me. We mustn't lose a minute.”

So saying, the old gentleman dragged him back into Oxford Street and, hailing an omnibus on its way to the City, pushed Nicholas in before him, and followed himself.

As he appeared in a most extraordinary condition of restless excitement, and whenever Nicholas offered to speak, immediately interposed with: “Don't say another word, my dear sir, on any account — not another word!” the young man thought it better to attempt no further interruption. Into the City they journeyed accordingly, without interchanging any conversation; and the farther they went, the more Nicholas wondered what the end of the adventure could possibly be.

The old gentleman got out with great alacrity, when they reached the Bank<sup>1</sup> and, once more taking Nicholas by the arm, hurried him along Threadneedle Street and through some lanes and passages on the right until they at length emerged in a quiet shady little square. Into the oldest and cleanest-looking house of business in the square he led the way. The only inscription on the door post was “Cheeryble Brothers”; but from a hasty glance at the directions of some packages which were lying about, Nicholas supposed that the Brothers Cheeryble were German merchants.

Passing through a warehouse which presented every indication of a thriving business, Mr. Cheeryble (for such Nicho-

<sup>1</sup> The Bank of England.

las supposed him to be, from the respect which had been shown him by the warehousemen and porters whom they passed) led him into a little partitioned-off counting-house like a large glass case, in which there sat — as free from dust and blemish as if he had been fixed into the glass case before the top was put on and had never come out since — a fat, elderly, large-faced clerk, with silver spectacles and a powdered head.

“Is my brother in his room, Tim?” said Mr. Cheeryble, with no less kindness of manner than he had shown to Nicholas.

“Yes he is, sir,” replied the fat clerk, turning his spectacle-glasses towards his principal, and his eyes towards Nicholas, “but Mr. Trimmers is with him.”

“Ay! And what has he come about, Tim?”

“He is getting up a subscription for the widow and family of a man who was killed in the East India Docks this morning, sir. Smashed, sir, by a cask of sugar.”

“He is a good creature,” said Mr. Cheeryble, with great earnestness. “He is a kind soul. I am very much obliged to Trimmers. Trimmers is one of the best friends we have. He makes a thousand cases known to us that we should never discover of ourselves. I am very much obliged to Trimmers.” Saying which, Mr. Cheeryble rubbed his hands with infinite delight, and Mr. Trimmers happening to pass the door that instant, on his way out, shot out after him and caught him by the hand.

“I owe you a thousand thanks, Trimmers, ten thousand thanks. I take it very friendly of you, very friendly indeed,” dragging him into a corner to get out of hearing. “How many children are there, and what has my brother Ned given, Trimmers?”

“There are six children,” replied the gentleman, “and your brother has given us twenty pounds.”

“My brother Ned is a good fellow, and you’re a good

fellow, too, Trimmers," shaking him by both hands with trembling eagerness. "Put me down for another twenty — or — stop a minute, stop a minute! We mustn't look ostentatious; put me down ten pound, and Tim Linkinwater ten pound. A cheque for twenty pound for Mrs. Trimmers, Tim. God bless you, Trimmers — and come and dine with us some day this week; you'll always find a knife and fork, and we shall be delighted. Now, my dear sir — cheque from Mr. Linkinwater, Tim. Smashed by a cask of sugar, and six poor children — oh dear, dear, dear!"

Talking on in this strain, as fast as he could to prevent any friendly remonstrances from the collector, Mr. Cheeryble led Nicholas, equally astonished and affected by what he had seen and heard in this short space, to the half-opened door of another room.

"Brother Ned," said Mr. Cheeryble, tapping with his knuckle and stopping to listen, "are you busy, my dear brother, or can you spare time for a word or two with me?"

"Brother Charles, my dear fellow," replied a voice from the inside, so like in its tones to that which had just spoken, that Nicholas started, and almost thought it was the same, "don't ask me such a question, but come in directly."

They went in without further parley. What was the amazement of Nicholas when his conductor advanced and exchanged a warm greeting with another old gentleman, the very type and model of himself. Nobody could have doubted their being twin brothers.

"Brother Ned," said Nicholas's friend, closing the room door, "here is a young friend of mine whom we must assist. We must make proper inquiries into his statements, in justice to him as well as to ourselves; and if they are confirmed — as I feel assured they will be — we must assist him, we must assist him, brother Ned."



“It is enough, my dear brother, that you say we should. When you say that, no further inquiries are needed. He shall be assisted. What are his necessities, and what does he require? Where is Tim Linkinwater?” said Brother Ned.

“Stop, stop, stop!” said Brother Charles, taking the other aside. “I’ve a plan, my dear brother, I’ve a plan. Tim is getting old, and Tim has been a faithful servant. I don’t think pensioning Tim’s mother and sister and buying a little tomb for the family when his poor brother died was a sufficient recompense for his faithful services.”

“No, no, no, certainly not. Not half enough, not half.”

“If we could lighten Tim’s duties and prevail upon him to go into the country now and then and sleep in the fresh air two or three times a week (which he could, if he began business an hour later in the morning), old Tim Linkinwater would grow young again in time; and he’s three good years our senior now. Old Tim Linkinwater young again! Eh, brother Ned, eh? why, I recollect old Tim Linkinwater quite a little boy, don’t you? Ha, ha, ha! Poor Tim, poor Tim!”

“But hear this first — hear this first, Brother Ned,” said the old man, hastily, placing two chairs, one on each side of Nicholas. “I’ll tell it you myself because the young gentleman is modest, and is a scholar, and you and I shouldn’t feel it right that he should tell us his story over and over again as if he was a beggar, or as if we doubted him. No, no, no.”

“No, no, no,” nodding his head gravely. “Very right, my dear brother, very right.”

“He will tell me I’m wrong, if I make a mistake, but whether I do or not, you’ll be very much affected, Brother Ned, remembering the time when we were two friendless lads and earned our first shilling in this great city.”

The twins pressed each other’s hands in silence, and in his own homely manner Brother Charles related the particu-

lars he had heard from Nicholas. The conversation which ensued was a long one; and when it was over, a secret conference of almost equal duration took place between Brother Ned and Tim Linkinwater in another room. It is no disparagement to Nicholas to say that, before he had been closeted with the two brothers ten minutes, he could only wave his hand at every fresh expression of kindness and sympathy, and sob like a little child.

At length Brother Ned and Tim Linkinwater came back together, when Tim instantly walked up to Nicholas and whispered in his ear in a very brief sentence (for Tim was ordinarily a man of few words) that he had taken down the address in the Strand and would call upon him that evening, at eight. Having done which, Tim wiped his spectacles and put them on, preparatory to hearing what more the brother Cheeryble had to say.

“Tim,” said Brother Charles, “you understand that we have an intention of taking this young gentleman into the countinghouse?”

Brother Ned remarked that Tim was aware of that intention and quite approved of it. Tim having nodded, and said he did, drew himself up and looked particularly fat, and very important. After which there was a profound silence.

“I’m not coming an hour later in the morning, you know,” said Tim, breaking out all at once and looking very resolute. “I’m not going to sleep in the fresh air; no, and I’m not going into the country, either. A pretty thing at this time of day, certainly. Pho!”

“Darn your obstinacy, Tim Linkinwater,” said Brother Charles, looking at him without the faintest spark of anger, and with a countenance radiant with attachment to the old clerk. “Darn your obstinacy, Tim Linkinwater; what do you mean, sir?”

Tim said: “It’s forty-four year next May since I first kept

the books of Cheeryble Brothers. I've opened the safe every morning all that time (Sundays excepted) as the clock struck nine, and gone over the house every night at half-past ten (except on Foreign Post nights, and then twenty minutes before twelve) to see the doors fastened and the fires out. I've never slept out of the back attic one single night. There's the same mignonette box in the middle of the window, and the same four flower pots, two on each side, that I brought with me when I first came. There ain't — I've said it again and again, and I'll maintain it — there ain't such a square as this in the world. I know there ain't. Not one. For business or pleasure, in summer time or winter — I don't care which — there's nothing like it. There's not such a spring of water in England as the pump under the archway. There's not such a view in England as the view out of my window. I've seen it every morning before I shaved, and I ought to know something about it. I have slept in that room for four-and-forty year; and if it wasn't inconvenient and didn't interfere with business, I should request leave to die there."

"Confound you, Tim Linkinwater, how dare you talk about dying?" roared the twins by one impulse and blowing their old noses violently.

"That's what I've got to say, Mr. Edwin and Mr. Charles," said Tim, squaring his shoulders again. "This isn't the first time you've talked about superannuating me; but, if you please, we'll make it the last, and drop the subject for evermore."

With those words, Tim Linkinwater stalked out, and shut himself up in his glass case, with the air of a man who had had his say, and was thoroughly resolved not to be put down.

The brothers exchanged looks and coughed some half-dozen times without speaking.

"He must be done something with, Brother Ned. We



must disregard his old scruples; they can't be tolerated or borne. He must be made a partner, Brother Ned; and if he won't do it peaceably, we must have recourse to violence."

"Quite right, quite right, my dear brother. If he won't listen to reason, we must do it against his will and show him that we are determined to exert our authority. We must quarrel with him, Brother Charles."

"We must. We certainly must have a quarrel with Tim Linkinwater. But in the meantime, my dear brother, we are keeping our young friend, and the poor lady and her daughter will be anxious for his return. So let us say good-by for the present — there, there — take care of that box, my dear sir — and — no, no, no, not a word now — be careful of the crossings and ——"

And with many disjointed and unconnected words which would prevent Nicholas from pouring out his thanks, the brothers hurried him out, shaking hands with him all the way and affecting very unsuccessfully — they were poor hands at deception! — to be wholly unconscious of the feelings that mastered him.

To recount all the delight and wonder which the circumstances just detailed awakened at Miss La Creevy's, and all the things that were done, said, thought, expected, hoped, and prophesied in consequence is beside the present course and purpose of these adventures. It is sufficient to state, in brief, that Mr. Timothy Linkinwater arrived, punctual to his appointment; that he reported strongly and warmly in favour of Nicholas; and that next day Nicholas was appointed to the vacant stool in the countinghouse of Cheeryble Brothers, with a present salary of one hundred and twenty pounds a year.

"And I think, my dear brother," said Nicholas's first friend, "that if we were to let them that little cottage at Bow which is empty, at something under the usual rent, now? Eh, Brother Ned?"



The brothers hurried him out, shaking hands with him all the way.



“For nothing at all. We are rich and should be ashamed to touch the rent under such circumstances as these. Where is Tim Linkinwater? — for nothing at all, my dear brother, for nothing at all.”

“Perhaps it would be better to say something, Brother Ned. It would help to preserve habits of frugality, you know, and remove any painful sense of overwhelming obligations. We might say fifteen pound, or twenty pound; and if it was punctually paid, make it up to them in some other way. And I might secretly advance a small loan towards a little furniture, and you might secretly advance another small loan, Brother Ned; and if we find them doing well — as we shall; there’s no fear, no fear — we can change the loan into gifts. Carefully, Brother Ned, and by degrees, and without pressing upon them too much — what do you say now, brother?”

Brother Ned gave his hand upon it, and not only said it should be done, but had it done, too; and in one short week, Nicholas took possession of the house, and all was hope, bustle, and light-heartedness.

There surely never was such a week of discoveries and surprises as the first week at that cottage. Every night when Nicholas came home, something new had been found out. One day it was a grape vine, and another day it was a boiler, and another day it was the key of the front parlour closet at the bottom of the water-butt, and so on through a hundred items. Then this room was embellished with a muslin curtain, and that room was rendered quite elegant by a window blind, and such improvements were made as no one could have supposed possible. Then there was Miss La Creevy, who had come out in the omnibus to stop a day or two and help, and who was perpetually losing a very small brown paper parcel of tin tacks and a very large hammer, and running about with her sleeves tucked up at the wrists, and falling off pairs of steps and hurting herself very much —



and Mrs. Nickleby, who talked incessantly, and Kate, who busied herself noiselessly everywhere, and was pleased with everything — and Smike, who made the garden a perfect wonder to look upon — and Nicholas, who helped and encouraged them every one — all the peace and cheerfulness of home restored, with such new zest imparted to every frugal pleasure and such delight to every hour of meeting that misfortune and separation alone could give.

In short, the poor Nicklebys were social and happy, while the rich Nickleby was alone and miserable.

## CHAPTER XXIII

WITH a shattered leg, a body severely bruised, a face disfigured by half-healed scars, and pallid from the exhaustion of recent pain and fever, Sir Mulberry Hawk lay stretched upon his back on the couch to which he was doomed to be a prisoner for some weeks yet to come. Mr. Pyke and Mr. Pluck sat drinking hard in the next room, now and then varying the monotonous murmurs of their conversation with a half-smothered laugh, while the young lord — the only member of the party who was not thoroughly irredeemable — and who really had a kind heart — sat beside his mentor with a cigar in his mouth, and read to him by the light of a lamp such scraps of intelligence from a paper of the day as were most likely to yield him interest or amusement.

“Curse those hounds!” said the invalid, turning his head impatiently towards the adjoining room, “will nothing stop their infernal throats?”

Messrs. Pyke and Pluck heard the exclamation and stopped immediately, winking to each other as they did so and filling their glasses to the brim as some recompense for the deprivation of speech.

“Damn!” muttered the sick man between his teeth and writhing impatiently in his bed. “Isn’t this mattress hard enough, and the room dull enough, and the pain bad enough, but they must torture me! What’s the time?”

“Half-past eight,” replied his friend.

“Here, draw the table nearer, and let us have the cards again. More piquet. Come.”

While he was thus occupied, his man appeared to announce that Mr. Ralph Nickleby was below and wished to know how he was tonight.

“Better.”

“Mr. Nickleby wishes to know, sir ——”

“I tell you, better,” striking his hand upon the table.

The man hesitated for a moment or two, and then said that Mr. Nickleby had requested permission to see Sir Mulberry Hawk, if it was not inconvenient.

“It is inconvenient. I can’t see him. I can’t see anybody,” said his master, more violently than before. “You know that, you blockhead.”

“I am very sorry, sir. But Mr. Nickleby pressed so much, sir.”

The fact was that Ralph Nickleby had bribed the man, who being anxious to earn his money with a view to future favours, held the door in his hand and ventured to linger still.

“Did he say whether he had any business to speak about?” inquired Sir Mulberry, after a little impatient consideration.

“No, sir. He said he wished to see you, sir. Particularly, Mr. Nickleby said, sir.”

“Tell him to come up. Here!” cried Sir Mulberry, calling the man back as he passed his hand over his disfigured face, “move that lamp, and put it on the stand behind me. Wheel that table away, and place a chair there — further off. Leave it so.”

The man obeyed these directions as if he quite comprehended the motive with which they were dictated, and left the room. Lord Frederick Verisopht, remarking that he would look in presently, strolled into the adjoining apartment and closed the folding door behind him.

Then was heard a subdued footstep on the stairs; and Ralph Nickleby, hat in hand, crept softly into the room, with his body bent forward as if in profound respect, and his eyes fixed upon the face of his worthy client.

“Well, Nickleby,” said Sir Mulberry, motioning him to the chair by the couch side and waving his hand in assumed carelessness. “I have had a bad accident, you see.”

“I see,” rejoined Ralph, with the same steady gaze. “Bad, indeed! I should not have known you, Sir Mulberry. Dear, dear! This is bad.”

“Sit down,” said Sir Mulberry, turning towards him, as though by a violent effort. “Am I a sight that you stand gazing there?”

As he turned his face, Ralph recoiled a step or two, and making as though he were irresistibly impelled to express astonishment, but was determined not to do so, sat down with well-acted confusion.

“I have inquired at the door, Sir Mulberry, every day, twice a day, indeed, at first — and tonight — I could not resist soliciting admission to your room. Have you — have you suffered much?”

“More than enough to please me, and less than enough to please some broken-down hacks that you and I know of and who lay their ruin between us, I dare say. What is it that brought you here tonight?”

“Nothing. There are some bills of my lord’s which need renewal; but let them be till you are well. I — I — came,” said Ralph, speaking more slowly and with harsher emphasis, “I came to say how grieved I am that any relative of mine,



although disowned by me, should have inflicted such punishment on you as —— ”

“ Punishment! ”

“ I know it has been a severe one and that has made me the more anxious to tell you that I disown this vagabond — that I acknowledge him as no kin of mine — and that I leave him to take his deserts from you and every man besides. You may wring his neck if you please. I shall not interfere.”

“ This story that they tell me here has got abroad then, has it? ” asked Sir Mulberry, clenching his hands and teeth.

“ Noised in all directions. Every club and gaming room has rung with it. There has been a good song made about it, as I am told,” said Ralph, looking eagerly at his questioner. “ I have not heard it myself, not being in the way of such things, but I have been told it’s even printed — for private circulation — but that’s all over town, of course.”

“ It’s a lie! I tell you it’s all a lie. The mare took fright.”

“ They say he frightened her. Some say he frightened you, but that’s a lie, I know. I have said that boldly — oh, a score of times! I am a peaceable man, but I can’t hear folks tell that of you. No, no.” When Sir Mulberry found coherent words to utter, Ralph bent forward with his hand to his ear and a face as calm as if its every line of sternness had been cast in iron.

“ When I am off this cursed bed,” said the invalid, actually striking at his broken leg in the ecstasy of his passion, “ I’ll have such revenge as never man had yet. By G —— I will! Accident favouring him, he has marked me for a week or two, but I’ll put a mark on him that he shall carry to his grave. I’ll slit his nose and ears, flog him, maim him for life. I’ll do more than that; I’ll drag that pattern of chastity, that pink of prudery, his delicate sister, through —— ”

He stopped and, menacing with his hand, confirmed the unuttered threat with a tremendous oath.

“It is a galling thing,” said Ralph, after a short term of silence, during which he had eyed the sufferer keenly, “to think that the man about town, the rake, the roué, the rook of twenty seasons, should be brought to this pass by a mere boy!”

Sir Mulberry darted a wrathful look at him, but Ralph’s eyes were bent upon the ground, and his face wore no other expression than one of thoughtfulness.

“A raw, slight stripling against a man whose very weight might crush him; to say nothing of his skill in — I am right, I think,” raising his eyes; “you were a patron of the ring once, were you not?”

The sick man made an impatient gesture, which Ralph chose to consider as one of acquiescence.

“Ha! I thought so. That was before I knew you, but I was pretty sure I couldn’t be mistaken. He is light and active, I suppose. But those were slight advantages compared with yours. Luck, luck! These hangdog outcasts have it.”

“He’ll need the most he has, when I am well again, let him fly where he will.”

“Oh! he doesn’t dream of that. He is here, good sir, waiting your pleasure, here in London, walking the streets at noon-day, carrying it off jauntily, looking for you, I swear. If we were only citizens of a country where it could be safely done, I’d give good money to have him stabbed to the heart and rolled into the kennel for the dogs to tear.”

As Ralph, somewhat to the surprise of his old client, vented this little piece of sound family feeling and took up his hat preparatory to departing, Lord Frederick Verisopht looked in.

“Why what in the dayvle’s name, Hawk, have you and

Nickleby been talking about? I neyver heard such an insufferable riot. Croak, croak, croak. Bow, wow, wow. What has it all been about?"

"Sir Mulberry has been angry, my lord," said Ralph, looking towards the couch.

"Not about money, I hope? Nothing has gone wrong in business, has it, Nickleby?"

"No, my lord, no. On that point we always agree. Sir Mulberry has been calling to mind the cause of ——"

There was neither necessity nor opportunity for Ralph to proceed; for Sir Mulberry took up the theme and vented his threats and oaths against Nicholas, almost as ferociously as before.

Ralph was surprised to see that as this tirade proceeded, the manner of Lord Frederick Verisopht, who at the commencement had been twirling his whiskers with a most dandified and listless air, underwent a complete alteration. He was still more surprised when, Sir Mulberry ceasing to speak, the young lord angrily and almost unaffectedly requested never to have the subject renewed in his presence.

"Mind that, Hawk. I never will be a party to, or permit, if I can help it, a cowardly attack upon this young fellow."

"Cowardly!"

"Ye-es," said the other, turning full upon him. "What happened to you was more your fault than his; and it shall not, with my knowledge, be cruelly visited upon him; it shall not indeed."

With this emphatic repetition of his concluding words, the young lord turned upon his heel, but before he had reached the adjoining room, he turned back again and said with even greater vehemence than he had displayed before:

"I do believe, now; upon my honour, I do believe that the sister is as virtuous and modest a young lady as she is a



handsome one; and of the brother I say this, that he acted as her brother should, and in a manly and spirited manner. And I only wish, with all my heart and soul, that any one of us came out of this matter half as well as he does."

So saying, Lord Frederick Verisopht walked out of the room, leaving Ralph Nickleby and Sir Mulberry in most unpleasant astonishment.

"Is this your pupil?" asked Ralph, softly, "or has he come fresh from some country parson?"

"Green fools take these fits sometimes," biting his lip, and pointing to the door. "Leave him to me."

Ralph exchanged a familiar look with his old acquaintance, for they had suddenly grown confidential again.

## CHAPTER XXIV

**T**IM LINKINWATER, sir," said Brother Charles; "give me your hand, sir. This is your birthday. How dare you talk about anything else till you have been wished many happy returns of the day. God bless you, Tim! God bless you!"

"My dear brother," said the other, seizing Tim's disengaged fist, "Tim Linkinwater looks ten years younger than he did on his last birthday."

"Brother Ned, my dear boy, I believe that Tim Linkinwater was born a hundred and fifty years old and is gradually coming down to five-and-twenty; for he's younger every birthday than he was the year before."

"So he is, Brother Charles, so he is. There's not a doubt about it."

"Remember, Tim," said Brother Charles, "that we dine at half-past five today instead of two o'clock; we always

depart from our usual custom on this anniversary, as you very well know. Mr. Nickleby, my dear sir, you will make one. Tim Linkinwater, give me your snuffbox as a remembrance to Brother Charles and myself of an attached and faithful rascal; and take that, in exchange, as a feeble mark of our respect and esteem, and don't open it until you go to bed." He gave him a costly gold snuffbox in exchange, inclosing a banknote worth more than ten times its value and hurried away to prevent hearing any thanks.

At a quarter past five o'clock, punctual to the minute, arrived, according to annual usage, Tim Linkinwater's sister. The company consisted of the Brothers Cheeryble, Tim Linkinwater, a ruddy-faced, white-headed friend of Tim's (who was a superannuated bank clerk), and Nicholas, who was presented to Tim Linkinwater's sister with much gravity and solemnity. The party being now completed, Brother Ned rang for dinner. This being shortly afterwards announced, Brother Ned led Tim Linkinwater's sister into the next room where the dinner was set forth with great preparation. Then Brother Ned took the head of the table, and Brother Charles the foot; and Tim Linkinwater's sister sat on the left hand of Brother Ned, and Tim Linkinwater himself on his right; and an ancient butler of apoplectic appearance and with very short legs took up his position at the back of Brother Ned's arm chair and, waving his right arm preparatory to taking off the covers with a flourish, stood bolt upright and motionless.

"For these and all other blessings, Brother Charles," said Ned.

"Lord, make us truly thankful, Brother Ned," said Charles.

Whereupon the apoplectic butler whisked off the top of the soup tureen and shot at once into a state of violent activity.

There was abundance of conversation and little fear of its

ever flagging, for the good humour of the glorious old twins drew everybody out.

There was one little ceremony peculiar to the day, both the matter and manner of which made a very strong impression upon Nicholas. The cloth having been removed and the decanters sent round for the first time, a profound silence succeeded, and in the cheerful faces of the brothers there appeared an expression of quiet thoughtfulness very unusual at a festive table. As Nicholas, struck by this sudden alteration, was wondering what it could portend, the brothers rose together, and the one at the top of the table leaning forward towards the other and speaking in a low voice as if he were addressing him individually, said:

“ Brother Charles, my dear fellow, there is another association connected with this day which must never be forgotten, and never can be forgotten by you and me. This day, which brought into the world a most faithful and excellent and exemplary fellow took from it the kindest and very best of parents, the very best of parents to us both. I wish that she could have seen us in our prosperity and shared it, and had the happiness of knowing how dearly we loved her in it, as we did when we were two poor boys; but that was not to be. My dear brother — The Memory of our Mother.”

\* \* \*

As Nicholas had some distance to walk, it was considerably past midnight by the time he reached home, where he found his mother and Smike sitting up to receive him. It was long after their usual hour of retiring, and they had expected him at the very latest, two hours ago; but the time had not hung heavily on their hands, for Mrs. Nickleby had entertained Smike with a genealogical account of her family by the mother's side, comprising biographical sketches of the principal members, and Smike had sat wondering what it was all



about, and whether it was learned from a book, or said out of Mrs. Nickleby's own head, so that they got on together very pleasantly.

Nicholas could not go to bed without expatiating on the excellences and munificence of the brothers Cheeryble and relating the great success which had attended his efforts that day. But before he had said a dozen words, Mrs. Nickleby, with many sly winks and nods, observed that she was sure Mr. Smike must be quite tired out and that she positively must insist on his not sitting up a minute longer.

"A most biddable creature he is to be sure," said Mrs. Nickleby, when Smike had wished them good night and left the room. "I know you'll excuse me, Nicholas, my dear, but I don't like to do this before a third person; indeed, before a young man it would not be quite proper. Kate has been in bed — oh! a couple of hours — and I'm very glad, Nicholas, my dear, that I prevailed upon her not to sit up, for I wished very much to have an opportunity of saying a few words to you. I am naturally anxious about it, and, of course, it's very delightful and consoling to have a grown-up son that one can put confidence in and advise with; indeed, I don't know any use there would be in having sons at all unless people could put confidence in them."

Nicholas stopped in the middle of a sleepy yawn, as his mother began to speak, and looked at her with fixed attention.

"There was a lady in our neighbourhood," said Mrs. Nickleby, "speaking of sons puts me in mind of it, — a lady in our neighbourhood, when we lived near Dawlish, I think her name was Rogers; indeed I am sure it was, if it wasn't Murphy, which is the only doubt I have —"

"Is it about her, mother, that you wish to speak to me?"

"About her! Good gracious, Nicholas, my dear, how can you be so ridiculous! But that was always the way with

your poor dear papa — just his way, — always wandering, never able to fix his thoughts on any one subject for two minutes together. I think I see him now! ” wiping her eyes, “ looking at me while I was talking to him about his affairs, just as if his ideas were in a state of perfect conglomeration! Anybody who had come in upon us suddenly would have supposed I was confusing and distracting him instead of making things plainer, upon my word they would.”

“ I am very sorry, mother, that I should inherit this unfortunate slowness of apprehension, but I’ll do my best to understand you, if you’ll only go straight on.”

“ Your poor papa! He never knew till it was too late what I would have had him do! ”

This was undoubtedly the case, inasmuch as the deceased Mr. Nickleby had not arrived at the knowledge when he died. Neither had Mrs. Nickleby herself, which is, in some sort, an explanation of the circumstance.

“ However,” drying her tears, “ this has nothing to do — certainly, nothing whatever to do — with the gentleman in the next house.”

“ I should suppose that the gentleman in the next house has as little to do with us.”

“ There can be no doubt that he is a gentleman, and has the manners of a gentleman, although he does wear knee breeches and grey worsted stockings. That may be eccentricity, or he may be proud of his legs. I don’t see why he shouldn’t be. The Prince Regent was proud of his legs, and so was Daniel Lambert.”

Nicholas looked on, quite amazed at the introduction of this new theme, which seemed just what Mrs. Nickleby had expected him to be.

“ You may well be surprised, Nicholas, my dear. I am sure I was. It came upon me like a flash of fire and almost froze my blood. The bottom of his garden joins the bottom of

ours, and of course I had several times seen him sitting among the scarlet beans in his little arbour, or working at his little hotbeds. I used to think he stared rather, but I didn't take any particular notice of that, as we were newcomers, and he might be curious to see what we were like. But when he began to throw his cucumbers over our wall —— ”

“ To throw his cucumbers over our wall? ” repeated Nicholas, in great astonishment.

“ Yes, Nicholas, my dear, his cucumbers over our wall. And vegetable marrows likewise.”

“ Confound his impudence! What does he mean by that? ”

“ I don't think he means it impertinently at all.”

“ What! Cucumbers and vegetable marrows flying at the heads of the family as they walk in their own garden, and not meant impertinently! Why, mother —— ”

Nicholas stopped short; for there was an indescribable expression of placid triumph, mingled with a modest confusion, which arrested his attention suddenly.

“ He must be a very weak, and foolish, and inconsiderate man, blamable, indeed — at least I suppose other people would consider him so. Of course, I can't be expected to express any opinion on that point, especially after always defending your poor dear papa when other people blamed him for making proposals to me; and to be sure there can be no doubt that he has taken a very singular way of showing it. Still at the same time, his attentions are — that is, as far as it goes, and to a certain extent, of course — a flattering sort of thing. And although I should never dream of marrying again with a dear girl like Kate still unsettled in life —— ”

“ Surely, mother, such an idea never entered your brain for an instant? ”

“ Bless my heart, Nicholas, my dear, isn't that precisely



what I am saying, if you would only let me speak? Of course, I never gave it a second thought, and I am surprised and astonished that you should suppose me capable of such a thing. All I say is, what step is the best to take, so as to reject these advances civilly and delicately, and without hurting his feelings too much, and driving him to despair, or anything of that kind? My goodness me! Suppose he was to go doing anything rash to himself. Could I ever be happy again, Nicholas?"

Despite his vexation and concern, Nicholas could scarcely help smiling, as he answered: "Now do you think, mother, that such a result would be likely to ensue from the most cruel repulse?"

"Upon my word, my dear, I don't know; really, I don't know."

"But this man — what has he done, mother, what has he said? You know there is no language of vegetables which converts a cucumber into a formal declaration of attachment."

"My dear," tossing her head and looking at the ashes in the grate, "he has done and said all sorts of things."

"Is there no mistake on your part?"

"Mistake! Lord, Nicholas, my dear, do you suppose I don't know when a man's in earnest?"

"Well, well!"

"Every time I go to the window he kisses one hand and lays the other upon his heart — of course, it's very foolish of him to do so, and I dare say you'll say it's very wrong, but he does it very respectfully — very respectfully indeed — and very tenderly, extremely tenderly. So far, he deserves the greatest credit; there can be no doubt about that. Then there are the presents which come pouring over the wall every day, and very fine they certainly are, very fine. We had one of the cucumbers at dinner yesterday and think of

pickling the rest for next winter. And last evening, he called gently over the wall, as I was walking in the garden, and proposed marriage and an elopement. His voice is as clear as a bell or a musical glass — very like a musical glass indeed — but, of course, I didn't listen to it. Then the question is, Nicholas, my dear, what am I to do? ”

“ Does Kate know of this? ”

“ I have not said a word about it yet.”

“ Then, for heaven's sake,” rising, “ do not, for it would make her very unhappy. And with regard to what you should do, my dear mother, do what your good sense and feeling and respect for my father's memory would prompt. There are a thousand ways in which you can show your dislike of these preposterous and doting attentions. If you act as decidedly as you ought, and they are still continued, and to your annoyance, I can speedily put a stop to them. But I should not interfere in a matter so ridiculous and attach importance to it until you have vindicated yourself. Most women can do that, but especially one of your age and condition, in circumstances like these, which are unworthy of a serious thought. I would not shame you by seeming to take them to heart or treat them earnestly for an instant. Absurd old idiot! ”

So saying, Nicholas kissed his mother and bade her good night, and they retired to their respective rooms.

To do Mrs. Nickleby justice, her attachment to her children would have prevented her seriously contemplating a second marriage, even if she could have so far conquered her recollections of her late husband as to have any strong inclinations that way. But although there was no evil and little real selfishness in Mrs. Nickleby's heart, she had a weak head and a vain one; and there was something so flattering in being sought (and vainly sought) in marriage at this time of day that she could not dismiss the passion of the unknown gentle-

man quite so summarily or lightly as Nicholas appeared to deem becoming.

“As to its being preposterous and doting and ridiculous,” thought Mrs. Nickleby, communing with herself in her own room, “I don’t see that at all. It’s hopeless on his part, certainly; but why he should be an absurd old idiot, I confess I don’t see. He is not to be supposed to know it’s hopeless. Poor fellow! He is to be pitied, I think!”

Having made these reflections, Mrs. Nickleby looked in her little dressing glass and, walking backward a few steps from it, tried to remember who it was who used to say that when Nicholas was one-and-twenty he would have more the appearance of her brother than her son. Not being able to call the authority to mind, she extinguished her candle and drew up the window blind to admit the light of morning, which had, by this time, begun to dawn.

“It’s a bad light to distinguish objects in,” murmured Mrs. Nickleby, peering into the garden, “and my eyes are not very good — I was shortsighted from a child — but upon my word I think there’s another large vegetable marrow sticking, at this moment, on the broken glass bottles at the top of the wall!”

## CHAPTER XXV

WHEN Nicholas returned from executing some commission and inquired whether Mr. Cherryble was alone in his room, Tim replied in the affirmative, although somebody had passed into the room not ten minutes before.

“I’ll take this letter to him at once if that’s the case,” Nicholas said. And with that he walked to the room and knocked at the door.



No answer.

Another knock, and still no answer.

“He can’t be here. I’ll lay it on his table.”

Nicholas opened the door and walked in, but very quickly he turned to walk out again when he saw to his great astonishment a young lady upon her knees at Mr. Cheeryble’s feet, and Mr. Cheeryble beseeching her to rise, and entreating the young lady’s female attendant to add her persuasions to his to induce her to do so.

Nicholas stammered out an awkward apology, and was hurrying out when the young lady, turning her head a little, presented to his view the features of the lovely girl whom he had seen at the employment office on his first visit long before. Glancing from her to the attendant, he recognized the same clumsy servant who had accompanied her then; and between his admiration of the young lady’s beauty and the confusion and surprise of this unexpected recognition, he stood stock-still in such a bewildered state of surprise and embarrassment that, for the moment, he was quite bereft of the power either to speak or move.

“My dear ma’am — my dear young lady,” cried Brother Charles in violent agitation, “pray don’t — not another word. I beseech and entreat you! I implore you — I beg of you — to rise. We — we — are not alone.”

As he spoke, he raised the young lady, who staggered to a chair and fainted away.

“She has fainted, sir,” said Nicholas, darting eagerly forward.

“Poor dear, poor dear! Where is my brother Ned? Ned, my dear brother, come here, pray.”

“Brother Charles, my dear fellow,” replied his brother, hurrying into the room, “what is the — ah! what —”

“Hush! hush! — not a word for your life, Brother Ned. Ring for the housekeeper — call Tim Linkinwater! Here,

Tim Linkinwater, sir — Mr. Nickleby, my dear sir, leave the room, I beg and beseech of you.”

“I think she is better now,” said Nicholas, who had been watching the patient so eagerly that he had not heard the request.

“Poor bird!” cried Brother Charles, gently taking her hand in his and laying her head upon his arm. “Brother Ned, my dear fellow, you will be surprised, I know, to witness this, in business hours; but ——” here he was again reminded of the presence of Nicholas and, shaking him by the hand, earnestly requested him to leave the room and to send Tim Linkinwater without an instant’s delay.

Nicholas immediately withdrew, and on his way to the countinghouse met both the old housekeeper and Tim Linkinwater, jostling each other in the passage and hurrying to the scene of action with extraordinary speed. Without waiting to hear his message, Tim Linkinwater darted into the room and presently afterwards Nicholas heard the door shut and locked on the inside.

He had abundance of time to ruminate on this discovery, for Tim Linkinwater was absent during the greater part of an hour, during the whole of which time Nicholas thought of nothing but the young lady and her exceeding beauty, and what could possibly have brought her there, and why they made such a mystery of it. The more he thought of all this, the more anxious he became to know who and what she was. “I should have known her among ten thousand.” And with that he walked up and down the room and, recalling her face and figure (of which he had a peculiarly vivid remembrance), discarded all other subjects of reflections and dwelt upon that alone.

At length Tim Linkinwater came back — provokingly cool, and with papers in his hand, and a pen in his mouth, as if nothing had happened.

“Is she quite recovered?” said Nicholas, impetuously.

“Who?”

“Who!”

“What do you make, Mr. Nickleby,” said Tim, taking his pen out of his mouth, “what do you make of four hundred and twenty-seven times three thousand two hundred and thirty-eight?”

“Nay, what do you make of my question first? I asked you ——”

“About the young lady,” putting on his spectacles. “To be sure. Yes. Oh! she’s very well.”

“Very well, is she?”

“Very well.”

“Will she be able to go home today?”

“She’s gone.”

“Gone!”

“Yes.”

“I hope she has not far to go?” looking earnestly at the other.

“Ay,” replied the immovable Tim, “I hope she hasn’t.”

Nicholas hazarded one or two further remarks, but it was evident that Tim Linkinwater had his own reasons for evading the subject, and that he was determined to afford no further information respecting the fair unknown, who had awakened so much curiosity in the breast of his young friend. Nothing daunted by this repulse, Nicholas returned to the charge next day, emboldened by the circumstance of Mr. Linkinwater being in a very talkative mood; but he no sooner resumed the theme than Tim relapsed into a state of the most provoking taciturnity and, from answering in monosyllables, came to returning no answers at all, save such as were to be inferred upon several grave nods and shrugs, which only served to whet that appetite for intelligence in Nicholas, which had already attained a most unreasonable height.



Foiled in these attempts, he was fain to content himself with watching for the young lady's next visit, but here again he was disappointed. Day after day passed, and she did not return. He looked eagerly at the superscription of all the notes and letters, but there was not one among them which he could fancy to be in her handwriting.

He told Newman Noggs about this lovely girl, for whom he had taken such a fancy, and he and Newman tried to find her address; but though they searched many days and weeks, it seemed impossible to find any trace of her.

Ever since her last momentous conversation with her son, Mrs. Nickleby had begun to display unusual care in the adornment of her person. Even her black dress assumed something of a deadly-lively air from the jaunty style in which it was worn. This was especially noticeable one day when Kate proposed that they should take their work into the summerhouse and enjoy the beauty of the afternoon. Mrs. Nickleby readily assented, and to the summerhouse they went without further discussion.

"Well, I will say," observed Mrs. Nickleby, as she took her seat, "that there never was such a good creature as Smike. Upon my word, the pains he has taken in putting this little arbour to rights and training the sweetest flowers about it are beyond anything I could have—I wish he wouldn't put all the gravel on your side, Kate, my dear, though, and leave nothing but mould for me."

"Dear mama, take this seat — do — to oblige me, mama."

"No, indeed, my dear. I shall keep my own side. Well! I declare!"

Kate looked up inquiringly.

"If he hasn't got from somewhere or other a couple of roots of those flowers that I said I was so fond of the other night, and asked you if you were not — no, that you said *you*

were so fond of, the other night, and asked me if I wasn't — it's the same thing. Now upon my word, I take that as very kind and attentive indeed! I don't see any of them, on my side, but I suppose they grow best near the gravel. You may depend upon it they do, Kate, and that's the reason they are all near you, and he has put the gravel there, because it's the sunny side. Upon my word, that's very clever now! I shouldn't have had half so much thought myself!" After a short pause Mrs. Nickleby was about to proceed on another discourse, when a loud "Hem!" which appeared to come from the very foundation of the garden wall gave both herself and her daughter a violent start.

"Mama! what was that?"

"Upon my word, my dear, unless it was the gentleman belonging to the next house I don't know what it could possibly ——"

"A — hem," cried the same voice; and that not in the tone of an ordinary clearing of the throat but in a kind of bellow, which woke up all the echoes in the neighbourhood, and was prolonged to an extent which must have made the unseen bellower quite black in the face.

"I understand it now, my dear; don't be alarmed, my love; it's not directed to you; and it is not intended to frighten anybody. Let us give everybody their due, Kate; I am bound to say that."

So saying, Mrs. Nickleby nodded her head and patted the back of her daughter's hand a great many times, and looked as if she could tell something vastly important if she chose, but had self-denial, thank heaven, and wouldn't do it.

"What do you mean, mama?"

"Don't be flurried, my dear," replied Mrs. Nickleby, looking towards the garden wall, "for you see I'm not, and if it

would be excusable in anybody to be flurried, it certainly would — under all circumstances — be excusable in me, but I am not, Kate, not at all.”

“It seems designed to attract our attention, mama.”

“It is designed to attract our attention, my dear; at least, to attract the attention of one of us. Hem! you needn't be at all uneasy, my dear.”

Kate looked very much perplexed and was apparently about to ask for further explanation when a shouting and scuffling noise, as of an elderly gentleman whooping and kicking up his legs on loose gravel with great violence, was heard to proceed from the same direction as the former sounds; and before they had subsided, a large cucumber was seen to shoot up in the air with the velocity of a sky rocket, whence it descended, tumbling over and over, until it fell at Mrs. Nickleby's feet.

This remarkable appearance was succeeded by another of a precisely similar description; then a fine vegetable marrow, of unusually large dimensions, was seen to whirl aloft and come toppling down; then several cucumbers shot up together; finally the air was darkened by a shower of onions, turnips, radishes, and other small vegetables, which fell rolling and scattering and bumping about in all directions.

As Kate rose from her seat in some alarm, and caught her mother's hand to run with her into the house, she felt herself rather retarded than assisted in her intention and, following the direction of Mrs. Nickleby's eyes, was quite terrified by the apparition of an old black velvet cap, which, by slow degrees, as if its wearer were ascending a ladder or pair of steps, rose above the wall dividing their garden from that of the next cottage, and was gradually followed by a very large head and an old face, in which were a pair of most extraordinary grey eyes, very wild, very wide open, and



rolling in their sockets, with a dull, languishing, leering look, most ugly to behold.

“Mama! why do you stop; why do you lose an instant? Mama, pray come in!”

“Kate, my dear, how can you be so foolish? I’m ashamed of you. How do you suppose you are ever to get through life if you’re such a coward as this? What do you want, sir? How dare you look into this garden?”

“Queen of my soul,” replied the stranger, folding his hands together, “this goblet sip!”

“Nonsense, sir. Kate, my love, pray be quiet.”

“Won’t you sip the goblet?” urged the stranger, with his head imploringly on one side, and his right hand on his breast. “Oh, do sip the goblet!”

“I shall not consent to do anything of the kind, sir. Pray begone.”

“Why is it,” said the old gentleman, coming up a step higher, and leaning his elbows on the wall with as much complacency as if he were looking out a window, “why is it that beauty is always obdurate, even when admiration is as honourable and respectful as mine?” Here he smiled, kissed his hand, and made several low bows. “Is it owing to the bees, who, when the honey season is over, and they are supposed to have been killed with brimstone, in reality fly to Barbary and lull the captive Moors to sleep with their drowsy songs? Or is it,” he added, dropping his voice almost to a whisper, “in consequence of the statue at Charing Cross having been lately seen on the Stock Exchange at midnight, walking arm in arm with the Pump from Aldgate, in a riding habit?”

“Mama, do you hear him?”

“Hush, my dear! he is very polite, and I think that was a quotation from the poets. Pray, don’t worry me so — you’ll pinch my arm black and blue. Go away, sir!”

“Quite away?” said the gentleman, with a languishing look. “Oh! *quite* away?”

“Yes, certainly. You have no business here. This is private property, sir; you ought to know that.”

“I do know,” said the old gentleman, laying his finger on his nose, with an air of familiarity most reprehensible, “that this is a sacred and enchanted spot, where the most divine charms” — here he kissed his hand and bowed again — “waft mellifluousness over the neighbours’ gardens and force the fruit and vegetables into premature existence. That fact I am acquainted with. But you will permit me, fairest creature, to ask you one question, in the absence of the planet Venus, who has gone on business to the Horse Guards and would otherwise — jealous of your superior charms — interpose between us?”

“Kate, it’s very awkward, positively. I really don’t know what to say to this gentleman. One ought to be civil, you know.”

“Dear mama, don’t say a word to him, but let us run away as fast as we can, and shut ourselves up till Nicholas comes home.”

Mrs. Nickleby looked very grand, not to say contemptuous, at this humiliating proposal and, turning to the old gentleman, who had watched them during these whispers with absorbing eagerness, said:

“If you will conduct yourself like the gentleman I should imagine you to be and will put your question to me in plain words, I will answer it.”

He took off his black velvet cap and, exhibiting a perfectly bald head, made a long series of bows, each accompanied with a fresh kiss of the hand. After exhausting himself with this fatiguing performance, he covered his head once more, pulled the cap very carefully over the tips of his ears, and, resuming his former attitude, said,

“ The question is —— ”

Here he broke off to look round in every direction and satisfy himself beyond all doubt that there was no listeners near. Assured that there were not, he tapped his nose several times, accompanied the action with a cunning look, as though he congratulated himself on his caution, stretched out his neck, and said in a loud whisper,

“ Are you a princess? ”

“ You are mocking me, sir,” replied Mrs. Nickleby, making a feint of retreating towards the house.

“ No, but are you? ” said the old gentleman.

“ You know I am not, sir.”

“ Then are you any relation to the Archbishop of Canterbury? Or to the Pope of Rome? Or the Speaker of the House of Commons? Forgive me if I am wrong, but I was told you were niece to the Commissioners of Paving and daughter-in-law to the Lord Mayor and Court of Common Council, which would account for your relationship to all three.”

“ Whoever has spread such reports, sir, has taken great liberties with my name, and one which I am sure my son Nicholas, if he was aware of it, would not allow for an instant. The idea! Niece to the Commissioners of Paving! ”

“ Pray, mama, come away! ” whispered Kate.

“ Pray, mama! Nonsense, Kate, but that’s just the way. If they had said I was niece to a piping bullfinch, what would you care! But I have no sympathy,” whimpered Mrs. Nickleby, “ I don’t expect it, that’s one thing.”

“ Tears! ” cried the old gentleman, with such an energetic jump that he fell down two or three steps and grated his chin against the wall. “ Catch the crystal globules — catch ’em — bottle ’em up — cork ’em tight — put sealing wax on the top — seal ’em with a cupid — label ’em ‘ Best quality ’



— and stow 'em away in the fourteen bin, with a bar of iron on the top to keep the thunder off! ”

Issuing these commands, he turned his velvet cap inside out, put it on with great dignity so as to obscure his right eye and three-fourths of his nose, and sticking his arms akimbo, looked very fiercely at a sparrow hard by till the bird flew away. He then put his cap in his pocket with an air of great satisfaction and addressed himself with respectful demeanour to Mrs. Nickleby.

“ Beautiful madam, if I have made any mistake with regard to your family or connexions, I humbly beseech you to pardon me. If I supposed you to be related to Foreign Powers or Native Boards, it is because you have the manner, a carriage, a dignity which, you will excuse my saying, none but yourself (with the single exception of the tragic muse, when playing extemporaneously on the barrel organ before the East India Company) can parallel. I am not a youth, ma'am, as you see; and although beings like you can never grow old, I venture to presume that we are fitted for each other.”

“ Really, Kate, my love! ” said Mrs. Nickleby, faintly and looking the other way.

“ I have estates, ma'am,” said the old gentleman, flourishing his right hand negligently, as if he made very light of such matters, and speaking very fast, “ jewels, lighthouses, fish ponds, a whalery of my own in the North Sea, and several oyster beds of great profit in the Pacific Ocean. If you will have the kindness to step down to the Royal Exchange and to take the cocked hat off the stoutest beadle's head, you will find my card in the lining of the crown, wrapped up in a piece of blue paper. My walking stick is also to be seen on application to the chaplain of the House of Commons, who is strictly forbidden to take any money for showing it. I have enemies about me, ma'am,” he looked towards his

house and spoke very low, "who attack me on all occasions and wish to secure my property. If you bless me with your hand and heart, you can apply to the Lord Chancellor or call out the military if necessary — sending my toothpick to the commander-in-chief will be sufficient — and so clear the house of them before the ceremony is performed. After that, love, bliss, and rapture; rapture, love, and bliss. Be mine, be mine!"

Repeating these last words with great rapture and enthusiasm, the old gentleman put on his black velvet cap again and, looking up into the sky in a hasty manner, said something that was not quite intelligible concerning a balloon he expected and which was rather after its time.

"Be mine, be mine!" repeated the old gentleman.

"Kate, my dear, I have hardly the power to speak; but it is necessary for the happiness of all parties that this matter should be set at rest for ever."

"Surely there is no necessity for you to say one word, mama?"

"You will allow me, my dear, if you please, to judge for myself."

"Be mine, be mine!" cried the old gentleman.

"It can scarcely be expected, sir," said Mrs. Nickleby, fixing her eyes modestly on the ground, "that I should tell a stranger whether I feel flattered and obliged by such proposals, or not. They certainly are made under very singular circumstances; still at the same time, as far as it goes, and to a certain extent, of course, they must be gratifying and agreeable to one's feelings."

"Be mine, be mine. Gog and Magog, Gog and Magog. Be mine, be mine!"

"It will be sufficient for me to say, sir, that I'm sure you'll see the propriety of taking an answer and going away — that I have made up my mind to remain a widow and to devote

myself to my children. You may not suppose I am the mother of two children — indeed many people have doubted it and said that nothing on earth could ever make 'em believe it possible — but it is the case, and they are both grown up. We shall be very glad to have you for a neighbour — very glad; delighted, I'm sure — but in any other character it's quite impossible, quite. As to my being young enough to marry again, that perhaps may be so, or it may not be; but I couldn't think of it for an instant, not on any account whatever. I said I never would, and I never will. It's a very painful thing to have to reject proposals, and I would much rather that none were made; at the same time, this is the answer that I determined long ago to make, and this is the answer I shall always give."

These observations were partly addressed to the old gentleman, partly to Kate, and partly delivered in soliloquy. Towards their conclusion, the suitor evinced a very irreverent degree of inattention, and Mrs. Nickleby had scarcely finished speaking when, to the great terror both of that lady and her daughter, he suddenly flung off his coat and, springing on the top of the wall, threw himself into an attitude which displayed his short knee breeches and grey worsted stockings to the fullest advantage, and concluded by standing on one leg and repeating his favourite bellow with increased vehemence.

While he was still dwelling on the last note and embellishing it with a prolonged flourish, a dirty hand was observed to glide stealthily and swiftly along the top of the wall, as if in pursuit of a fly, and then to clasp one of the old gentleman's ankles. This done, the companion hand appeared and clasped the other ankle.

Thus encumbered the old gentleman lifted his legs awkwardly once or twice, and then looking down on his own side of the wall burst into a loud laugh.



“It’s you, is it?” said the old gentleman.

“Yes, it’s me,” replied a gruff voice.

“How’s the Emperor of Tartary?” said the old gentleman.

“Oh! he’s much the same as usual,” was the reply. “No better and no worse.”

“The young Prince of China,” said the old gentleman, with much interest, “is he reconciled to his father-in-law, the great potato salesman?”

“No,” answered the gruff voice, “and he says he never will be, that’s more.”

“If that’s the case, perhaps I’d better come down.”

“Well,” said the man on the other side, “I think you had, perhaps.”

One of the hands being then cautiously unclasped, the old gentleman dropped into a sitting posture, and was looking round to smile and bow to Mrs. Nickleby when he disappeared with some precipitation, as if his legs had been pulled from below.

Very much relieved by his disappearance, Kate was turning to speak to her mother when the dirty hands again became visible and were immediately followed by the figure of a coarse squat man, who ascended by the steps which had been occupied by their singular neighbour.

“Beg your pardon, ladies,” said the newcomer, grinning and touching his hat. “Has he been making love to either of you?”

“Yes,” said Kate.

“Ah!” rejoined the man, taking his handkerchief out of his hat and wiping his face, “he always will, you know. Nothing will prevent his making love.”

“I need not ask you if he is out of his mind, poor creature,” said Kate.

“Why no, that’s pretty plain, that is.”

“Has he been long so?”

“A long while.”

“And is there no hope for him?”

“Not a bit and don’t deserve to be,” replied the keeper. “He’s a deal pleasanter without his senses than with ’em. He was the cruelest, wickedest old flint that ever drawed breath.”

“Indeed!” said Kate.

“By George! I never came across such a vagabond, and my mate says the same. Broke his poor wife’s heart, turned his daughters out of doors, drove his sons into the streets; it was a blessing he went mad at last, through evil tempers, and guzzling and drinking, or he’d have drove many others so. Hope for *him*, an old rip! It’s good there isn’t much hope for such as him.”

But Mrs. Nickleby said to her daughter on their way to the house:

“Why then, I just tell you this, Kate. That poor gentleman is not at all out of his mind. I am surprised that you can be so imposed upon. It’s some plot of these people to possess themselves of his property—didn’t he say so himself? He may be a little odd and flighty, perhaps; many of us are that; but downright insane! and express himself as he does, respectfully, and in quite poetical language, and making offers with so much thought and care and prudence—not as if he ran into the streets, and went down upon his knees to the first girl he met as a madman would. No, no, Kate, there’s a great deal too much method in his madness; depend upon that, my dear.”

## CHAPTER XXVI

ON the way home from an errand one evening Smike was looking in at the window of a jewelry store, wishing he could take some of the beautiful trinkets home as presents, when the clock struck three-quarters past eight. Roused by the sound, he hurried on at a quick pace and was crossing the corner of a by-street when he felt himself violently brought to, with a jerk so sudden that he was obliged to cling to a lamp post to save himself from falling. At the same moment, a small boy clung tight round his leg, and a shrill cry of "Here he is, father! Hooray!" vibrated in his ears.

Smike knew that voice too well. He cast his despairing eyes downward towards the form from which it had proceeded, and, shuddering from head to foot, looked round. Mr. Squeers had hooked him in the coat collar with the handle of his umbrella, and was hanging on at the other end with all his might and main. The cry of triumph proceeded from Master Wackford, who, regardless of all his kicks and struggles, clung to him with the tenacity of a bulldog!

One glance showed Smike this, and in that one glance the terrified boy became utterly powerless and unable to utter a sound.

"Here's a go!" cried Mr. Squeers, gradually coming hand-over-hand down the umbrella, and only unhooking it when he had got tight hold of the victim's collar. "Here's a delicious go. Wackford, my boy, call up one of them coaches."

"A coach, father!"

"Yes, a coach, sir," feasting his eyes upon the countenance of Smike. "Darn the expense. Let's have him in a coach."

"What's he been doing of?" asked a labourer with a hod





“ Here he is, father. Hooray! ” vibrated in his ears.

of bricks, against whom and a fellow labourer Mr. Squeers had backed, on the first jerk of the umbrella.

“Everything!” looking fixedly at his old pupil in a sort of rapturous trance. “Everything — running away, sir — joining in bloodthirsty attacks upon his master — there’s nothing that’s bad that he hasn’t done. Oh, what a delicious go is this here, good Lord!”

The man looked from Squeers to Smike, but such mental faculties as the poor fellow possessed had utterly deserted him. The coach came up, Master Wackford entered, Squeers pushed in his prize, and, following close at his heels, pulled up the glasses. The coachman mounted his box and drove slowly off.

Mr. Squeers sat himself down on the opposite seat to the unfortunate Smike and, planting his hands firmly on his knees, looked at him for some five minutes when, seeming to recover from his trance, he uttered a loud laugh and slapped his old pupil’s face several times — taking the right and left sides alternately.

“It isn’t a dream. That’s real flesh and blood! I know the feel of it!” And being quite assured of his good fortune by the experiments, Mr. Squeers administered a few boxes on the ear, lest the entertainment should seem to partake of sameness, and laughed louder and longer at every one.

“Mother will be fit to jump out of her skin, my boy, when she hears of this.”

“Oh, won’t she though, father.”

“To think that you and me should be turning out of a street, and come upon him at the very nick; and that I should have him tight, at only one cast of the umbrella, as if I had hooked him with a grappling iron! Ha, ha!”

“Didn’t I catch hold of his leg, neither, father?”

“You did, like a good ’un, my boy,” patting his son’s head, “and you shall have the best button-over jacket and waist-



coat that the next new boy brings down, as a reward of merit. Mind that. You always keep on in the same path, and do them things that you see your father do, and when you die you'll go right slap to heaven and no questions asked."

Improving the occasion in these words, Mr. Squeers patted his son's head again, and then patted Smike's — but harder, and inquired in a bantering tone how he found himself by this time.

"I must go home," said Smike, looking wildly round.

"To be sure you must. You're about right there. You'll go home very soon, you will. You'll find yourself at the peaceful village of Dotheboys, in Yorkshire, in something under a week's time, my young friend; and the next time you get away from there, I give you leave to keep away. Where's the clothes you run off in, you ungrateful robber?"

Smike glanced at the neat attire which the care of Nicholas had provided for him and wrung his hands.

"Do you know that I could hang you up outside of the Old Bailey for making away with them articles of property? Do you know that it's a hanging matter—eh? Do you know that? What do you suppose was the worth of them clothes you had? Do you know that that Wellington boot you wore cost eight-and-twenty shillings when it was a pair, and the shoe seven and six? But you came to the right shop for mercy when you came to me, and thank your stars that it is me as has got to serve you with the articles."

He followed up the remark by poking Smike in the chest with the ferrule of his umbrella, and dealing a smart shower of blows, with the ribs of the same instrument, upon his head and shoulders.

"I never thrashed a boy in a hackney coach before," said Mr. Squeers, when he stopped to rest. "There's inconvenience in it, but the novelty gives it a sort of relish, too!"

Poor Smike! He warded off the blows as well as he



could and shrank into a corner of the coach with his head resting on his hands, and his elbows on his knees. He was stunned and stupefied, and had no more idea that any act of his would enable him to escape from the all-powerful Squeers, now that he had no friend to speak to or advise with, than he had had in all the weary years of his Yorkshire life which preceded the arrival of Nicholas.

The journey seemed endless; street after street was entered and left behind; and still they went jolting on. At last Mr. Squeers began to thrust his head out of the window every half-minute and to bawl a variety of directions to the coachman; and after passing with some difficulty through several mean streets, which the appearance of the houses and the bad state of the road showed to have been recently built, Mr. Squeers suddenly tugged at the check string with all his might, and cried:

“Stop!”

“What are you pulling a man’s arm off for?” said the coachman, looking angrily down.

“That’s the house. The second of them four little houses, one story high, with the green shutters. There’s a brass plate on the door, with the name of Snawley.”

“Couldn’t you say that without wrenching a man’s limbs off his body?”

“No!” bawled Mr. Squeers. “Say another word, and I’ll summon you for having a broken winder. Stop!”

Obedient to this direction, the coach stopped at Mr. Snawley’s door. Mr. Snawley may be remembered as the sleek and sanctified gentleman who confided two stepsons to the parental care of Mr. Squeers. Mr. Snawley’s house was on the extreme borders of some new settlements adjoining Somers Town. Mr. Squeers had taken lodgings therein for a short time, as his stay was longer than usual, and as the Saracen, having had experience of young Master Wackford’s

appetite, declined to receive him on any terms than as a full-grown customer.

“Here we are!” said Squeers, hurrying Smike into the little parlor, where Mr. Snawley and his wife were taking a lobster supper. “Here’s the vagrant — the felon — the rebel — the monster of unthankfulness.”

“What! The boy that run away!” cried Snawley, resting his knife and fork upright on the table and opening his eyes to their full width.

“The very boy,” said Squeers, putting his fist close to Smike’s nose, and drawing it away again, and repeating the process several times with a vicious aspect. “If there wasn’t a lady present, I’d fetch him such a —— ; never mind, I’ll owe it to him.”

Mr. Squeers related where, when, and in what manner he had picked up the runaway.

“It’s clear that there has been a Providence in it, sir,” said Mr. Snawley, casting down his eyes with an air of humility and elevating his fork, with a bit of lobster on the top of it, towards the ceiling.

“Providence is against him, no doubt,” replied Mr. Squeers, scratching his nose. “Of course, that was to be expected. Anybody might have known that.”

“Hard-heartedness and evil-doing will never prosper, sir,” said Mr. Snawley.

“Never was such a thing known,” rejoined Squeers, taking a little roll of notes from his pocketbook to see that they were all safe.

“I have been, Mrs. Snawley,” said Mr. Squeers, when he had satisfied himself upon this point, “I have been that chap’s benefactor, feeder, teacher, and clother. I have been that chap’s classical, commercial, mathematical, philosophical, and trigonometrical friend. My son — my only son, Wackford — has been his brother. Mrs. Squeers has been his

mother, grandmother, aunt, — ah! and I may say uncle too, all in one. She never cottoned to anybody, except them two engaging and delightful boys of yours, as she cottoned to this chap. What's my return? What's come of my milk of human kindness? It turns into curds and whey when I look at him."

"Well it may, sir," said Mrs. Snawley. "Oh, well it may, sir."

"Where has he been all this time?" inquired Snawley. "Has he been living with ——?"

"Ah, sir!" interposed Squeers, confronting him again. "Have you been living with that there devilish Nickleby, sir?"

But no threats or cuffs could elicit from Snike one word of reply to this question; for he had internally resolved that he would rather perish in the wretched prison to which he was again about to be consigned than utter one syllable which could involve his first and true friend.

Finding every effort useless, Mr. Squeers conducted him to a little back room upstairs, where he was to pass the night. Taking the precaution of removing his shoes, and coat, and waistcoat, and also of locking the door on the outside, lest he should muster up sufficient energy to make an escape, that worthy gentleman left him to his meditations.

The night, fraught with so much bitterness to one poor soul, had given place to a bright and cloudless summer morning, when a north-country mail coach clattered onward to its halting place near the post office.

The only outside passenger was a burly, honest-looking countryman on the box, who, with his eyes fixed upon the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, appeared so wrapt in admiring wonder as to be quite insensible to all the bustle of getting out the bags and parcels, until one of the coach windows being let sharply down, he looked round and encountered a pretty female face which was just then thrust out.



“ See there, lass! ” bawled the countryman, pointing towards the object of his admiration. “ There be Paul’s Church. ’Ecod, he be a soizable ’un, he be.”

“ Goodness, John! I shouldn’t have thought it could have been half the size. What a monster! ”

“ Monsther! — Ye’re aboot right theer, I reckon, Mrs. Browdie,” said the countryman, good-humouredly, as he came slowly down in his huge topcoat, “ and wa’at dost thee tak’ yon place to be noo — thot ’un ower the way? Ye’d never coom near it ’gin ye thried for twolve moonths. It’s na’ but a poast office! Ho! ho! ”

So saying, John Browdie — for he it was — opened the coach door and, tapping Mrs. Browdie, late Miss Price, on the cheek as he looked in, burst into a boisterous fit of laughter.

“ Well! ” said John. “ Dang my bootuns if she bean’t asleep agean! ”

“ She’s been asleep all night, and was all yesterday, except for a minute or two now and then,” replied John Browdie’s choice, “ and I was very sorry when she woke, for she has been so cross.”

The subject of these remarks was a slumbering figure, so muffled in shawl and cloak that it would have been a matter of impossibility to guess at its sex but for a brown beaver bonnet and green veil which ornamented the head, and which, having been crushed and flattened for two hundred and fifty miles in that particular angle of the vehicle from which the lady’s snores now proceeded, presented a very funny appearance.

“ Hollo! ” cried John, twitching one end of the dragged veil. “ Coom, wakken oop, will ’ee? ”

After several attempts at burrowings into the old corner, and many exclamations of impatience and fatigue, the figure struggled into a sitting posture; and there, under a mass of crumpled beaver and surrounded by a semicircle of blue curl papers, were the delicate features of Miss Fanny Squeers.

“ Oh, 'Tilda! How you have been akicking of me through this blessed night! ”

“ Well, I do like that,” replied her friend, laughing, “ when you have had nearly the whole coach to yourself.”

“ Don't deny it, 'Tilda, because you have, and it's no use to go attempting to say you haven't. You mightn't have known it in your sleep, 'Tilda, but I haven't closed my eyes for a single wink, and so I think I am to be believed.”

With which reply, Miss Squeers adjusted the bonnet and, evidently flattering herself that it looked uncommonly neat, brushed off the sandwich crumbs and bits of biscuit which had accumulated in her lap and, availing herself of John Browdie's proffered arm, descended from the coach.

“ Noo,” said John, when a hackney coach had been called and the ladies and the luggage hurried in, “ gang to the Sarah's Head, mun.”

“ To the vere? ” cried the coachman.

“ Lawk, Mr. Browdie! ” interrupted Miss Squeers. “ The idea! Saracen's Head.”

“ Sure-ly, I know'd it was something about Sarah's Son's Head. Dost thou know that? ”

“ Oh, ah! I know that,” replied the coachman gruffly, as he banged the door.

“ 'Tilda, dear, really we shall be taken for I don't know what.”

“ Let them tak' us as the foind us, we dean't come to Lunnun to do nought but 'joy oursel, do we? ”

“ I hope not, Mr. Browdie.”

“ Well, then, it's no matther. I've only been married fower days, 'count of poor old feyther deeing and puttin't off. Here be a weddin' party — broide and broidesmaid, and the groom — if a mun dean't 'joy himself noo, when ought he, hey? Drat it all, thot's what I want to know.”

When they reached the Saracen's Head Hotel, the party

straightway retired to rest, the refreshment of sleep being necessary after so long a journey. They met again about noon at a substantial breakfast, spread by direction of Mr. John Browdie, in a small private room upstairs, commanding a view of the yard and stables.

Miss Squeers now appeared dressed in a manner which would attract a great deal of attention anywhere. She wore a white dress with a broad pink belt around her waist, a large white muslin bonnet with a very large pink rose on the inside, and the top trimmed all over with little pink roses. Her hair was curled in such tight corkscrew curls that it was impossible for them to come out by any accident. Coral bracelets made of beads strung together (rather short of beads and with a visible black string) clasped her wrists, and a long chain of the same beads hung around her neck with a large red crystal heart hanging from this, typical of her own disengaged affections.

Even the waiter looked very hard at Miss Squeers as he handed her the muffins.

“Is my pa in, do you know?” said Fanny Squeers with an air of great importance.

“Beg your pardon, miss?” said the waiter.

“My pa; is he in?”

“In where, miss?”

“In here — in the hotel! My pa — Mr. Wackford Squeers — he’s stopping here. Is he at home?”

“I didn’t know there was any gen’lman of that name in the house, Miss. There may be in the coffee room.”

*May be!* Very pretty this, indeed! Here was Miss Squeers, who had been depending all the way to London upon showing her friends how much respectful notice her name and connexions would excite, told that her father *might* be there! “As if he was a feller!” observed Miss Squeers, with emphatic indignation.



“Ye’d betther inquire, mun,” said John Browdie. “An’ hond up another pigeon pie, will ’ee? Dang the chap,” muttered John, looking into the empty dish as the waiter retired; “does he ca’ this a pie — three young pigeons and a troiffing matther o’ steak, and a crust so loight that you doant know when it’s in your mooth and when it’s gane? I wonder hoo many pies goes to a breakfast!”

After a short interval, which John Browdie employed upon the ham and a cold round of beef, the waiter returned with another pie, and the information that Mr. Squeers was not stopping in the house, but that he came there every day and that, when he arrived, he should be shown upstairs. With this he retired, and he had not retired two minutes when he returned with Mr. Squeers and his hopeful son.

“Why, who’d have thought of this?” said Mr. Squeers, when he had saluted the party and received some private family intelligence from his daughter.

“Who, indeed, pa! But you see ’Tilda is married at last.”

“And I stond threat for a soight o’ Lunnun, schoolmeas-ther,” said John, vigorously attacking the pie.

“One of them things that young men do when they get married and as runs through with their money like nothing at all! How much better wouldn’t it be now to save it up for the eddication of any little boys, for instance. They come on you before you’re aware of it; mine did upon me.”

“Will ’ee pick a bit?” said John.

“I won’t myself, but if you’ll just let little Wackford tuck into something fat, I’ll be obliged to you. Give it him in his fingers, else the waiter charges it on, and there’s lot of profit on this sort of vittles without that. If you hear the waiter coming, sir, shove it in your pocket, and look out the window, d’ye hear?”

“ I’m awake, father.”

“ Well,” said Squeers, turning to his daughter, “ it’s your turn to be married next. You must make haste.”

“ Oh, I’m in no hurry,” said Fanny Squeers.

“ What do you think? Who do you suppose we have laid hands on, Wackford and me? ” said her father, exultingly.

“ Pa! not Mr. —— ? ” Miss Squeers was unable to finish the sentence, but Mrs. Browdie did it for her, and added, “ Nickleby? ”

“ No, but next door to him, though.”

“ You can’t mean Smike? ” cried Miss Squeers, clapping her hands.

“ Yes, I can though, I’ve got him, hard and fast.”

“ Wa’at! ” exclaimed John Browdie, pushing away his plate. “ Got that poor — dom’d scoundrel? Where? ”

“ Why, in the top back room at my lodging, with him on one side and the key on the other.”

“ At thy loodgin’ ! Thee’st gotten him at thy loodgin’ ? Ho, ho! The schoolmeaster agin all England! Give us thee hond, mun; I’m darned but I must shak thee by the hond for thot — gotten him at thy loodgin’ ? ”

“ Yes,” replied Squeers, staggering in his chair under the congratulatory blow on the chest which the stout Yorkshireman dealt him; “ thankee. Don’t do it again. You mean it kindly, I know, but it hurts rather. Yes, there he is. That’s not so bad, is it? ”

“ Ba’ad! It’s eneaf to scare a mun to hear tell on.”

“ I thought it would surprise you a bit. It was pretty neatly done, and pretty quick, too.”

“ Hoo wor it? Tell us all about it, mun; coom, quick! ”

Although he could not keep pace with John Browdie’s impatience, Mr. Squeers related the lucky chance by which Smike had fallen into his hands as quickly as he could and, except when he was interrupted by the admiring remarks

of his auditors, paused not in the recital until he had brought it to an end.

“For fear he should give me the slip, by any chance, I’ve taken three outside seats for tomorrow morning on the coach, for Wackford and him and me — and have arranged to leave the accounts and the new boys to the agent, don’t you see? So it’s very lucky you come today, or you’d have missed us; as it is, unless you could come and tea with me tonight, we shan’t see anything more of you before we go away.”

“Dean’t say anoother wurd,” shaking him by the hand. “We’d coom, if it was twonty mile,” said Mr. Browdie, quickly.

“No, would you though?” returned Mr. Squeers, who had not expected quite such a ready acceptance of his invitation, or he would have considered twice before he gave it.

John Browdie’s only reply was another squeeze of the hand and an assurance that they would not begin to see London till tomorrow, so that they might be at Mr. Snawley’s at six o’clock without fail. After some further conversation, Mr. Squeers and his son departed.

During the remainder of the day, Mr. Browdie was in a very odd and excitable state, bursting occasionally into an explosion of laughter and then taking up his hat and running into the coachyard to have it out by himself. He was very restless, too, constantly walking in and out, and snapping his fingers, and dancing scraps of uncouth country dances, and, in short, conducting himself in such a very extraordinary manner that Miss Squeers thought he was going mad, and, begging her dear ’Tilda not to distress herself, communicated her suspicions in so many words. Mrs. Browdie, however, without discovering any great alarm, observed that she had seen him so once before and that, although he was almost sure to be ill after it, it would not be anything very serious, and therefore he was better left alone.



The result proved her to be perfectly correct; for while they were all sitting in Mr. Snawley's parlor that night just as it was beginning to get dusk, John Browdie was taken so ill and seized with such an alarming dizziness in the head that the whole company were thrown into the utmost consternation. His good lady was the only person present who retained presence of mind enough to observe that, if he were allowed to lie down on Mr. Squeers's bed for an hour or so and were left entirely to himself, he would be sure to recover again almost as quickly as he had been taken ill. Accordingly, John was supported upstairs, with great difficulty (being a monstrous weight and regularly tumbling down two steps every time they hoisted him up three) and, being laid on the bed, was left in charge of his wife, who after a short interval re-appeared in the parlour, with the gratifying intelligence that he had fallen fast asleep.

Now the fact was, at that particular moment, that John Browdie was sitting on the bed, with the reddest face ever seen, cramming the corner of the pillow into his mouth to prevent his roaring out loud with laughter. He had no sooner succeeded in suppressing this emotion than he slipped off his shoes and, creeping to the adjoining room where the prisoner was confined, turned the key, which was on the outside, and darting in, covered Smike's mouth with his huge hand before he could utter a sound.

"Ods bobs, dost thee not know me, mun?" whispered the Yorkshireman to the bewildered lad. "Browdie. Chap as met thee efther schoolmeaster was banged?"

"Yes, yes. Oh! help me."

"Help thee!" replied John, stopping his mouth again, the instant he had said thus much. "Thee didn't need help, if thee warn't as silly yoongster as ever draw'd breath. Wa'at did 'ee come here for, then?"

"He brought me; oh! he brought me!"

“Brout thee! Why didn’t ’ee punch his head, or lay theeself doon and kick, and squeal out for the pollis? I’d ha’ licked a doozen such as him when I was yoong as thee. But thee be’est a poor broken-doon chap, and God forgi’ me for bragging ower yan o’ his weakest creeturs!”

Smike opened his mouth to speak, but John Browdie stopped him.

“Stan’ still and doant ’ee speak a morsel o’ talk till I tell ’ee.”

With this caution, John Browdie shook his head significantly and, drawing a screw driver from his pocket, took off the box of the lock in a very deliberate and workmanlike manner, and laid it, together with the implement, on the floor.

“See thot? Thot be thy doin’. Noo, coot awa’!”

Smike looked vacantly at him, as if unable to comprehend his meaning.

“I say, coot awa’. Dost thee know where thee livest? Thee dost? Weel. Are yon thy clothes, or schoolmeasther’s?”

“Mine,” replied Smike, as the Yorkshireman hurried him to the adjoining room and pointed out a pair of shoes and coat which were lying on a chair.

“On wi’ ’em!” said John, forcing the wrong arm into the wrong sleeve and winding the tails of the coat round the fugitive’s neck. “Noo foller me, and when thee get’st ootside door, turn to the right, and they wean’t see thee pass.”

“But — but — he’ll hear me shut the door,” replied Smike, trembling from head to foot.

“Then dean’t shut it at all. Dang it, thee bean’t afeared o’ schoolmeasther’s takkin cold, I hope?”

“N-no,” said Smike, his teeth chattering in his head. “But he brought me back before, and will again. He will, he will indeed.”

“ He wull, he wull? He wean't, he wean't. Look'ee! I wan't to do this neighbourly loike, and let them think thee's gotten awa' o' theeself, but if he cooms oot o' that parlour awhile thee'rt clearing off, he mun' have mercy on his own boans, for I wean't. If he foinds it oot, soon efther, I'll put un on a wrong scent, I warrant 'ee. But if thee keep'st a good heart, thee'll be at whoam afore they know thee'st gotten off.. Coom! ”

Smike, who comprehended just enough of this to know it was intended as encouragement, prepared to follow with tottering steps when John whispered in his ear.

“ Thee'lt just tell yoong measther, that I'm sploiced to 'Tilly Price, and to be heerd on at the Saracen by latther, and that I bean't jealous of 'un — dang it, I'm loke to boost when I think o' that neight! 'Cod, I think I see 'un now, a powderin' awa' at the thin bread and butther! ”

It was rather a ticklish recollection for John just then, for he was within an ace of breaking out into a loud guffaw. Restraining himself, however, just in time, by a great effort, he glided downstairs, hauling Smike behind him; then placing himself close to the parlour door to confront the first person that might come out, he signed to Smike to make off.

Having got so far, Smike needed no second bidding. Opening the house door gently and casting a look of mingled gratitude and terror at his deliverer, he took the direction which had been indicated to him and sped away like the wind.

Without stopping for a moment to reflect upon which way to go, he fled away with surprising swiftness, borne upon such wings as only Fear can wear and, impelled by imaginary shouts in the well-remembered voice of Squeers, who, with a crowd of pursuers, seemed to the poor fellow's disordered senses to press hard upon his track. After a time the darkness and quiet of a country road made him think about his



surroundings, and the starry sky above warned him of the rapid flight of time. Covered with dust, and panting for breath, he stopped to listen and look about him.

All was still and silent. A glare of light in the distance, casting a warm glow upon the sky, marked where the huge city of London lay. He now made for this with almost the same speed as that with which he had left the temporary abode of Mr. Squeers. By the time he entered it, the greater part of the shops were closed. There were only a few people on the streets, but of these Smike asked his way from time to time until he reached the dwelling of Newman Noggs.

All that evening Newman had been hunting and searching in byways and corners for the very person who now knocked at his door, while Nicholas had been pursuing the same inquiry in other directions. Newman was sitting, with a melancholy air, at his poor supper when Smike's timorous and uncertain knock reached his ears. Alive to every sound, in his anxious and expectant state, Newman hurried down stairs and, uttering a cry of joyful surprise, dragged the welcome visitor into the passage and up the stairs, and said not a word until he had him safe in his own garret and the door was shut behind them, when he mixed a great mugful of gin and water and, holding it to Smike's mouth, as one might hold a bowl of medicine to the lips of a refractory child, commanded him to drink it all.

Newman looked blank when he found that Smike scarcely put his lips to the precious mixture; he was in the act of raising the mug to his own mouth with a deep sigh of compassion for his poor friend when Smike, beginning to relate his adventures, stopped him halfway, and he stood listening, with the mug in his hand.

Soon he deposited the mug upon the table and limped up and down the room in great excitement. When John Browdie was mentioned, he dropped, by slow and gradual degrees

into a chair, and then, as the story reached the climax, burst at last into a laugh composed of one loud sonorous "Ha, ha!" Having given vent to which, his countenance immediately fell again, as he inquired with the utmost anxiety whether it was probable that John Browdie and Squeers had come to blows.

"No! I don't think so," replied Smike. "I don't think he could have missed me till I had got quite away."

Newman scratched his head with a show of great disappointment and, once more lifting up the mug, applied himself to the contents, smiling meanwhile over the rim with a grim and ghastly smile at Smike. Then he said:

"You shall stay here tonight. You're tired — fagged. I'll tell them you're come back. They have been half-crazy about you. Mr. Nicholas ——"

"God bless him!" cried Smike.

"Amen!" returned Newman. "He hasn't had a minute's rest or peace; no more has the old lady, nor Miss Nickleby."

"No, no. Has *she* thought about me?" said Smike. "Has she thought? Oh, has she? Don't tell me so, if she has not."

"She has," cried Newman. "She is as noble-hearted as she is beautiful."

"Yes, yes!" cried Smike. "Well said!"

"So mild and gentle," said Newman.

"Yes, yes!" cried Smike, with increasing eagerness.

"And yet with such a true and gallant spirit," pursued Newman.

He was going on in his enthusiasm when, chancing to look at Smike, he saw that he had covered his face with his hands and that tears were on his face. A moment before, the boy's eyes were sparkling with an unusual fire, and every feature had been lighted up with an excitement which made him appear, for the moment, quite a different being.

“Well, well,” muttered Newman, as if he were a little puzzled. At length he repeated his proposition that Smike should remain where he was for that night and that he, Noggs, should go to the cottage to relieve the suspense of the family. But as Smike would not hear of this — pleading his anxiety to see his friends again — they eventually sallied forth together. The night being by this time far advanced and Smike being so footsore that he could hardly crawl along, it was within an hour of sunrise when they reached the cottage of the Nickleby’s.

At the first sound of their voices outside the house, Nicholas, who had passed a sleepless night devising schemes for the recovery of his lost charge, started from his bed and joyfully admitted them. There was so much noisy conversation and congratulation and indignation that the remainder of the family were soon awakened, and Smike received a warm and cordial welcome not only from Kate but from Mrs. Nickleby also, who assured him of her future favour and regard and was so obliging as to relate for his entertainment and that of the assembled circle a most remarkable account from some work, the name of which she had never known, of a miraculous escape from some prison, but what prison she couldn’t remember, effected by an officer whose name she had forgotten, confined for some crime she didn’t clearly recollect.

Nicholas made up his mind that he should certainly try to have the schoolmaster receive a severe punishment, if possible, but he did not know exactly how to bring this about.

## CHAPTER XXVII

**I**N one of the smallest sitting rooms in the hotel, a tea table was displayed in neat and inviting order. On the table were joints of roast and boiled, a tongue, a pigeon



pie, a cold fowl, a tankard of ale, and other little matters of the kind.

Mr. John Browdie, with his hands in his pockets, hovered restlessly about these delicacies.

“Tilly!” said John to his lady, who was reclining half-asleep upon a sofa.

“Well, John!”

“Weel, John ——” retorted her husband, impatiently. “Dost thou feel hoongry, lass?”

“Not very.”

“Not vary! Hear her say ‘not vary’ and us dining at three, and loonching off pasthry thot aggravates a mon ‘stead of pacifying him; Not vary!”

“Here’s a gent’l’mán for you, sir,” said the waiter, looking in.

“A wa’at for me?”

“A gent’l’mán, sir.”

“Stars and garthers, chap, wa’at dost thou coom in and say thot for? In wi’ um.”

“Are you at home, sir?”

“At whoam! I wish I were. I’d ha tea’d two hours ago. Why, I told t’other chap to look sharp ootside door, and tell ‘un d’rectly he coom thot we were faint wi’ hoonger. In wi’ un. — Aha! Thee hond, Mister Nickleby. This is nigh to be the proodest day o’ my life, sir. Hoo be all wi’ ye? Ding! But I’m glod o’ this!”

Quite forgetting even his hunger in the heartiness of his salutation, John Browdie shook Nicholas by the hand again and again, slapping his hand with great violence to add warmth to the reception.

“Aha! There she be,” said John, observing the look which Nicholas directed towards his wife. “There she be — we shan’t quarrel about her noo — Eh? Ecod, when I think o’ thot — but thou want’st soom’at to eat. Fall to, mun, fall to, and for wa’at we’re aboot to receive ——”

No doubt the grace was properly finished, but nothing more was heard, for John had already begun to play such a knife and fork that his speech was, for the time, gone.

“ You remember the night of our first tea drinking? ” said Nicholas.

“ Shall I e'er forget it, mun? ”

“ He was a desperate fellow that night, though, was he not,” said Mrs. Browdie. “ Quite a monster? If you had only heard him as we were going home, Mr. Nickleby, you'd have said so indeed. I never was so frightened in all my life.”

“ Coom, coom,” said John, with a broad grin; “ thou know'st better than thot, Tilly.”

“ So I was. I almost made up my mind never to speak to you again.”

“ A'most! ” said John with a broader grin than the last, “ a'most made up her mind! And she wur coaxin' and coaxin' and wheedlin' and wheedlin' a' the blessed wa'. ‘ Wa'at didst't thou let yon chap mak' oop tiv' 'ee for? ’ I says. ‘ I deedn't, John,’ says she, squeedgin my arm. ‘ You deedn't! ’ says I. ‘ Noa! ’ says she, a squeedgin of me again.”

“ Lor, John! ” interposed his pretty wife, colouring very much. “ How can you talk such nonsense? As if I should have dreamt of such a thing! ”

“ I dinnot know whether thou'd ever dreamt of it, but thou didst it.”

“ ‘ Ye're a feeckle, changeable weathercock, lass,’ says I.

“ ‘ Not feeckle, John,’ says she.

“ ‘ Yes,’ says I, ‘ feeckle, dom'd feeckle. Dinnot tell me thou bean' efther yon chap at schoolmeasther's,’ says I.

“ ‘ Him! ’ says she, quite screeching.

“ ‘ Ah! him! ’ says I.

“ ‘ Why John,’ says she — and she coom a deal closer and squeedged a deal harder than she'd deane afore, ‘ dost thou

think that having such a mun as thou to keep company wi', I'd ever tak' oop wi' such a leetle scanty whippersnapper as yon?' she says. Ha! ha! ha! She said whippersnapper! 'Ecod!' I says, 'efther thot, neame the day, and let's have it ower!' Ha, ha, ha!"

Nicholas laughed very heartily at this story, both on account of its telling against himself and of his being desirous to spare the blushes of Mrs. Browdie, whose protestations were drowned in peals of laughter from her husband. His good nature soon put her at her ease; and although she still denied the charge, she laughed so heartily at it that Nicholas had the satisfaction of feeling assured that in all essential respects it was strictly true.

"This is the second time," said Nicholas, "that we have ever taken a meal together, and only the third I have ever seen you; and yet it really seems to me as if I were among old friends."

"Weel, so I say," observed the Yorkshireman.

"And I am sure I do," added his young wife.

"I have the best reason to be impressed with the feeling," said Nicholas, "for if it had not been for your kindness of heart, my good friend, when I had no right or reason to expect it, I know not what might have become of me or what plight I should have been in by this time."

"Talk about soom'at else, and dinnot bother," replied John, gruffly.

"It must be a new song to the same tune then," said Nicholas, smiling. "I told you in my letter that I deeply felt and admired your sympathy with that poor lad, whom you released at the risk of involving yourself in trouble; but I can never tell you how grateful he and I, and others whom you don't know, are to you for taking pity on him."

"Ecod! and I can never tell *you* hoo grateful soom folks



that we do know would be loikewise, if they'd knowed I had taken pity on him."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mrs. Browdie, "what a state I was in, that night!"

"Did they think you had anything to do with assisting in the escape?"

"Not a bit," said John, extending his mouth from ear to ear. "There I lay, snoog in schoolmeaster's bed long efther it was dark, and nobody coom nigh the place. 'Weel!' thinks I, 'he's got a pretty good start, and if he bean't whoam by noo, he never will be; so you may coom as quick as you loike, and foind us reddy.' Presently he *did* coom. I heered door shut doonstairs, and him a warking oop in the daark. 'Slow and stedly,' I says to myself, 'tak you time, sir — no hurry.' He cooms to the door, turns the key — turns the key when there warn't nothing to hoold the lock! — and ca'as oot, 'Hallo, there!' — 'Yes,' thinks I, 'you may do thot agean, and not wakken anybody, sir.' 'Hallo, there,' he says, and then he stops. 'Thou'd betther not aggravate me,' says schoolmeaster, efther a little time. 'I'll brak' every boan in your boddy, Smike,' he says, efther another little time. Then all of soodden, he sings oot for a loight, and when it cooms — ecod, such a hoorly-boorly! 'Wa'at's the matter?' says I. 'He's gane,' says he, — stark mad wi' vengeance. 'Have you heard nought?' 'Ees,' says I, 'I heerd street door shut, no time at a' ago. I heered a person run doon there' (pointing t'other way) 'Help!' he cries. 'I'll help you,' says I; and off we set — the wrong way! Ho, ho, ho!"

"Did you go far?"

"Far! I run him clean off his legs in quarter of an hoor. To see old schoolmeaster wi'out his hat, skimming along over fences and rowling along up to his knees in mud and wather, tumbling over fences and into ditches, bawling oot like mad, wi' his one eye looking sharp out behind and him spattered

wi' mud all ower, face and all! I thot I 'should ha' dropped doon and killed myself wi' laughing."

John laughed so heartily at the mere recollection that all three burst into peals of laughter, which were renewed again and again, until they could laugh no longer.

"He's a bad 'un," said John, wiping his eyes; "a very bad 'un, is schoolmeaster."

"I can't bear the sight of him, John," said his wife.

"Coom, thot's tidy in you, thot is. If it wa'nt along o' you we shouldn't know nought about 'un. Thou know'd 'un first, Tilly, didn't thou?"

"I couldn't help knowing Fanny Squeers, John. She was an old playmate of mine, you know."

"Weel, dean't I say so, lass? It's best to be neighbourly and keep up old acquaintance, loike; and what I say is, dean't quarrel if 'ee can help it. Dinnot think so, Mr. Nickleby?"

"Certainly, and you acted upon that principle when I met you on horseback on the road after our memorable evening."

"Surely. Wa'at I say, I stick by."

"And that's a fine thing to do, and manly, too. Miss Squeers is stopping with you, you said in your note."

"Yes, Tilly's bridesmaid; and a queer bridesmaid she be, too. She wean't be a bride in a hurry, I reckon."

"For shame, John," said Mrs. Browdie.

"The groom will be a blessed man," said John, his eyes twinkling at the idea. "He'll be in luck, he will."

"You see, Mr. Nickleby," said his wife, "that it was in consequence of her being here that John wrote to you and fixed tonight, because we thought that it wouldn't be pleasant for you to meet after what has passed."

"Unquestionably. You were quite right in that," said Nicholas, interrupting.

“John fixed tonight, because she had settled that she would go and drink tea with her father. And to make quite sure of there being nothing amiss and of your being quite alone with us, he settled to go out there and bring her home.”

“That was a very good arrangement, though I am sorry to be the occasion of so much trouble.”

“Not the least in the world, for we have looked forward to seeing you — John and I — with the greatest possible pleasure. Do you know, Mr. Nickleby,” said Mrs. Browdie, with her archest smile, “that I really think Fanny Squeers was very fond of you?”

“I am very much obliged to her, but upon my word, I never aspired to making any impression upon her virgin heart.”

“How you talk,” tittered Mrs. Browdie. “No, but do you know that really — seriously now, and without any joking — I was given to understand by Fanny herself that you had made an offer to her and that you two were going to be engaged quite solemn and regular.”

“Was you, ma’am — was you?” cried a shrill female voice, “was you given to understand that I — I — was going to be engaged to an assassinating thief that shed the gore of my pa? Do you — do you think, ma’am — that I was very fond of such dirt beneath my feet, as I couldn’t condescend to touch with kitchen tongs, without blackening and crocking myself by the contact? Do you, ma’am? Do you? Oh, base and degrading Tilda!”

With these reproaches Miss Squeers flung the door wide open, and disclosed to the eyes of the astonished Browdies and Nicholas, not only her own symmetrical form, arrayed in the chaste white garments before described (a little dirtier), but the form of her brother and father, the pair of Wackfords.

“This is the hend, is it?” continued Miss Squeers, who being excited, aspirated her h’s strongly; “this is the hend,



is it, of all my forebearance and friendship for that double-faced thing — that viper, that — that — mermaid? ”

Miss Squeers hesitated a long time for this last epithet, and brought it out triumphantly at last. “ This is the hend, is it, of all my bearing with her deceitfulness, her lowness, her falseness, her laying herself out to catch the admiration of vulgar minds, in a way which made me blush for my — for my —— ”

“ Gender,” suggested Mr. Squeers, regarding the spectators with a malevolent eye; literally *a* malevolent eye.

“ Yes,” said Miss Squeers; “ but I thank my stars that my ma is of the same.”

“ Hear, hear! ” remarked Mr. Squeers; “ and I wish she was here to have a scratch at this company.”

“ This is the hend, is it,” said Miss Squeers, tossing her head, and looking contemptuously at the floor, “ of my taking notice of that rubbishing creature, and demeaning myself to patronise her? ”

“ Oh, come,” rejoined Mrs. Browdie, disregarding all the endeavours of her spouse to restrain her, and forcing herself into a front row, “ don’t talk such nonsense as that.”

“ Have I not patronised you, ma’am? ” demanded Miss Squeers.

“ No.”

“ I will not look for blushes in such a quarter,” said Miss Squeers, haughtily, “ for that countenance is a stranger to everything but hignominiousness and red-faced boldness.”

“ I say,” interposed John Browdie, nettled by these accumulated attacks on his wife, “ dra’ it mild, dra’ it mild.”

“ You, Mr. Browdie, I pity. I have no feeling for *you*, sir, but one of unliquidated pity.”

“ Oh! ” said John.

“ No,” said Miss Squeers, looking sidewise at her parent, “ although I *am* a queer bridesmaid and *shan’t* be a bride in

a hurry, and although my husband *will* be in luck, I entertain no sentiments towards you, sir, but sentiments of pity."

Here Miss Squeers looked sideways at her father again, who looked sideways at her, as much as to say, "There you had him."

"I know what you've got to go through," said Miss Squeers, shaking her curls violently. "I know what a life is before you; and if you was my bitterest and deadliest enemy, I could wish you nothing worse."

"Couldn't you wish to be married to him yourself, if that was the case?"

"Oh, ma'am, how witty you are, almost as witty, ma'am, as you are clever. How very clever it was in you, ma'am, to choose a time when I had gone to tea with my pa, and was sure not to come back without being fetched! What a pity you never thought that other people might be as clever as yourself and spoil your plans!"

"You won't vex me, child, with such airs as these."

"Don't *Missis* me, ma'am, if you please. I'll not bear it. Is this the hend ——"

"Dang it a'," cried John Browdie, impatiently. "Say thee say out, Fanny, and mak' sure it's the end, and dinnot ask nobody whether it is or not."

"Thanking you for your advice, which was not required, Mr. Browdie, have the goodness not to meddle with my Christian name. Even my pity shall never make me forget what's due to myself, Mr. Browdie.—'Tilda," said Miss Squeers, with such sudden violence that John started in his boots, "I renounce you. I wouldn't," cried Miss Squeers in a solemn voice, "have a child named 'Tilda, not to save it from its grave."

"As for the matter o' that," observed John, "it'll be time eneaf to think aboot neaming of it when it cooms."

"John!" interposed his wife, "don't tease her."

“Oh, tease, indeed!” cried Miss Squeers, bridling up. “Tease, indeed; He! he! Tease, too! No, don’t tease her. Consider her feelings, pray!”

“If it’s fated that listeners are never to hear any good of themselves,” said Mrs. Browdie, “I can’t help it, and I am very sorry for it. But I will say, Fanny, that times out of number I have spoken so kindly of you behind your back that even you could have found no fault with what I said.”

“Oh, I dare say not, ma’am,” cried Miss Squeers, with a curtsey. “Best thanks to you for your goodness, and begging and praying you not to be too hard upon me another time.”

“I don’t know,” resumed Mrs. Browdie, “that I have said anything very bad of you, even now. At all events, what I did say was quite true; but if I have, I am very sorry for it, and I beg your pardon. You have said much worse of me scores of times, Fanny, but I have never born any malice to you, and I hope you’ll not bear any to me.”

Miss Squeers made no more direct reply than surveying her former friend from top to toe and elevating her nose in the air with disdain. But some indistinct allusions to a “puss” and a “minx” and a “contemptible creature” escaped her; and this, with a severe biting of the lips, great difficulty in swallowing, and very frequent comings and goings of breath, seemed to imply that feelings were swelling in Miss Squeers’s bosom too great for utterance.

While the foregoing conversation was proceeding, Master Wackford, finding himself unnoticed, had sidled up to the table and attacked the food with such light skirmishing as drawing his fingers round and round the inside of the plates, and afterwards sucking them with infinite relish; picking the bread and dragging the pieces over the surface of the butter; pocketing lumps of sugar, pretending all the time to be absorbed in thought. Finding that no interference was attempted with these small liberties he gradually mounted



to greater, and after helping himself to a good cold collation, was by this time deep in the pie.

Nothing of this had been unobserved by Mr. Squeers, who, so long as the attention of the company was fixed upon other objects, hugged himself to think that his son and heir should be fattening at the enemy's expense. But there being now a temporary calm, in which the proceedings of little Wackford could scarcely fail to be observed, he feigned to be aware of the circumstance for the first time and inflicted upon the face of that young gentleman a slap that made the very teacups ring.

"Eating of what his father's enemies has left! It's fit to go and poison you, you unnat'ral boy."

"It wean't hurt him," said John, "let 'un eat. I wish the whole school was here. I'd give 'em soom'ut to stay their unfort'nate stomachs wi', if I spent the last penny I had!"

Squeers scowled at him with the worst and most malicious expression of which his face was capable and shook his fist stealthily.

"Coom, coom, schoolmeaster, dinnot make a fool o' thyself; for if I was to sheake mine — only once — thou'd fa'doon wi' the wind o' it."

"It was you, was it," returned Squeers, "that helped off my runaway boy? It was you, was it?"

"Me! Yes, it wa' me. Coom, wa'at o' that! It wa' me. Noo then!"

"You hear him say he did it, my child!" appealing to his daughter. "You hear him say he did it!"

"Did it!" cried John. "I'll tell 'ee more; hear this, too. If thou'd get another roonaway boy, I'd do it agean. If thou'd got twonty roonaway boys, I'd do it twonty times ower, and twonty more to thot; and I'll tell thee more, noo my blood is oop, that thou't an old ra'ascal; and that it's weel for thou, thou be'st an old 'un, or I'd ha pounded thee

to flour when thou told an honest mun hoo' thou 'licked that poor chap in th' coach."

"An honest man!" cried Squeers, with a sneer.

"Ah! An honest man, honest in ought but ever putting legs under seame table wi' such as thou."

"Scandal!" said Squeers, exultingly. "Two witnesses to it; Wackford knows the nature of an oath, he does; we shall have you there, sir. Rascal, eh?" Mr. Squeers took out his pocketbook and made a note of it. "Very good. I should say that was worth full twenty pound at the next assizes, without the honesty, sir."

"'Soizes! Thou'd betther not talk to me o' 'soizes. Yorkshire schools have been shown up at 'soizes afore noo, mun, and it's a ticklish soobject to revive, I can tell ye."

Mr. Squeers shook his head in a threatening manner, looking very white with passion and, taking his daughter's arm and dragging little Wackford by the hand, retreated towards the door.

"As for you," said Squeers, turning round and addressing Nicholas, who, as he had caused him to smart pretty soundly on a former occasion, purposely abstained from taking any part in the discussion, "see if I ain't down upon you before long. You'll go a kidnapping of boys, will you? Take care their fathers don't turn up, and send them back to me to do as I like with, in spite of you."

"I am not afraid of that," replied Nicholas, shrugging his shoulders contemptuously and turning away.

"Ain't you!" retorted Squeers, with a diabolical look. "Now, then, come along."

"I leave such society, with my pa for hever," said Miss Squeers, looking contemptuously and loftily round. "I am defiled by breathing the air with such creatures. Poor Mr. Browdie! He, he, he! I do pity him, that I do; he's so deluded! He, he, he! — Artful and designing 'Tilda!"

With this sudden relapse into the sternest and most majestic wrath, Miss Squeers swept from the room and, having sustained her dignity until the last possible moment, was heard to sob and scream and struggle in the passage.

John Browdie remained standing behind the table, looking from his wife to Nicholas and back again, with his mouth wide open, until his hand accidentally fell upon the tankard of ale. He took it up and, having obscured his features therewith for some time, drew a long breath, handed it over to Nicholas, and rang the bell.

“Here, waither. Look alive here. Tak’ these things awa’, and let’s have soomat broiled for sooper — vary comfortable and plenty o’ it — at ten o’clock. Bring some brandy and some water and a pair o’ slippers — the largest pair in the house — and be quick about it. Dash ma’ wig!” said John, rubbing his hands, “there’s no ganging oot to neeght, noo, to fetch anybody whoam, and ecod we’ll begin to spend the evening in airnest!”

## CHAPTER XXVIII

MR. NICKLEBY,” said Brother Charles one day, calling him aside and taking him kindly by the hand, “I—I—am anxious, my dear sir, to see that you are properly and comfortably settled in the cottage. I wish, too, to see your mother and sister: to know them, Mr. Nickleby, and have an opportunity of relieving their minds by assuring them that any trifling service we have been able to do them is a great deal more than repaid by the zeal and ardour you display. — Not a word, my dear sir, I beg. Tomorrow is Sunday. I shall make bold to come out at tea time and take the chance of finding you at home. If you are not, you know, or the ladies should feel a delicacy in being



intruded on, and would rather not be known to me just now, why I can come again another time; any other time would do for me. Let it remain upon that understanding."

There was a mighty bustle in the Nickleby home that night and a vast quantity of preparation for the expected visitor. If the cottage ever looked pretty, it must have been on such a bright and sunshiny day as the next day was. But Smike's pride in the garden or Mrs. Nickleby's in the condition of the furniture was nothing to the pride with which Nicholas looked at Kate herself; and surely the costliest mansion in all England might have found in her beautiful face and graceful figure its most exquisite and peerless ornament.

About six o'clock in the afternoon Mrs. Nickleby was thrown into a great flutter of spirits by the long-expected knock at the door; nor was this flutter at all composed by the audible tread of two pairs of boots in the passage, which Mrs. Nickleby said in a breathless state, must be "the two Mr. Cheerybles," as it certainly was, though not the two Mrs. Nickleby expected. It was Mr. Charles Cheeryble and his nephew, Mr. Frank. This young man had just returned from Germany where he had superintended a part of the business for five years. He made a thousand apologies for his intrusion, which Mrs. Nickleby (having teaspoons enough and to spare for all) most graciously received. Nor did the appearance of this unexpected visitor occasion the least embarrassment (save in Kate, and that only to the extent of a blush or two at first), for the old gentleman was so kind and cordial, and the young gentleman imitated him in this respect so well, that the usual stiffness and formality of a first meeting showed no sign of appearing, and Kate more than once detected herself in the act of wondering when it was going to begin.

After tea there was a walk in the garden, and the evening

being very fine, they strolled out at the garden gate into some lanes and by-roads, and sauntered up and down until it grew quite dark. The time seemed to pass very quickly with all the party. Kate walked, leaning upon her brother's arm and talking with him and Mr. Frank Cheeryble, who was on her other side. Mrs. Nickleby and the elder gentleman followed at a short distance. Smike (who, if he had ever been an object of interest in his life, had been one that day) accompanied them, joining sometimes one group and sometimes the other, as Brother Charles, laying his hand upon his shoulder, bade him walk with him, or Nicholas, looking smilingly round, beckoned him to come and talk with the old friend who understood him best and could win a smile into his careworn face when none else could.

There was a quiet mirth about the little supper which harmonized exactly with this tone of feeling and lasted until at length the two gentlemen took their leave. There was one circumstance in the leave-taking which occasioned a vast deal of smiling and pleasantry; and that was Mr. Frank Cheeryble's offering his hand to Kate twice over, quite forgetting that he had bade her adieu already.

\* \* \*

"Sir Mulberry Hawk gone out of town!" said Ralph, slowly. "A mistake of yours. Go back again."

"No mistake," returned Newman. "Not even going; gone."

"Has he turned girl or baby?" muttered Ralph, with a fretful gesture.

"I don't know, but he's gone."

"And *where* has he gone?" asked Ralph.

"France. Danger of another attack of erysipelas — a worse attack — in the head. So the doctors ordered him off. And he's gone."

“And Lord Frederick —— ?”

“He’s gone, too.”

“And he carries his drubbing with him, does he! Pockets his bruises and sneaks off without the retaliation of a word or seeking the smallest reparation.”

“He’s too ill.”

“Too ill! Why I would have had it if I were dying. In that case I would only be the more determined to have it, and without delay — I mean if I were he. But he’s too ill! Poor Sir Mulberry! Too ill!”

Uttering these words with supreme contempt and great irritation of manner, Ralph signed hastily to Newman to leave the room and, throwing himself into his chair, beat his foot impatiently upon the ground.

“There is some spell about that boy,” said Ralph, grinding his teeth. “Circumstances conspire to help him. Talk of fortune’s favors! What is even money to such devil’s luck as this! Hawk will come back, however, and his wrath will have lost nothing of its violence in the meanwhile. Obligated to live in retirement — the monotony of a sick room to a man of his habits — no life — no drink — no play — nothing that he likes and lives by. He is not likely to forget his obligation to the cause of all this. Few men would, but he of all others? No, no!”

He smiled and shook his head and, resting his chin upon his hand, fell a-musing, and smiled again. After a time he rose and rang the bell.

“That Mr. Squeers, has he been here?”

“He was here last night. I left him here when I went home,” returned Newman.

“I know that, fool, do I not? Has he been here this morning?”

“No,” bawled Newman, in a very loud key.

“If he comes while I am out — he is pretty sure to be



here by nine tonight — let him wait. And if there's another man with him, as there will be perhaps, let him wait, too."

"Let 'em both wait?" said Newman.

"Ay. Help me on with this spencer, and don't repeat after me like a croaking parrot."

"I wish I was a parrot," said Newman, sulkily.

"I wish you were. I'd have wrung your neck long ago," Ralph said as he went out.

The sky had been lowering and dark for some time, and the commencement of a violent storm of rain finally drove him for shelter to a tree. He was leaning against it with folded arms, still buried in thought, when, happening to raise his eyes, he suddenly met those of a man who, creeping round the trunk, peered into his face with a searching look and, stepping close up to Ralph, pronounced his name.

Astonished for the moment, Ralph fell back a couple of paces and surveyed, from head to foot, a thin, dark, withered man, of about his own age, with a stooping body, and a very sinister face rendered more ill-favoured by hollow and hungry cheeks deeply sunburnt.

The man saw the recognition was mutual and addressed him in a hoarse, faint tone.

"You would hardly have known me from my voice, I suppose, Mr. Nickleby?"

"No, though there is something in that that I remember now."

"There is little in me that you can call to mind as having been there eight years ago, I dare say?"

"Quite enough," said Ralph, carelessly, and averting his face, "more than enough."

"If I had remained in doubt about *you*, Mr. Nickleby, this reception and your manner would have decided me very soon."

"Did you expect any other?" asked Ralph, sharply.

"No!"

“You are right,” growled Ralph, “and, as you feel no surprise, need express none.”

“Mr. Nickleby, will you hear a few words that I have to say?”

“I am obliged to wait here till the rain holds a little. If you talk, sir, I shall not put my fingers in my ears, though your talking may have as much effect as if I did.”

“I was once in your confidence,” the man began.

Ralph looked round and smiled involuntarily.

“I mean as much in your confidence as you ever chose to let anybody be.”

“Ah!” rejoined Ralph, folding his arms, “that’s another thing, quite another thing.”

“Don’t let us play upon words, Mr. Nickleby, in the name of humanity.”

“Of what?”

“Of humanity,” replied the other, sternly. “I am hungry and in want. If the change that you must see in me after so long an absence will not move you to pity, let the knowledge that bread — a crust of dry hard bread — is beyond my reach today — let that have some weight with you if nothing else has.”

“If this is the usual form in which you beg, you have studied your part well; but if you will take advice from one who knows something of the world and its ways, I should recommend a lower tone; a little lower tone, or you stand a fair chance of being starved in good earnest.”

As he said this, Ralph looked at him whom he addressed with a frowning, sullen face. The very picture of a man whom nothing could move or soften.

“Yesterday was my first day in London,” said the old man, glancing at his travel-stained dress and worn shoes.

“It would have been better for you, I think, if it had been your last also,” replied Ralph.

“I have been seeking you these two days where I thought you were most likely to be found, and I met you here at last when I had almost given up the hope of encountering you, Mr. Nickleby.”

He seemed to wait for some reply, but Ralph giving him none, he continued:

“I am a most miserable and wretched outcast, nearly sixty years old, and as destitute and helpless as a child of six.”

“I am sixty years old, too, and am neither destitute nor helpless. Work. Don’t make fine play-acting speeches about bread, but earn it.”

“How? Where? Show me the means. Will you give them to me?”

“I did once; you scarcely need ask me whether I will again.”

“It’s twenty years ago or more since you and I fell out. You remember that? I claimed a share in the profits of some business I brought to you, and as I persisted, you arrested me for an old advance of ten pounds, odd shillings, including interest at fifty per cent or so.”

“I remember something of it. What then?”

“That didn’t part us. I made submission, being on the wrong side of the bolts and bars; and as you were not the made man then that you are now, you were glad enough to take back a clerk who wasn’t overnice and who knew something of the trade you drove.”

“You begged and prayed, and I consented. That was kind of me. Perhaps I did want you. I forget. I should think I did, or you would have begged in vain. You were useful, not too honest, not too delicate, not too nice of hand or heart, but useful.”

“Useful, indeed! Come. You had pinched and ground me down for some years before that, but I had served you



faithfully up to that time, in spite of all your dog's usage. Had I?"

Ralph made no reply.

"Had I?"

"You had had your wages and had done your work. We stood on equal ground so far and could both cry quits."

"Then, but not afterwards."

"Not afterwards, certainly, nor even then, for (as you have just said) you owed me money, and do still."

"That's not all. That's not all. Mark that. I didn't forget that old sore, trust me. Partly in remembrance of that and partly in the hope of making money some day by the scheme, I took advantage of my position about you, and possessed myself of a hold upon you which you would give half of all you own to know, and never can know but through me. I left you — long after that time, transported for some poor trickery that came within the law, but was nothing to what you money makers daily practise just outside its bounds — was sent away, a convict, for seven years. I have returned what you see me. Now, Mr. Nickleby, what help and assistance will you give me; what bribe to speak out plainly? My expectations are not monstrous, but I must live, and to live I must eat and drink. Money is on your side, and hunger and thirst are on mine. You may drive an easy bargain."

"Is that all?"

"It depends on you, Mr. Nickleby, whether that's all or not."

"Why, then, harkye, Mr. —, I don't know by what name I am to call you," said Ralph.

"By my old one, if you like."

"Why, then, harkye, Mr. Brooker, and don't expect to draw another speech from me. Harkye, sir. I know you of old for a ready scoundrel, but you never had a stout heart;

and hard work, with (maybe) chains upon those legs of yours and shorter food than when I 'pinched' and 'ground' you, has blunted your wits, or you would not come with such a tale as this to me. You a hold upon me! Keep it, or publish it to the world, if you like."

"I can't do that. That wouldn't serve me."

"Wouldn't it? It will serve you as much as bringing it to me, I promise you. To be plain with you, I am a careful man and know my affairs thoroughly. I know the world, and the world knows me. Whatever you gleaned, or heard, or saw, when you served me, the world knows and magnifies already. I am reviled or threatened every day by one man or another, but things roll on just the same, and I don't grow poorer either."

"I neither revile nor threaten. I can tell you of what you have lost by my act, what *I* only can restore, and what, if I die without restoring, dies with me, and never can be regained."

"I tell my money pretty accurately and generally keep it in my own custody. I look sharply after most men that I deal with, and most of all I looked sharply after you. You are welcome to all you have kept from me."

"Are those of your own name dear to you? If they are ——"

"They are *not*," returned Ralph, exasperated at this perseverance, and the thought of Nicholas, which the last question awakened. "They are *not*. If you had come as a common beggar, I might have thrown a sixpence to you in remembrance of the clever knave you used to be; but since you try to palm these stale tricks upon one you might have known better, I'll not part with a halfpenny — nor would I to save you from rotting. And remember this, 'scapegallows, that if we meet again and you so much as notice me by one begging gesture, you shall see the inside of a jail once more. There's my answer to your trash. Take it."

With a disdainful scowl at the object of his anger, who met his eye but uttered not a word, Ralph walked away at his usual pace, without manifesting the slightest curiosity to see what became of his late companion or indeed once looking behind him.

The man remained on the same spot with his eyes fixed upon Ralph's retreating figure until it was lost to view, and then drawing his arms about his chest, as if the damp and lack of food struck coldly to him, lingered with slouching steps by the wayside and begged of those who passed along.

Ralph, in no wise moved by what had lately occurred, walked deliberately on and took his way through some streets at the west end of the town until he arrived in that one in which stood the residence of Madame Mantalini. The name of that lady no longer appeared on the doorplate, that of Miss Knag being substituted in its stead; but the bonnets and dresses were still in the first-floor windows.

"Humph!" muttered Ralph, surveying the house from top to bottom; "these people look pretty well. They can't last long; but if I know of their going, in good time, I am safe, and a fair profit too. I must keep them closely in view, that's all."

He was leaving the spot when his quick ear caught the sound of a confused noise and hubbub of voices, mingled with a great running up and down stairs. While he was hesitating whether to knock at the door or listen at the keyhole, a female servant of Madame Mantalini's opened it abruptly and bounced out, with her blue cap ribbons streaming in the air.

"Hallo here. Stop!" cried Ralph. "What's the matter? Here am I. Didn't you hear me knock?"

"Oh! Mr. Nickleby, sir. Go up, for the love of gracious. Master's been and done it again."

"Done what? What d'ye mean?"



“ I knew he would if he was drove to it,” cried the girl. “ I said so all along.”

“ Come here, you silly wench,” said Ralph, catching her by the wrist, “ and don’t carry family matters to the neighbours, destroying the credit of the establishment. Come here, do you hear me, girl? ”

Without any further expostulation, he led or rather pulled the frightened handmaid into the house and shut the door; then bidding her walk upstairs before him, followed without more ceremony.

Guided by the noise of a great many voices all talking together, Ralph quickly reached the private sitting room when he was rather amazed by the confused scene in which he suddenly found himself.

There were present all the young lady workers, in various attitudes expressive of alarm and consternation. Some were gathered round Madame Mantalini, who was in tears upon one chair. Others were gathered round Miss Knag, who was in opposition tears upon another; and others were round Mr. Mantalini, who was perhaps the most striking figure in the whole group. Mr. Mantalini’s legs were extended at full length upon the floor, and his head and shoulders were supported by a very tall footman, who didn’t seem to know what to do with them. Mr. Mantalini’s eyes were closed; his face was pale; his hair was comparatively straight; his whiskers and moustache were limp; and his teeth were clenched. He had a little bottle in his right hand, a little teaspoon in his left, and his hands, arms, legs, and shoulders were all stiff and powerless. And yet Madame Mantalini was not weeping upon the body, but was scolding violently upon her chair; and all this amidst a clamour of tongues, perfectly deafening, which really appeared to have driven the unfortunate footman to the utmost verge of distraction.

“ What is the matter here? ” said Ralph, pressing forward.

At this inquiry, the clamour was increased twentyfold, and an astounding string of such shrill contradictions as "He's poisoned himself" — "He's dying" — "Send for a doctor" — "Don't" — "He hasn't" — "He isn't, he's only pretending" — with various other cries, poured forth with bewildering volubility, until Madame Mantalini was seen to address herself to Ralph, when female curiosity to know what she would say prevailed, and, as if by general consent, a dead silence, unbroken by a single whisper, instantaneously succeeded.

"Mr. Nickleby," said Madame Mantalini, "by what chance you came here, I don't know."

Here a gurgling voice was heard to ejaculate, as part of the wanderings of a sick man, "Demnition sweetness!" But nobody heeded them except the footman, who, being startled to hear such awful tones from between his very fingers, dropped his master's head upon the floor with a pretty loud crash and, then without an effort to lift it up, gazed upon the bystanders as if he had done something rather clever.

"I will, however," continued Madame Mantalini, drying her eyes, and speaking with great indignation, "say before you, and before everybody here, once for all, that I never will supply that man's extravagances and viciousness again. I have been a dupe and a fool to him long enough. In future he shall support himself, if he can, and then he may spend what money he pleases, upon whom and how he pleases; but it shall not be mine, and, therefore, you had better pause before you trust him further."

Thereupon Madame Mantalini, quite unmoved by some pathetic lamentations on the part of her husband that the apothecary had not mixed the prussic acid strong enough and that he must take another bottle or two to finish the work, entered into a catalog of that gentleman's gallantries, deceptions, extravagances, and infidelities (especially the

last), winding up with a protest against being supposed to entertain the least remnant of regard for him and adducing, in proof of the altered state of her affections, the circumstance of his having poisoned himself no less than six times within the last fortnight, and her not having once interfered by word or deed to save his life.

“And I insist on being separated and left to myself,” said Madame Mantalini, sobbing. “If he dares to refuse me a separation, I’ll have one in law — I can — and I hope this will be a warning to all girls who have seen this disgraceful exhibition.”

“Why do you say all this before so many listeners?” said Ralph, in a low voice. “You know you are not in earnest.”

“I *am* in earnest,” replied Madame Mantalini, aloud, and retreating towards Miss Knag.

“Well, but consider,” reasoned Ralph, who had a great interest in the matter. “It would be well to reflect. A married woman <sup>1</sup> has no property.”

“Not a solitary individual dem, my soul,” said Mr. Mantalini, raising himself upon his elbow.

“I am quite aware of that,” retorted Madame Mantalini, tossing her head, “and I have none. The business, the stock, this house, and everything in it, all belong to Miss Knag.”

“That’s quite true, Madame Mantalini,” said Miss Knag, with whom her late employer had secretly come to an amicable understanding on this point. “Very true indeed, Madame Mantalini — hem — very true. And I never was more glad in all my life that I had strength of mind to resist matrimonial offers, no matter how advantageous, than I am when I think of my present condition as compared with your most unfortunate and most undeserved one, Madame Mantalini.”

“Demmit!” cried Mr. Mantalini, turning his head towards

<sup>1</sup> The property of a married woman at this time was under the absolute control of her husband.



his wife. "Will it not slap and pinch the envious dowager that dares to reflect upon its own delicious?"

But the day of Mr. Mantalini's blandishments had departed.

"Miss Knag, sir," said his wife, "is my particular friend," and although Mr. Mantalini leered till his eyes seemed in danger of never coming back to their right places again, madame showed no signs of softening.

To do the excellent Miss Knag justice, she had been mainly instrumental in bringing about this altered state of things; for finding that there was no chance of the business thriving while Mr. Mantalini had any hand in the expenditure, she had applied herself to the investigation of some little matters connected with that gentleman's private character, which she had so well imparted to Madame Mantalini as to open her eyes. The accidental discovery by Miss Knag of some tender correspondence, in which Madame Mantalini was described as "old" and "ordinary" had most providentially contributed.

However, notwithstanding her firmness, Madame Mantalini wept very piteously, and as she leaned upon Miss Knag and signed towards the door, that young lady and all the other young ladies proceeded to bear her out.

"Nickleby," said Mr. Mantalini in tears, "you have been made a witness to this demnition cruelty on the part of the demdest enslaver and captivator that ever was, oh dem! I forgive that woman."

"Forgive!" repeated Madame Mantalini, angrily.

"I do forgive her, Nickleby," said Mr. Mantalini. "You will blame me, the world will blame me, the women will blame; everybody will laugh, and scoff, and smile, and grin most demnebly. They will say, 'She had a blessing. She did not know it. He was too weak; he was too good; he was a dem'd fine fellow, but he loved too strong; he could not

bear her to be cross and call him wicked names. It was a dem'd case. There never was a demder.' But I forgive her."

With this affecting speech Mr. Mantalini fell down again very flat and lay to all appearance without sense or motion, until all the females had left the room, when he came cautiously into a sitting posture, and confronted Ralph with a very blank face, and the little bottle still in one hand, the teaspoon in the other.

"You may put away those fooleries now and live by your wits again," said Ralph, coolly putting on his hat.

"Demmit, Nickleby, you're not serious?"

"I seldom joke. Good night."

"No, but Nickleby."

"I am wrong, perhaps. I hope so. You should know best. Good night."

Affecting not to hear his entreaties that he would stay and advise with him, Ralph left the crestfallen Mr. Mantalini to his meditations and left the house quietly.

"Oho! Sets the wind that way so soon? Half-knave and half-fool, and detected in both characters. I think your day is over, sir."

As he said this, he made some memorandum in his pocket-book in which Mr. Mantalini's name figured conspicuously and, finding by his watch that it was between nine and ten o'clock, made all speed home.

"Are they here?" was the first question he asked of Newman.

Newman nodded. "Been here half an hour."

"Two of them? One a sleek fat man?"

"Ay. In your room now."

"Good. Get me a coach."

"A coach! What you — going to — eh?" stammered Newman.

Ralph angrily repeated his orders, and Newman, who

might well have been excused for wondering (for he had never seen Ralph in a coach in his life) departed on his errand and presently returned with the coach.

Into it went Mr. Squeers and Ralph, and the third man whom Newman Noggs had never seen. Newman stood upon the door step to see them off, not troubling himself to wonder where or upon what business they were going, until he chanced to hear Ralph name the address whither the coachman was to drive.

Quick as lightning and in a state of the most extreme wonder, Newman darted into his little office for his hat and limped after the coach as if with the intention of getting up behind; but in this design he was balked, for it had too much the start of him and was soon hopelessly ahead, leaving him gaping in the empty street. "I don't know, though," said Newman, stopping for breath, "any good that I might have done by going too. He would have seen me if I had. Drive *there!* What can come of this! If I had only known it yesterday I could have told — drive *there!* There's mischief in it. There must be."

His reflections were interrupted by a grey-haired man of a very remarkable, though far from prepossessing appearance, who, coming stealthily towards him, solicited relief.

Newman, still cogitating deeply, turned away; but the man followed him and pressed him with such a tale of misery that Newman (who might have been considered a hopeless person to beg from and who had little enough to give) looked into his hat for some halfpence which he usually kept screwed up, when he had any, in a corner of his pocket handkerchief. While he was busily untwisting the knot with his teeth, the man said something which attracted his attention. Whatever that something was, it led to something else. In the end he and Newman walked away side by side — the strange man talking earnestly and Newman listening.



## CHAPTER XXIX

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. The time was the 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. John Browdie declared, in the parlor after supper, at twenty minutes before eleven o'clock P. M., that he had never been so happy in all his born days.

" Mr. Browdie," said Kate, addressing his young wife, " is the best-humoured, 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."

" 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. " This is quite early for us. We used to keep such hours! Twelve, one, two, three o'clock was nothing to us. Balls, dinners, card parties! "

Kate saw that for the ease and comfort of the visitors it was high time to stay this flood of recollection. She 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, John Browdie 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 there was a loud and violent knocking at the street door; 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 seemed highly probable at that time of night), or perhaps Mr. Linkinwater had run away with the property, or perhaps Miss La Creevy was taken ill, or perhaps —

But a hasty exclamation from Kate stopped her 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, and Smike retreated behind them. John Browdie, who had heard of Ralph, 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 bett'her 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. I tell ’ee I ha’ gotten scent o’ thot already. Wa’at be that shadow outside door there? Noo, schoolmeaster, show thyself, mun; dinnot be sheame-feaced. Noo, auld gen’l’man, let’s have schoolmeaster 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, was obliged 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.”

“ I can wait. Take your time.”

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 ought to weigh with him, has the slightest influence.”

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 to — ha, 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 triumphant smile, “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, trapped, 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.”

“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. Smike’s to come back to me directly, he is. Now, what do you say — eh! — now — come — what do you say to that — an’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 broad-brimmed 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."

"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 have — I 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 a 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 o’ 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 hair-brained 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! Don't I?”

“Good. A very few words will be sufficient here. You had a son by your first wife, Mr. Snawley?”

“I had, and there he stands.”

“We'll show that presently. 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! Oh, the joy of ——”

“Be rational, sir. This is business, and transports interfere with it. This wife died a year and a half ago, or thereabouts — not more — in some obscure place, where she was housekeeper in a family. Is that the case?”

“That's the case.”

“Having written on her deathbed a letter of confession to you about this very boy, which, as it was not directed otherwise than in your name, only reached you a few days since?”

“Just so. Correct in every particular, sir.”

“And this confession, is to the effect that his death was an invention of hers to wound you; that the boy lived, but was of weak, imperfect intellect — that she sent him by a trusty hand to a cheap school in Yorkshire — that 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 dis-

covery 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 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, 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, folded his arms, and looked for the first time at his nephew.

Nicholas 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.

"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. 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. 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. Your praise, sir, is commendation indeed."

"Well," said Squeers, "what's to be done? Them hackney coach 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," said 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 *that*?" 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, schoolmeaster. It's nobody's minding that keeps sike men as thou afloat. Noo then, where be'st 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 door, and thrusting him into the passage, shut it upon him.

“Now,” said Nicholas, to the other two, “have the kindness to follow your friend.”

“I want my son,” said Snawley.

“Your son chooses for himself. He chooses to remain here, and he shall.”

“You won’t give him up?”

“I would not give him up against his will, to be the victim of such brutality as that to which you would consign him, 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.”

“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 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 went 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; 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, and those who think you now a young-fledged 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."

## CHAPTER XXX

**A**FTER an anxious consideration of the painful and embarrassing position in which he was placed concerning SMIKE, Nicholas decided that he ought to lose no time in

frankly stating it to the two brothers. Availing himself of the first opportunity of being alone with Mr. Charles Cheeryble at the close of the next day, he accordingly related Smike's little history. He received this answer from Mr. Charles Cheeryble.

“ I suppose you are surprised that I have listened 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 paving stone.”

“ He came to —— ” said Nicholas.

“ To complain of you, 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 Mr. Nickleby — Brother Ned 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 before you could say ‘ Jock Robinson.’ ”

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

“ By keeping silent upon the subject. 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 father — if he is the father — and I suppose he must be. He is a barbarian and a hypocrite, Mr. Nickleby. I told him, ‘ You are a barbarian, sir.’ I did. 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 tried 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 on a confidential and delicate mission.”

“You might employ many a more able messenger,” 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. 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!” cried Nicholas, quite trembling for the moment with his eagerness to hear more.

“A very beautiful young lady,” said Mr. Cheeryble, gravely.

“Please 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 in a fainting spell. Do you remember? Perhaps you have forgotten.”

“Oh, no,” replied Nicholas hurriedly. “I — I — remember it very well indeed.”

“*She* is the lady I speak of,” said Brother Charles. “She

is the daughter of a lady who, when she was a beautiful girl herself and I was very many years younger, I — it seems a strange word for me to utter now, — I loved very dearly. You will smile, perhaps, to hear a grey headed man talk about such things. You will not offend me; for when I was as young as you, I suppose I should have done the same.”

“ I have no such inclination, indeed,” said Nicholas.

“ My dear Brother Ned 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 after-life was as happy as, God knows, I ever prayed it might be! ”

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

“ It will be enough to say that she was not happy, that they fell into complicated distresses and difficulties. Twelve months before her death she came to me to appeal to my old friendship. She was sadly changed, sadly altered, broken-spirited from suffering and ill-usage, and almost broken-hearted. Her husband 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 water. In those times this young lady was a mere child. I never saw her again until that morning when you saw her also. You saw also her faithful servant girl who has stayed with her even when they had no money. The young lady told us that her father was in some secret place to avoid his creditors, reduced, between sickness and poverty, to the verge of death, and she — who should have blessed a better father, was steadily braving privation, degradation, and everything most terrible to such a young and delicate creature’s heart for the purpose of supporting him.”

“ Cannot she be persuaded to —— ” Nicholas hesitated.

“ 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 her — not by me — but always with the same result.”

“Is he kind to her? Does he return her affection?” asked Nicholas.

“True kindness is not in his nature. 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 until her death as cruelly 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 is 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, although, if he knew that every penny she had came from me, he would not give up one personal desire to avoid taking it.”

“An unnatural scoundrel!” said Nicholas, indignantly.

“We will use no harsh terms,” said Brother Charles, in a gentle voice, “but will accommodate ourselves to the circumstance in which this young lady is placed. Such assistance as I have prevailed upon her to accept, I have been obliged, at her own request, to dole out in the smallest portions, lest he, finding how easily money was procured, should squander it more lightly. 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 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; how they had at last



come to the conclusion that the best course would be a pretence 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.

“The young lady, sir,” said Nicholas, who felt so embarrassed that he had difficulty in saying anything at all, “does — is — is she a party to this innocent deceit?”

“Yes, yes; at least she knows you come from us; she does *not* know, however, but that we shall dispose of these little productions which 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 we made a profit of them. Eh? Eh?”

\* \* \*

To the row of houses indicated to him by Mr. Charles Cheeryble, Nicholas directed his steps. Opening the rickety gate which, dangling on its broken hinges, 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 a very small show of blinds. Neither, when the door was opened, did the inside appear to belie the outward promise. There was faded carpeting on the stairs and faded oil-cloth in the passage. 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. She, 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. 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 from the time when he had seen her in the employment office.

But how the graces and elegances which she had dispersed about the poorly furnished 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!

A sick man propped up with pillows in an easy chair, moving restlessly and impatiently in his seat, attracted 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 traced. 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, 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 that he had called about





Into a front room he was shown.



a pair of hand screens and some painted velvet for an ottoman. 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. 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 pounds — well, is *that* right?”

“Quite right,” 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 notes 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 week — and — I forget half I want now, but she can go out again. Let her get those first. Now Madeline, my love, quick, 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? No matter! Do you think you bring your paltry money here as a favour or as a gift, or as a matter of business, and in return for value received? 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. My daughter 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 pretending to write it, 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 shall I call again?” said Nicholas, as he took the piece of paper.

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 earth — do 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 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. He heard a light footstep above him as he descended the stairs. Looking round, he 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,” said Madeline Bray, hurriedly, “ but please, please, 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 as 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. 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 entrusted 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. If I meant more or less than this, I should be unworthy his regard, and false to the 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 XXXI

**I**T was with a sad and heavy heart that Nicholas retraced his steps to the countinghouse of Cheeryble Brothers. Whatever the pleasant visions which had sprung up in his mind round the fair image of Madeline Bray, they were now dispelled, and not a vestige of their gaiety and brightness remained.

"I will keep my word as I have pledged it to her. This is no common trust that I have to discharge, and I will perform the duty scrupulously and strictly. My secret feelings deserve no consideration in such a case as this, and they shall have none."

While Nicholas occupied his leisure hours with thoughts of Madeline Bray, and (in execution of the commissions which Brother Charles had imposed upon him in her behalf) saw her again and again, and each time with greater danger to his peace of mind, Mrs. Nickleby and Kate lived in peace and quiet. They were agitated by no other cares than those which were connected with certain proceedings taken by Mr. Snawley for the recovery of his son and their anxiety

concerning the health of Smike, which seemed to be failing; this occasioned both them and Nicholas considerable uneasiness and alarm.

It was no complaint or murmur on the part of the poor fellow himself that 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 heavy in its course, the frame too feeble and exhausted, to escape their notice.

There is a dread disease which prepares its victim gradually for death; which 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 that the mortal part wastes away slowly but surely day by day.

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, the doctor 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 be fatal — and that was all.

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.

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 half a dozen 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 last-named gentleman had been the subject of the worthy lady's praise, for some time, and Kate had sat perfectly silent.

"Attentive, mama!"

"Bless my heart, Kate, 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; however, it's gone now at any rate, so it doesn't matter whether it was there 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."



“Not serious! 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, what an extraordinary girl you are! Was it likely I should be talking of his attention to anybody else?”

Before Kate had returned any reply, a queer little double knock announced that Miss La Creevy had called to see them.

“I met that dear old soul, Mr. Linkinwater,” she said.

“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 Tuesday — was it Tuesday? Yes, to be sure it was; you recollect, Kate, my dear, the very last time young Mr. Cheeryble was here — last Tuesday night he went off in just the same strange way at the very moment that 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.”

Any further reflections were 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.

“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.

Nicholas did not come home, nor did Smike reappear; but neither circumstance had any great effect upon the little party, who were all in the best humour possible. Indeed, there sprang 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.

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 of the evening closing in and enjoying the quiet beauty of the night, which seemed to have similar attractions for 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. Neither was 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.

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 did not seem possible, but the noise *did* come from the chimney in the next room. It was a strange compound of shuffling, sliding, rumbling, and struggling sounds, all muffled by the chimney. 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. So they all proceeded 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 greatly 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 feather beds, the once popular air of "Has She Then Failed in Her Truth, the Beautiful Maid I Adore!" On bursting into the room, they were more greatly astonished to find 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 with the tongs, 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 in such a manner."

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 short knee breeches and grey worsted stocking, or whether her eyes had deceived her?

“Yes,” cried Frank, looking a little closer. “Short knee breeches, certainly, and—and—rough grey stocking, too. Do you know him, ma’am?”

“Kate, my dear,” said Mrs. Nickleby, sitting 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 how this matter stands. I have given him no encouragement—none whatever—not 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; still at the same time, if I am to be persecuted in this way, if vegetable what’s-his-names and all kinds of garden stuff are to strew my path out of doors, and gentlemen are to come choking up our chimneys at home, I really don’t know—upon my word I do not know—what is to become of me. It’s a very hard case—harder than anything I was ever exposed to, 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 pig-faced lady than be exposed to such a life as this!”

Frank Cheeryble and Tim Linkinwater looked, in 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





Nothing was visible but a pair of legs.



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 legs with such force as to bring the man floundering into the room with greater precipitation than he had quite calculated upon.

“Oh! yes, yes,” said Kate, when the whole figure of this singular visitor appeared in this abrupt manner. “I know who it is. Please don’t be rough with him. Is he hurt? I hope not. Oh, please 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.

“No, 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, of course not; but he — mama does not think so, I believe — but he is an insane 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.”

“I am surprised at you, 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, after a short pause, "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 boot tops, 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 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 last — at last — and 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 biscuit bakers' 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 me — a 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 anybody — especially anybody that I am under great obligations to — to 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 of 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 sonorous voice: "Be gone, 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 market days 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 please take him away; please 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, never! That gentleman has lost his senses, and I am the unhappy cause."

## CHAPTER XXXII

THE little race course 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.

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.

Of the gambling booths there was a plentiful show, flourishing in all the splendour of carpeted ground, striped hangings, crimson cloth, pinnacled roofs, geranium pots, and livery servants. It is into one of these booths that our story takes its way.

An officer was busily plying his vocation of rolling the ball when half a dozen persons sauntered through the booth, to whom, but without stopping either in his speech or work, he bowed respectfully. At the same time he directed, by a look, the attention of a man beside him to the tallest figure in the group, in recognition of whom the proprietor over near the entrance pulled off his hat. This was Sir Mulberry Hawk, with whom were his friend and pupil, Lord Verisopht, and a small train of gentlemanly dressed men, of characters more doubtful than obscure.

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

There yet remained a slight scar on 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 sprucely dressed. “ How d’ye do, old fellow? ”

“ Quite well, quite well.”

“ That’s right. How d’ye do, Lord Frederick? He’s a little pulled down, our friend Sir Mulberry here. Rather out of condition still, hey? ”

“ He’s in a very good condition; there’s nothing the matter with him,” said the young man, carelessly.

“ Upon my soul I’m glad to hear it. 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 unpleasant — by the by — you know the rights of the affair, of course. Why did you never give these 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 tomorrow — no, next day,” interrupted Sir Mulberry, turning suddenly round.

“ Upon my life, my dear fellow, I seldom or never read the papers, 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. Old Nickleby'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 wha-ats to be done tomorrow?" inquired Lord Frederick.

Sir Mulberry Hawk honoured him with an angry glance, but condescended to return no verbal answer to the 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, tell me; I must know."

"Must know. When! Go on. If you must know, of course, there's no escape for me. Must know!"

"Must *ask*, then, 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, 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, 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?”

“Ye-es, if I can.”

“A very proper saving clause, that last, and one you stand in need of. Look to your own business, and leave me to look to mine.”

“This is mine. 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. 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.

Thus they rejoined their friends, each with causes of dislike against the other rankling in his breast, the young man haunted, besides, with thoughts of the vindictive retalia-



tion which was threatened against Nicholas and the determination to prevent it by some strong step, if possible.

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; 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 gaming table.

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? 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? I say he struck me!”

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

“I will not. A dozen men about us saw the blow.”

“Tomorrow will be ample time.”

“It will not be ample time! Tonight, at once, here!” His passion was so great that he could not articulate, but

stood clenching his fist, tearing his hair, and stamping on 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.”

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

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; those who had been most noisy fell fast asleep upon the sofas and thought no more about it.

Meanwhile the two seconds, each with his principal, met together in another room, both utterly heartless, both men about town, both thoroughly initiated in its worst vices, both deeply in debt, both fallen from some higher estate, both addicted to every depravity.

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.

“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.”

“No apology, I suppose?” said Mr. Westwood.

“Not a syllable, sir, from my man, if we talk till dooms-

day. 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. Sir Mulberry was sarcastic; Lord Frederick was excited and struck him. 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, 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?" said Mr. Westwood.

"Sharp work; however, as negotiation is only a waste of words, no," said Captain Adams.

"Something may possibly be said out of doors 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 river-side?"

The captain saw no objection.

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, to Lord Verisopht 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, thought hurried and disordered, he felt as though the light were a reproach and shrank 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 half-sobered 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.

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, 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. The face expressed nothing but violent and evil passions. He shaded his eyes with his hand, gazed 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 hastily 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. Good-by!”

With these words, he seized Sir Mulberry by the arm and hurried him away.

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.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

THERE go the three-quarter past!" muttered Newman Noggs to himself, 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 spoke. "I don't believe he ever had an appetite 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 morsel — but the crown — ha! ha!"

"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 dinner time is two! And I might have a nice little bit of hot roast spoiling at home all this time — how 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 dinner time for then — eh? Don't you know it's nothing but aggravation — eh?"

These words, though uttered in a very loud key, were addressed to nothing but empty air. The recital, however, seemed to have the effect of making Newman Noggs desperate. He flattened his old hat upon his head and 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 latch key in the street door caused him to make a very sudden retreat into his own office again, saying to himself:

"Here he is 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 as soon as Ralph was safe inside his own room.

“Noggs!” cried Ralph Nickleby, “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 person who made this reply was a little old man of seventy or seventy-five years of age of a very lean figure, much bent, and slightly twisted. He wore a grey coat and such scanty trousers as displayed his shrunken spindle shanks in their full ugliness. His nose and chin were sharp and prominent; his jaws had fallen inward from loss of teeth; his face was shrivelled and yellow. 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. Such was old Arthur Gride, as he sat in a low chair looking up into the face of Ralph Nickleby, who, lounging on 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, pretending great interest in Ralph’s state of health. “I haven’t seen you for — oh! not for —”

“Not for a long time,” said Ralph, with a peculiar smile, showing 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 money lender, Gride, 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, what’s in the wind today?” said Ralph at length.

“ Oh dear, dear, what a bold man you are! Aha, you’re a bold man, Mr. Nickleby! ”

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

“ You were a born genius, Mr. Nickleby. Deep, deep, deep. Ah! ”

“ Deep enough 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 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! 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 révive?” 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 way — a wilful man, as the Scotch say — well, 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, 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 was — that I was — going to be married?"

"I should tell you, 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 what I told you this minute. Stay. Let me look at you. There's a liquorish deviltry 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 again — he, 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 — 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 ground — to marry all this, sir, — hey, 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! 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 name — is there nobody within hearing? ”

“ Why, who in the devil should there be? ” retorted Ralph.

“ 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. Is Mr. Noggs —— ”

“ Curse Mr. Noggs, and go on with what you have to say, ” rejoined Ralph.

“ Curse Mr. Noggs by all means, ” said old Arthur. “ I am sure I have not the least objection to that. Her name is —— ”



“What would you say to me if I was to tell you — that I was  
— going to be married?”



“ Well,” said Ralph, rendered very irritable by old Arthur’s pausing again. “ What is it? ”

“ Madeline Bray.”

“ Bray,” said Ralph. “ Bray — there was young Bray of — no, he never had a daughter.”

“ You remember Bray? ” asked 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, I shall confound him with nine-tenths of the dashing men I have ever known.”

“ Tut, tut. That Bray both of us did business with. You can’t have forgotten Bray. Why he owes you money! ”

“ Oh *him!* Ay, ay. Now you speak. Oh! It’s his daughter, is it? ”

“ I knew you couldn’t forget him, when you came to think for a moment.”

“ 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 anything — old Arthur Gride and such things as these is more monstrous still. Plainly, friend Arthur, 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 it’s 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.”

“ Well,” said Gride, “ the little plan I have in mind to bring this about (I haven’t offered myself even to the father yet), I should have told you, but you seem to have guessed



something of it already. Ah! Oh dear, what an edged tool you are!”

“Don’t play with me then,” said Ralph, impatiently. “You know the old 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 creditor for seventeen hundred pounds.”

“You talk as if you were the only creditor,” said Ralph, pulling out his pocketbook. “I am another for nine hundred and seventy-five pounds four and threepence.”

“The only other, Mr. Nickleby,” said old Arthur eagerly. “The only other. We both fell into the same snare. Oh, dear, what a pitfall it was! It almost ruined me. 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 son-in-law, upon the condition that the moment I am fast married he shall be quickly 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 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 Gride — pretty Mrs. Arthur Gride — a titbit — a dainty chick — shouldn't I have her Mrs. Arthur Gride in a week, a month, a day, — any time I chose to name?"

"Go on," said Ralph, nodding his head deliberately. "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 you what you would take from me, if I prospered with the father, for this debt of yours. You are such a good friend. We have always been on such good terms. You won't be hard upon me, I know. Now, will you?"

"There's something more," said Ralph.

"Yes, yes, there is, but you won't give me time. 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," said Ralph.

"Oh!" returned old Arthur, pretending 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. That's kind of you to ask. Oh dear, how very kind of you! Why, supposing I had a knowledge of some prop-

erty — some little property — very little — to 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 hand 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 ten shillings in the pound, and we’ll close the bargain. It’s more than I ought to give, but you’re so kind — shall we say the ten? Do now, do.”

Ralph took no notice of these supplications, but sat for three or four minutes, looking thoughtfully at the person from whom they proceeded. Finally he said:

“ If you married this girl without me, 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. That’s the first article of the treaty. Second, for my trouble in negotiation and persuasion, and helping you to this fortune, I must have five hundred pounds. That’s very little, because you have the ripe lips and the clustering hair, and what not all to yourself. Third, I require that you execute a bond to me, this day, binding yourself in the payment of these two sums before noon on the day of your marriage with Miss 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 and offers of compromise Ralph was deaf as an adder. He would enter into no further discussion of the subject, and while old Arthur dilated on the enormity of



his demands and proposed modifications of them, sat perfectly mute, looking over the entries and papers in his pocket-book. Finding that it was impossible to make any impression upon his staunch friend, Arthur Gride consented with a heavy heart to the proposed treaty and upon the spot filled up the bond required, after exacting the condition that Mr. Nickleby should accompany him to Bray's lodgings that very hour and open negotiation at once.

The worthy gentlemen went out together shortly afterwards, and Newman emerged from the cupboard, out of the upper door of which at the imminent risk of detection, he had more than once thrust his nose when such parts of the subject were under discussion as interested him most.

"I have no appetite now," said Newman Noggs. Having delivered this observation in a very grievous and doleful tone, he 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, but I pity her with all my heart and soul; and I can't help her! nor can I help 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 curricule. 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 went forth to seek such consolation as might be derivable from the beef and greens of some cheap eating house.

Meanwhile the two plotters had gone to the same house where Nicholas had gone for the first time a few mornings before and, having obtained access to Mr. Bray and found his daughter from home, had at length laid open the real object of their visit. Ralph did nearly all the talking, saying at length:

“There he sits, Mr. Bray,” as the invalid, not yet recovered from his surprise, reclined in his chair, looking alternately at him and Arthur Gride. “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 father-in-law he wanted. “If we are married, it will be destiny, according to that.”

“Then think, Mr. Bray,” said Ralph, “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, as her mother’s friends and my enemies do

— a 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 reason why our positions should be changed and that she should command and I should obey? Hint a wish, too! Perhaps you think, because you see me scarcely able to leave this chair without assistance, that I am some broken-spirited dependent creature without the courage or power to do what I 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 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 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 grave-



stone 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 paid—in 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? What is it now, I say, 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. "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, how often do they marry their daughters to old men or, (worse still) to young men without heads or hearts, to please 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 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 dared 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 girl, 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.

"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 connexion 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.

“ You will communicate with us again? ” said Ralph.

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

“ One week, ” said Ralph, turning to his companion, “ from today. Good morning. 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 am 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 condescend! Only the tips of her fingers! ” said Arthur, hesitating and half-retreating.

Madeline shrank 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! She — she — looked at me so soft.”

“Not overlovingly, I think, did she?” said Ralph.

“No, you think not? 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 half-closed eyes.

“I’m 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 is so considerate and affectionate that his 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 a different kind. Oh, we may wait with confidence for this day week.”

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

**I**N 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 the day, as he had in hoarding his money, lived Arthur Gride. Meagre old chairs and tables of spare and bony make werè ranged in grim array against the gloomy walls. 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, it rattled as if it were pinched with hunger.

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 tight-locked 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 end of some forgotten song.

Ta — ran — tan — too,  
Throw the old shoe,  
And may the wedding be lucky!

which he repeated in the same shrill quavering tones 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 worm-eaten wardrobe, a quantity of frowsy 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 snuff-coloured suit,” said Arthur Gride, surveying a threadbare coat. “Did I look well in snuff colour? Let me think.”

The result of his cogitations appeared to be unfavourable,

and 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’ but songs are only written for the sake of rhyme, and this is a silly one that the poor country people sang when I was a little boy. Though, stop — young is quite right, too — it means the bride — yes. 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 bottle green, the bottle green was a famous suit to wear, and I bought it very cheap at a pawnbroker’s, and there was — he, 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 bottle green. The very day I put it on first, old Lord Mallowford was burnt to death in his bed, and all the post bonds to be paid after death fell in, and I made more money. I’ll be married in the bottle green, Peg. Peg Sliderskew — I’ll wear the bottle green!”

This call, loudly repeated twice or thrice at the room door, brought into the apartment a short, thin, weasen, blear-eyed old woman, palsy-stricken, 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 ever stirs in the house."

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

"You, eh? And what do you want?"

"I'll be married in the bottle green."

"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."

"Why not do? Why don't you wear your everyday clothes, like a man — eh?"

"They an't becoming enough, Peg."

"Not what enough?"

"Becoming."

"Becoming what? Not becoming too old to wear?"

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

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

"Look! 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 yourself — pepper and salt, bottle green, sky blue, or tartan plaid 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?"

"Why, isn't it enough to make me? I shall soon enough be put out of humour, 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 me

— no, no, nor for you. Try that plan, and come to ruin — ruin — ruin! ”

“ Oh dear, dear, I shall never try it, 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 we — we 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.”

“ But she can earn money herself, Peg, she can draw, paint, work all manner of pretty things for ornamenting stools and chairs; slippers, Peg, watch guards, hair chains, 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.”

“ A fool of me! Trust your old master not to be fooled by pretty faces, Peg; no, no, no — nor 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. 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.”

“ *When* I do that, Peg Sliderskew,” thought Arthur Gride, “ they *will* be.”

Although he thought this very distinctly, he dared 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 bottle green with the best black silk. Have a skein of the best, and some new buttons for the coat, and — this is a good idea, Peg, and one

you'll like, I know — as I have never given her anything yet, and girls like such attentions, you shall polish up a sparkling necklace that I have got upstairs, and I'll give it to her upon the wedding morning — clasp it round her charming little neck myself — and 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 with — eh, Peg?"

Mrs. Sliderskew appeared to approve highly of this ingenious scheme and expressed her satisfaction by various racking 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 alone again. "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 the keyholes, for she can't hear. She's a charming woman — for the purpose; a most discreet old housekeeper, and worth her weight in — copper."

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 upward 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, replied, suiting his action to the word, “A letter. From Mr. Nickleby. Bearer waits.”

“Won’t you take a — a —— ”

Newman looked up and smacked his lips.

“A chair?”

“No, thank’ee.”

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 re-peruse it that Newman considered it expedient to remind him of his presence.

“Answer; bearer waits.”

“True. Yes — yes; I almost forgot; I do declare.”

“I thought you were forgetting.”

“Quite right to remind me, Mr. Noggs. Oh, very right indeed. Yes, I’ll write a line. I’m — I’m rather flurried, Mr. Noggs. The news is —— ”

“Bad?”

“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. You have been there much oftener than you should. She does not languish for you, and it might have been dangerous. Restrain your youthful ardour for eight-and-forty 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 eyes—which was an impossibility and a thing no man had ever done.

“Only a cobweb.”

“Oh, is that all?”

“No. There’s a fly in it.”

“There are a good many cobwebs here.”

“So there are in our place, 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 finger joints, 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."

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 you — will you take a little drop of something — just 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 do and to punish him as much as he could, he accepted the offer immediately.

Arthur Gride, therefore, from a shelf laden with drinking glasses and quaint bottles, took down one dusty bottle of promising appearance and two glasses of curiously small size.

"You never tasted this," said Arthur. "It's *eau d'or* — golden 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 and thrice against the bottle, as a gentle reminder that he had not been helped yet. With a deep sigh, Arthur Gride slowly filled it — though not to the brim — and 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 ve — ry seldom, I like to think of it beforehand and teaze 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 drink — he, he, he! — we’ll drink a lady.”

“The ladies?”

“No, no, Mr. Noggs, 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 open-mouthed, 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.

“You’ve been a long time,” said Ralph when Newman returned.

“He was a long time,” replied Newman.

“Bah! 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.”

“You had better refresh your memory, sir.”

“I tell you 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. 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 said you to that?”

“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, 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.”

“Well,” retorted 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 the 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."

"Do it, then, 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 a position to watch for Nicholas. For Newman Noggs was proud in his way, and could not bear to appear 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 to meet him. Nicholas was no less pleased to encounter his friend, whom he had not seen for some time.

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

"That's right, and I of you. I couldn't help coming up tonight. I say! I think I'm 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; 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! Am I interested?”

“I think you are. I have a notion 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 hints that puzzle me—I say, that puzzle me.” Nicholas endeavoured by a series of questions to discover 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 lynx-eyed 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.

“And that reminds me,” said Newman, “that you never told me the young lady’s real name, whose address we could not obtain that time and whom you were so anxious to find.”

“Madeline!”

“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 crazy?”

“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 wretch—a devil born and bred, and grey in devil’s ways?”

“Be careful what you say, for heaven’s sake be careful! I am left here alone and those who could stretch out a hand to rescue her, the Cheeryble Brothers, are far away on business. 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 easy 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 place.

“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!”

Finding that Newman was determined to stop him, Nicholas soon slackened his pace and allowed 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, 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.”

“ I’ll drag him from it.”

“ Tut, tut, 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.

“ 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! 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!”

“You read me a good lesson, Newman, and I will profit by it. One step, at least, I may take — am bound to take indeed — and to that I will apply myself tomorrow.”

“What is that? Not to threaten Ralph? Not to see the father?”

“To see the daughter, Newman. To do what, after all, is the utmost that the brothers could do, if they were here; 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 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! 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. But where are you hurrying now?”

“Homewards. Do you come with me, or shall I say good night?”

“I’ll come a little way, if you will but walk, not run.”

“I cannot walk tonight, Newman; 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 I 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.

## CHAPTER XXXV

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. A hasty breakfast taken and such affairs of business that required prompt attention disposed of, he directed his steps to the residence of Madeline Bray, whither he lost no time in arriving.

Coming to the door of the house, he found it had been left ajar — probably 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 last seen her, but there was

a change in the lovely girl which told Nicholas how much mental suffering had been compressed into that short time.

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 occupation 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, for my daughter and I are busily engaged with 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 half-way and stretched out her hand as if expecting a letter.

“Madeline,” said her father impatiently, “my love, what are you doing?”

“Miss Bray expects an inclosure, perhaps. My employer is absent from England, or I should have brought a letter



with me. I hope she will give me time — a little time. I ask a very little time.”

“ If that is all you come about, sir, you may make yourself easy on that head. Madeline, my dear, I didn't know this person was in your debt? ”

“ A — a trifle, I believe.”

“ 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.”

“ You have not thought about it! 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 purse-proud tradesmen are, when, through some fortunate circumstances, they get the upper hand for a brief day — or think they get the upper hand — of a gentleman? ”

“ My business is with the lady.”

“ With a gentleman's daughter, sir, 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 question 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! These are the orders, are they? ”

“ Since you insist upon the terms, sir, yes.”

“ 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 who 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 suppress. He continued after a short silence, "You have your message and can retire — unless you have any further — ha! — any further orders."

"I have none, nor, in consideration of the station you once held, have I used that or any other word which could be supposed to imply authority on my part or dependence on yours. I have no orders, but I have fears — fears that I will express, chafe as you may — fears 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.

“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 late — too late for what I have to say, 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, 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 near. To her Nicholas appealed in such passionate terms that she opened a side door and, supporting her mistress into an adjoining room, beckoned Nicholas to follow them.

“Leave me, please,” said the young lady.

“I cannot, will not, leave you. 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; 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 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."

"You say you have a duty to discharge, and so have I. And with the help of heaven I will perform mine," said Madeline firmly.

"Say rather with the help of devils, one of them your destined husband who ——"

"I must not hear such talk. 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 to my dear friend and benefactor, and, taking with you my prayers and thanks for him and yourself, leave me for ever!"

"Not until I have besought you with all earnestness 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. 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 — though perhaps I ought — that I have undergone great pain of mind and have been nearly broken-hearted 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. 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 lighted 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 much — more than I should — already. What I have said to you I have said as to that dear friend to whom

I trust in you honourably to repeat it. Sometime in the future, 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 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. I—I hear him calling. I—I must 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 entitled to fortune of your own which 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 some wild, unquiet dream. The day wore on, until 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 tip-top spirits and great glee. The bottle-green suit had been brushed, ready for the morrow. Peg Sliderskew had rendered the accounts of her past house-keeping; 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 vellum book with rusty clasps.

"Well-a-day!" 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, "Well-a-day 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 real — that's the best of it — true as the Bank of England, and real as its gold and silver. Written by Arthur Gride. He, he, he! None of your story-book 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 seventy-five, four, three. Additional sum as per bond, five hundred. One thousand, four hundred and seventy-five pounds, four

shillings, and threepence, tomorrow at twelve o'clock. On the other side, though, there's 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 seventy-five, 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, 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! 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 dinner for an emperor. There'll only be she and me — and you, Peg, when we've done."

"Don't you complain of the expense afterwards," said Mrs. Sliderskew, sulkily.

"I'm 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?"

“Love your old master too much ——”

“No, not a bit too much.”

“Oh dear, I wish the devil had this woman! Love him too much to eat more than you can help at his expense.”

“At his what?”

“Oh dear! She can never hear the most important words, and hears all the others! At his expense — you catamaran!”

The last-mentioned 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 street door.

“There’s the bell,” said Arthur.

“Ay, ay. I know that.”

“Then why don’t you go?” bawled Arthur.

“Go where? 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 street door, 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.

“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. Peg — or 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 dirt-clogged 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 money lender had drawn close to him so that there was only room between it and himself for the book over which he bent. As he sat, with his elbows on the desk, and his sharp cheek bones resting on his hands, the light of this lamp 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 room 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 a — a ——”

“For what do you take me, if not for a man?”

“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; 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 ventured to regard his visitor more atten-

tively 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. 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.”

“N — n — no. Who said I was? How do you know that?”

“No matter how, I know it. The young lady who is to give you her hand hates 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. 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 means — for I scorn to sully her cause by falsehood or deceit — I do not know; at present I do not know, but I am not alone or single-handed 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, 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 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. As to the fraud on Madeline herself his visitor knew so little about its nature that it might be a lucky guess. 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 smooth face! ”

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 on the window shutters, 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! ”

“ You’ll bring your threats here, will you? ” said Gride, whom jealousy of Nicholas and 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 and I’ll rouse the street with such screams that, 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 were 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 ill-humoured, I'll taunt her with that spark; 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 street door 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 half-past 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 place of that warmer familiarity, and stole away to bed.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

**T**HERE are not many men who lie abed too late or oversleep on their wedding morning. Arthur Gride had enrobed himself in his marriage garments of bottle green a full hour before Mrs. Sliderskew knocked at his bedroom door, and he had hobbled downstairs in full array and smacked his lips over a scanty taste of his favourite cordial before she entered the kitchen.

“Faugh!” said Peg, grubbing 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 bachelor — no friends — no relations, Peg!’



Lies! And now he's to bring home a new mistress, a baby-faced 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. Ho, that she won't; but you little think why, Arthur, boy!"

While Mrs. Sliderskew 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, unless I have committed myself—let something drop at Bray's, for instance—which 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 of 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."

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 him, in short, what Nicholas had said and done.

"Well, and what then?" said Ralph.

"Oh! nothing more."

"He tried to frighten you, and you were frightened, I suppose; is that it?"

"I frightened him by crying thieves and murder. Once I was in earnest I tell you that, for I had 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? You are jealous—and with good cause I think."

“ No, no, no; not with good cause, hey? You don't think with good cause, do you? Do you, though, hey? ”

“ Why, how stands the fact? Here is an old man about to be forced in marriage upon a girl; and to this old man there comes a handsome young fellow — you said he was handsome, didn't you? ”

“ No! ” snarled Arthur Gride.

“ Oh! 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 teeth — gums I should rather say — and 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, for he said that no word of love had ever passed between 'em, ” said Arthur.

“ He said! ” repeated Ralph, contemptuously. “ But I like him for one thing, and that is his giving you this fair warning to keep your — what is it? — titbit or dainty chick — which? — 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 her — that'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 an easy thing 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? 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, letting his lip 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. Then 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 sitting room, 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! you are so — so very funny!”

“I need be, for this is rather dull and chilling. Look a little brisker, man, and not so hangdog like!”

“Yes, yes, I will, but — but — you 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 half-hour to spare yet. Curb your impatience.”



“ I — I — am not impatient; I wouldn't be hard with her for the world. Oh, dear, dear, not on any account. Let her take her time — her 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 for this great consideration and regard, a footstep was heard upon the stairs, and Bray himself came into the room on tiptoe, 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.”

“ And not likely to delay us by any young-lady weaknesses — fainting, or so forth? ” said Ralph.

“ She may be safely trusted now; 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. Don't ask me what. You know as well as I do.”

Ralph shrugged his shoulders in silent deprecation of Bray's impatience.

“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!”

“You see what a dry, shrivelled, withered old chap it is,” returned Ralph, when the other was at length silent. “If he were younger, it might be cruel, but as it is — harkee, Mr. Bray, he’ll die soon and leave her a rich young widow! Miss Madeline consults your taste 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. 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 the truth, 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 sank 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. Turning to the bridegroom when they were alone, he 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 other 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, of 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 footsteps 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 haste — not 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.

“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!”

As the brother and sister stood side by side, with a gallant bearing which became them well, a close likeness between them was apparent. 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 the resemblance was so perceptible.

“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 Rálp, "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.

Nicholas replied, "To offer to the unhappy subject of your treachery at this last moment 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 will say to her father that the Cheeryble brothers 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 fellow (I grieve to say, my brother's son; a reprobate and profligate,

stained with every mean and selfish crime), this 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 is — this 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 apron strings like a cowardly boy to his mother's. Isn't this a pretty fellow to talk as big as you have heard him now? ”

“ And as I heard him last night, as I heard him last night, when he sneaked into my house, and — he, 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 Bray — and 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.

Grilde 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 which the noise proceeded, forced his way through a crowd of persons who quite filled a small bedroom 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 Mr. Bray had been observed through the half-opened 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 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 that apartment downstairs into the room he had just left, 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, 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 that 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.”

“ Who shall prevent him? ”

“ I will.”

“ By what right I should like to know, by what right I ask? ”

“ By this right. That knowing what I do, you dare not tempt me further, and by this better right: that those I serve are her nearest and her dearest friends. In their name I take her with us. Give way! ”

“ One word! ” cried Ralph, foaming with rage.

“ Not one. I will not hear of one — save this. Look to yourself, and heed this warning that I give you! Day is past in your case, and night is coming 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 ill-spent 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 as 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. Nicholas then took his beautiful burden in his arms and rushed out. No one cared to stop him, if any were 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 XXXVII

WITH clenched hands and teeth ground together, Ralph stood for some minutes, breathing heavily, but as rigid and motionless as a brazen statue. After a time, he began by slow degrees to relax. For a moment he shook his clasped fist towards the door by which Nicholas had disappeared, and then 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, 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."

"N — n — no one else?"

"Not for this mischance; 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, something so unnatural and ghastly in the contrast between his harsh, slow, steady voice and his face's evidence of intense and violent passion that, if the dead body which lay above had stood before the cowering Gride, it could scarcely 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, 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."

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 farthest corner with folded arms and uttered not a word. With his chin sunk on 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, 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 of — of anything you like. It’s no use knocking, coachman. Ring the bell!”

The man rang, and rang, and rang again, then knocked until the street reëchoed 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. 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; one very fat man said 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 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 money lenders obtained shelter in a house next door and, being accommodated with a ladder, clambered over the wall of the back yard—which was not a high one—and 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. 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; every room dismal and silent as it always was, and every ghostly article of furniture in its customary position.

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 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?”

“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 money — all my money — I haven’t much! She had better have made me a beggar than have done this!”

“Done what? 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 it — reading it of late — I did very often — she 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 it — say they found it — knew it — and 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? ”

“ No! 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 panic-stricken 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; 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 day — for one day! How many anxious years, how many pinching days and sleepless nights, before I scraped together that ten thousand pounds! — Ten thousand pounds.”

At length, dropping into his elbow chair 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. 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 slow — let me but begin to get the better of him, let me but turn the scale — and 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.

“ 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, 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 them 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. The world is chockful 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 scripiter, 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, 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."

"My time is yours, and I say it is."

"You alter it every day; it isn't fair."

"You don't keep many cooks, and can easily apologise to them for the trouble. 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, nor to ruin a great many people whom I know. You were going to say ——?"

“Why, what I was going to say, sir, is that this here business regarding of that ungrateful and hard-hearted 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, but at the same time when one comes, as I do now, better than two hundred and fifty mile to take a affer-david, it does put a man out a good deal, letting alone the risk.”

“And where may the risk be, Mr. Squeers?”

“I said, letting alone the risk,” replied Squeers, evasively.

“I ask you where is the risk?” repeated Ralph, emphatically.

“Where the risk? 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 and how often am I to tell you that you run no risk? 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.”

“He did it cheap, yes; and he did it well. 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, if you come to that, I might say where’s yours?”

“You might say where’s mine! 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; 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, 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. The account is against me, for I spent money to gratify my hatred, and you pocket it, and gratify yours at the same time. Which is best off? You, who win money and revenge at the same time and are 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 secured that lady himself and borne her off in triumph.

Secondly, that by some will or settlement she was entitled to property which, if the existence of this deed ever became known to her, would make her husband a rich and prosperous man.

Thirdly, that this deed had been, with others, stolen from one who had obtained it fraudulently.

"Now," said Ralph, leaning forward, and placing his hand on Squeers's arm, "hear the design which I have conceived. No advantage can be reaped from this deed, whatever it is, save by the girl herself or her husband. 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, but if anybody — *you!* ”

Mr. Squeer'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; 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; the comparative ease with which somebody might worm himself into her confidence and obtain, under one pretence or another, free possession of the deed. The residence of Mr. Squeers at a long distance from London rendered his association with Mrs. Sliderskew a mere masquerading frolic in which nobody was likely to recognise him either at the time or afterwards; 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, and finally hinted that the fifty pounds might be increased to seventy-five, or even to a hundred.

These arguments at length concluded, Mr. Squeers, after exhibiting many signs of restlessness and indecision, asked whether Ralph couldn't go another fifty; then said he supposed he must try to 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? 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! I say, if you shouldn't find her out, you'll pay expenses at the Saracen and something for loss of time?"

"Well, yes! You have nothing more to say?"

Squeers shaking his head, Ralph accompanied him to the street door and returned to his own room.

"Now! Come what may, for the present I am firm and unshaken. 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 XXXVIII

**I**T was a dark, wet, gloomy night in autumn. In an upper room of a mean house situated in an obscure street, there sat, all alone, a one-eyed man in a loose greatcoat, with arms half as long again as his own and a 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. But Mrs. Squeers's lord it was. And in a tolerably disconsolate mood Mrs. Squeers's lord appeared to be, as he helped himself from a black bottle which stood on the table beside him.

There were no attractions 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 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 save 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 eyes to the ceiling and, fixing them 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 here! An uncommon pretty

go! Here have I been, a matter of how many weeks — hard upon six — a'follering up this here blessed old dowager petty larcenerer" — Mr. Squeers delivered himself of this epithet with great difficulty and effort — "and Dotheboys Hall a'running 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, 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, a'worming 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 an ugly old bright-eyed stagnation-blooded 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 of — well, I'll think of the rest, and say it when convenient."

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 who now refreshed his memory rather in the absence of better amusement than for any specific information.

"The pigs is well, the cows is well, and the boys is bobbish. Young Sprouter has been a'winking, has he? I'll wink him

when I get back. ‘Cobbey would persist in sniffing while he was a’eating 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 deep-laid 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 a’wishing 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 a’lingering in London, 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 pound, and there’s their keep to be subtracted. 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. Squeers — in his enthusiasm, no doubt — poured 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. 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 the door opposite his own, tapped gently at it.

“ But what’s the use of tapping? She’ll never hear. I suppose she isn’t doing anything very particular; and if she is, it don’t 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, walked in and tapped her on the shoulder.

“ Well, my Slider! ” said Mr. Squeers, jocularly.

“ Is that you? ” inquired Peg.

“ Ah! It’s me.”

Mr. Squeers drew a stool to the fire and, placing himself near 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.”

“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 I empty it; then I raise it genteelly with a little drop, which I’m forced to throw into the fire — hallo! we shall have the chimbley alight next — fill 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, manner, 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 for — eh?”

Mrs. Sliderskew didn’t know, but suggested that it was possibly because they couldn’t help it.

“Measles, rheumatics, whooping cough, 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 a screw loose in a earthly body, that's philosophy too. 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 serio-comic 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? 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; nothing takes place of that kind that I an't up to entirely. I'm a sort of a lawyer, Slider, of first-rate standing and understanding. I'm the intimate friend and confidential adviser of pretty nigh every man, woman, and child that gets them-



selves 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, was he? Not married after all? ”

“ No, that he wasn't! ”

“ And a young lover come and carried off the bride, eh? ”

“ From under his very nose, 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 word — now — now — beginning 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 application 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, that she 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; 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! 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?”

“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 money — them as wasn’t useful made away with, and them as was, laid by somewheres, safe; that’s all; 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 familiarities — for 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. Sliderskew — he protested that he had only been joking and, in proof of his unimpaired good humour, 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 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 with, 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 that you didn’t bear him any particular good will. But, I say! Why didn’t you take some money besides?”

“Some what?”

“Some money,” roared Squeers. “I do believe the woman hears me, and wants to make me break a vessel, 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 me — aye, 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. *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, 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 the arrangement, Mr. Squeers turned the box bottom upward 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! 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. If those two persons had been unacquainted with her infirmity, they would 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 door — which was not bolted, for the bolt had no hasp — but warily and with noiseless footsteps, advanced into the room.

They stole farther and farther in by slight and scarcely perceptible degrees, 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, was puffing at the dull embers which had not yet caught the wood. Squeers was 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 were intently engaged, wearing faces of exultation which contrasted strongly with the anxious looks of those intruders behind, who took advantage of the slightest sound to cover their advances, and almost before they had moved an inch forward and all was silent, stopped again.

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 learned, appeared to be considerably puzzled by the first prize, which was in an engrossing hand<sup>1</sup> 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?”

<sup>1</sup> A special form of handwriting formerly used in legal documents.

“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 is a bundle of overdue acceptances and renewed bills of six or eight young gentlemen; but they’re all M. P.’s,<sup>1</sup> so it is of no use to anybody. Throw it in the fire!”

Peg did as she was bidden, and waited for the next.

“This seems to be some deed of sale. 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 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. It’s very odd; I don’t see anything like it yet.”

“What’s the matter?” said Peg.

“Nothing, only I’m looking for ——”

Newman raised his bellows again. Once again Frank, by a rapid motion of his arm unaccompanied by any noise, checked him in his purpose.

“Here you are,” said Squeers, “bonds — take care of them. Warrant of attorney — take care of that. Two cognovits — take care of them. Lease and release — burn that. Ah! ‘Madeline Bray — come of age or marry — the 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

<sup>1</sup> M e m b e r s o f P a r l i a m e n t.



these words had caught his eye and burst into a shout of triumph.

“I’ve got it! 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 XXXIX

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 Bray’s strength. She was ill for a long time at the home of the Nicklebys. Recovering from the state of stupefaction into which the sudden death of her father plunged her, she only exchanged that condition for one of dangerous and active illness. But she had every care that could possibly be given, for Kate Nickleby took all the responsibility of the sick room.

Who, slowly recovering from any illness, could be insensible to the attentions of such a nurse as gentle, tender, earnest Kate? Her sweet voice, light step, delicate hand, her quiet cheerful discharge of little offices of kindness made a deep impression on Madeline’s young heart, stored with every pure and true affection that women cherish, but almost a stranger to the endearments and devotion of its own sex. She was rendered by calamity and suffering keenly susceptible to the sympathy so long unknown and so long sought

in vain! What wonder that days became as years in knitting them together!

“My dear,” Mrs. Nickleby would say, coming into the room with an elaborate caution, calculated to discompose the nerves of an invalid more than the entry of a horse soldier 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! I declare I never did! I had not the least idea that Nicholas was after his time, not the smallest. Mr. Nickleby used to say — your poor papa, I am speaking of, Kate, my dear — used to say that appetite was the best clock in the world, but you have no appetite, my dear Miss Bray, I wish you had, 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; 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 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 this — that 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 three-quarters 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 low-spirited 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 inspiring remarks, she would discourse at length on the arduous duties she had performed that day and sometimes would



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 getting along. 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 the former; 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. 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, quite right. He is a fine fellow.”

“Good-looking, too.”

“Decidedly good-looking.”

“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! 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 con-

sciousness 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, 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. 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 on 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 are — when they are sitting on the sofa, and — and 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 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, 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, surely it can't be!"

"Very good, my dear, wait and see."

Nicholas had never, until that moment, bestowed a thought on the possibility of such an occurrence 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 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 than his own, he was not quite convinced that they did not just arise from mere good-natured 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, I confess; but you may depend upon it I am not.”

“What of Kate?” inquired Nicholas.

“Why that, my dear, is just the point upon which I am not yet satisfied. During this sickness, she has been constantly at Madeline’s bedside — never were two people so fond of each other as they have grown — and 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 self-congratulation 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 permitted 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, 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 self-respect 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 inherit — in 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, 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 do — and 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. 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 he 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, 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 good-bye; 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 country people to leave him with, and will go backwards and forwards sometimes — backwards and forwards you know, Ned. And there's no cause to be down-hearted, 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, need not to be told. Next morning Nicholas and his feeble companion began their long journey.

And who but one — and that one he who, but for those who crowded round him then, had never met a look of kindness, or known a word of pity — could tell what agony of mind, what blighted thoughts, what unavailing sorrow, were involved in that parting!

"See," cried Nicholas, 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 good-bye 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 you — and now they are out of sight. Do not give way so bitterly, dear friend, don't. You will meet them all again."

## CHAPTER XL

**D**IVIDING the distance into two days' journey, in order that Smike 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. While this filled his mind with pleasant and peaceful thoughts, it also 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 had 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 self-imposed 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.

Nicholas made such spots the scenes of their daily rambles, driving him from place to place in a little pony chair, 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 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 mornings — they were all summer mornings then. There was not a lane, or brook, or copse, or cottage near, with which some childish event was not entwined.

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. Promise me that when I die, I shall be buried near — as near as they can make my grave — to 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 resting place by day. 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, believed to be the 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 arms — poor fellow! a child might have carried him then — to see the sunset and, having arranged his couch, had taken his seat beside it. Nicholas had been watching the whole of the night before and, being greatly fatigued both in body and mind, 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. Oh, say you’ll keep me with you. Swear you won’t leave me, for an instant! ”

“ Do I ever leave you? Lie down again — there! 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 tree — that one with the thick trunk — and there, with his eyes fixed on me, he stood! ”

“ Only reflect for one moment, granting, for an instant, that it’s likely he is alive, 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? ”

“ Anywhere — in 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 dressed — I think his clothes were ragged — but directly I saw him, the wet night, his face when he left me, the parlour I was left in, the people who were there, all seemed to come back together. When he knew I saw him, he looked frightened, for he started and shrank 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 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.



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, such pleasant, happy dreams!”

“Of what?”

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; 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 again — so very often lately, and now I feel the truth of that, so strongly — that I can even bear to part from you.”

The trembling voice and tearful eye and the closer grasp of the arm showed how the words 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 will not blame me, at a time like this, I know."

"I blame you!"

"I am sure you will not. You asked me why I was so changed, and — and sat so much alone. Shall I tell you why?"

"Not if it pains you; 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 see — I know he loves her dearly — oh! 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 learned 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 Eden — and so died.

## CHAPTER XLI

RALPH sat alone in the solitary room where he was accustomed to take his meals and to sit in the evening when no profitable occupation called him abroad. Before him was an untasted breakfast, and near the spot 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.

“What is this that hangs over me?” he said. “I have never pampered myself and I should not be ill. I have never moped and pined, 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 me — of the same detested people? I must have rest. One night’s unbroken rest, and I should be a man again.”

Pushing the table from him he noticed the watch, the hands of which were almost upon noon.

“This is strange! Noon, and Nogs not here! What drunken brawl keeps him away? I would give something now — something in money even after that dreadful loss — if 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 half-hour, he sent 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. Then she added:

"But there is a gentleman below, sir, 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 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," said the woman, quite disturbed by his harsh manner.

"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, I'll see him. Go you to your kitchen, and keep there. Do you mind me?"

Glad to be released, the woman quickly disappeared, and 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.

"Humph!" said Ralph, pausing at the door. "This is an unexpected favour."

"And an unwelcome one," said Brother Charles; "an unwelcome one, I know."

"Men say you are truth itself, sir," said Ralph. "You

“speak truth now at all events, and I’ll not contradict you. The favour is 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 ways lie 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, 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 determined not to hear you.”

“Mr. Nickleby, I come here against my will. I have never been in this house before, and have no wish ever to be here again. You do *not* guess the subject on which I come. 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. Here are walls to speak to, 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, “but an erring and imperfect man; nevertheless, there is one quality which all men have, in common with angels, *mercy*. It is an errand of mercy that brings me here. 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 you, 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, hear me when you must. Your nephew is a noble lad — 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, and we’ll explain it for you — and come soon, or it may be too late; and never forget 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 Brother Charles put on his broad-brimmed hat and, passing Ralph Nickleby, trotted nimbly into the street. Ralph looked after him, but neither moved nor spoke for some time, when he broke the silence by a scornful laugh.

“This 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.”



Still he became more and more ill at ease as time passed and no tidings of Newman Noggs arrived. After waiting until late in the afternoon, he left home, and scarcely knowing why, save that he was in a suspicious and agitated mood, he betook himself to Snawley's house. His wife came to the door 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 window blind above as I crossed the road just now and that I would speak to him on business. 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 better half, 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 schoolmaster—one of you, or the two between you—that got the forged letter done, remember that! That wasn't his doing, so don't lay that 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. Take care that other people know when to hold their tongues."

“ You jade! If your husband has been idiot enough to trust you with his secrets, keep them; keep them, she-devil that you are! ”

“ Not so much his secrets as other people’s secrets, perhaps; not so much his secrets as yours,” retorted the woman. “ 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, I do.”

For an instant Ralph had his hand raised, as though he were about to strike her, but checking himself, walked away.

He went straight to the inn which Mr. Squeers frequented and inquired when he had been there last. 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 Ralph determined to hazard the extreme step of inquiring for him at the Lambeth lodging, where Peg Sliderskew had hidden herself and her stolen papers, and having an interview with him even there. Being perfectly acquainted with the situation of Squeers’s room, he crept upstairs and knocked gently at the door. Not one, nor two, nor yet three, nor yet a dozen knocks served to convince Ralph, against his wish, that there was nobody inside. He waited quite a while, but there was not the slightest sign of the schoolmaster.

Now, thoroughly alarmed, he went to the home of Arthur Gride. There he found the windows close shut, the dingy

blinds drawn down, all silent, melancholy, and deserted. He knocked gently at first — then loudly and vigorously. Nobody came to the door. 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 window were raised, caught his ear and, looking up, he could just see the face of Gride himself, cautiously looking out. Seeing who was below, he quickly drew in his head, 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 a-way!" squeaked Gride, shaking his head in impatience. "Don't speak to me, don't knock, don't call attention to the house, but go away."

"I'll knock till I have your neighbours up in arms, if you don't tell me what you mean by lurking there, you whining cur," said Ralph.

"I can't hear what you say — don't talk to me — it isn't safe — go away — go away — go away!" returned Gride.

"Come down, I say. Will you come down?"

"No-o-o-o," snarled Gride. He drew in his head, and left Ralph standing in the street. He heard the window closed gently and carefully.

• "How is this, 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, he went 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. He found Tim Linkinwater alone.

"My name's Nickleby," said Ralph.

"I know it," said Tim, surveying him through his spectacles.

"Which of your firm was it who called on me this morning?"

"Mr. Charles."

"Then tell Mr. Charles I want to see him."

"You shall see," said Tim, getting off his stool with great agility, "not only Mr. Charles, but Mr. Ned likewise."

After a short interval he ushered Ralph into the presence of the two brothers, and 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," said Brother Ned, "the matter upon which my brother Charles called upon you this morning is well known to us three, and to others besides, and must soon become known to a great many more. 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 seems to be the peculiar style here. Well, talk in company, then; 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, "Tim, don't."

Tim, taking the hint, stifled his indignation as well as he could.

“As nobody bids me to a seat,” said Ralph, looking round, “I’ll take one, for I am tired with walking. And now, gentlemen, if you please, I wish to know—I demand to know—what you have to say to me. I tell you plainly that I don’t choose to submit quietly to slander and malice.”

“Very well, sir,” said Brother Charles. “Very well. Brother Ned, will you ring the bell?”

“Charles, stop one instant. 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.”

Ralph smiled, but made no reply. The bell was rung. The room door 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 honest, open-hearted men, fair dealing and candid! 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 a 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 sir—old 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, robber of pence out of the trays of blind men’s dogs rather than your drudge and pack-horse? 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 than any man you could have got from the poor-house. 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; 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. "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 great command upon himself but could not suppress a slight start.

"Aha!" cried Newman, "you mind me now, do you? 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, Newman Noggs became 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 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 the old gentleman returned no answer, but went on to say that, to show how much they were in earnest, it would be necessary to tell him not only what accusations were against him, but what proof of them they had, and how that proof had been acquired. All discoveries were now related to Ralph in detail. Whatever impression they produced, he allowed 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 Brother Charles said:

“I told you this morning that I came to you in mercy. How far you may be implicated, or how far the person Squeers, now in prison, may incriminate you, you best know. But justice must take its course against the persons plotting against this poor, unoffending, injured boy. It is not in our power 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. We entreat you to leave 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, "you will so easily crush *me*? Do you think that a hundred well-arranged plans, or a hundred 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 you — provoke you — taunt you — to do me the very worst you can ——"

Thus they parted, for that time; but the worst had not come yet.

Instead of going home, Ralph took the first cab he could find and went to the police office of the district in which Mr. Squeers's misfortunes had occurred. Inquiring for the object of his solicitude, he was ushered into a kind of waiting room 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 candle he could barely be seen, fast asleep on a bench in the corner. An empty glass stood on the table, and there was a very strong smell of brandy in the room. It was very evident that the schoolmaster had been seeking a temporary forgetfulness of his unpleasant situation.

It was not a very easy matter to rouse him, so heavy were his slumbers. Regaining his faculties by slow and faint glimmerings, he at length sat upright, displaying a very yellow face, a very red nose, and a very bristly beard. The general effect was heightened by a dirty white handkerchief, spotted with blood, drawn over the crown of his head, and tied under his chin. He stared ruefully at Ralph in silence, until his feelings found 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 didn’t you send for me? How could I come till I knew what had befallen you?”

“My family!” hiccupped Mr. Squeers, raising his eye to the ceiling; “my daughter, as is at that age when all the sensibilities is a’coming out strong in blow — my son as is the pride and ornament of a doting willage — here’s a shock for my family! The coat of arms of the Squeerses is tore, and their sun is gone down into the ocean wave!”

“You have been drinking and have not yet slept yourself sober.”

“I haven’t been drinking *your* health, my codger, so you have nothing to do with that,” replied Squeers.

Ralph suppressed the indignation which the schoolmaster’s insolent manner awakened and asked again why he had not sent to him.

“What should I get by sending to you? 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 I am hard and fast; and there are you, loose and comfortable.”

“And so must you be, in a few days,” retorted Ralph, with affected good humour. “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 cadaverous old Slider, who I wish was dead and buried, and resurrected and dissected, and hung upon wires in a museum, before I’d had anything to do with her. This is what the judge says to me this morning:



“ ‘Prisoner! As you have been found in company with this woman who stole some papers, as you were detected in possession of a stolen 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 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 to be an out-and-outer in morals and uprightness of principle. Whatever is wrong in this business is no fault of mine. I had no evil designs in it, sir. I was not aware that anything was wrong. I was merely employed by a friend, Mr. Ralph Nickleby. 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? ” inquired Ralph.

“ What document? Why, *the* document. The Madeline what’s-her-name 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; 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 great-coat.”

“ 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, youth are boarded, clothed, booked, washed, furnished with pocket money, provided with all

necessaries, instructed in all languages, living and dead, mathematics, orthography, geometry, astronomy, trigonometry — this is a altered state of trigonomics, this is! A double *L* — all, everything — a cobbler's weapon; *U-P* — up, adjective, not down; *S-q-u-doublee-r-s* — Squeers, noun substantive, a educator of youth. Total, all up with Squeers! ”

His running on in this way had given Ralph an opportunity of recovering his presence of mind, which suggested the necessity of removing the schoolmaster's fear and leading him to believe that his safety lay in keeping perfectly silent about the whole affair.

“ I tell you once again they can't hurt you. You shall sue them 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 bail 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 confused tonight and may not be able to see things as you would at another time; but this is what you must do; don't tell *anything*; 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 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 ain't a'going to have any stories made for me, and I ain't a'going 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. If all goes well 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 may serve me best. — My moral influence with them lads 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! ”

How long Mr. Squeers might have declaimed nobody knows. Being interrupted at this point by an attendant, 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, allowed himself to be led away.

“ As I supposed from his not sending,” thought Ralph, “ this fellow has made up his mind to turn upon me. I am so beset and hemmed in that they are all struck with fear and, 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 home. 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 felt sick and exhausted, but could taste nothing except a glass of water and continued to sit with his head upon his hand, feeling that every sense but one of weariness and desolation was benumbed. It was nearly ten o'clock when he heard a knocking at the door. It had been often repeated 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.



“Come to our house, where you came this morning. I have a coach here.”

“Why should I come there?” said Ralph.

“Don’t ask me why, but please come.”

“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 closely. Seeing that he was greatly excited, he faltered and could not tell what to say or think. After a moment’s hesitation he went into the hall for his hat and, returning, got into the coach without speaking a word.

Arrived at their place of destination, Ralph followed his conductor into the house and into a room where the two brothers were. Having taken a seat, he said:

“What—what have you to say to me—more 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, 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,” said Brother Charles. “Let him be, sir; let him be for the present.”

“More riddles!” said Ralph, faintly. “Well, sir?”

The brothers conferred apart for a short time, their manner showing that they were agitated. Ralph glanced at them

twice or thrice and finally said with a great effort to recover his self-possession, "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 that her brother is dead," said Ralph, as his eyes brightened. "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 Brother Ned, warmly. "Prepare yourself for intelligence which will make even you shrink and tremble. What if we tell you that a poor unfortunate boy, a warm-hearted, affectionate creature, who never offended you, or did you any harm, sinking under your persecution and the misery and ill usage of a life short in years but long in suffering, has gone to tell his sad tale where, for your part in it, you must surely answer?"

"If you tell me that he is dead, I forgive you all else," said Ralph. "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 bay window; “and sat there 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 forward.

He started back, for he found that he confronted — not Nicholas, as he had supposed, but Brooker.

Ralph had no reason, that he knew, to fear this man; yet he trembled, and his voice changed as he said:

“What does this fellow here? Do you know he is a convict, a felon, a common thief?”

“Hear what he has to tell you, 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.

“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.

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 pressed his two hands upon his temples. He removed them, after a minute, and never was there seen a more ghastly face. He looked at



Brooker, who was at 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:

“About twenty or twenty-five years ago a rough, fox-hunting, hard-drinking gentleman had dealings with Ralph Nickleby. This gentleman had run through his own fortune and wanted to squander away that of his sister who lived with him and managed his house. She was handsome and entitled to a pretty large property. In course of time Ralph Nickleby married her. But they kept the marriage secret, for a clause in her father’s will declared if she married without her brother’s consent the property should pass to another branch of the family. The result of this private marriage was a son. The child was put out to nurse a long way off. The wife remained alone in a dull country house, seeing little or no company but drunken sportsmen. Ralph Nickleby lived in London and clung to his business. He would never consent to have the marriage become known, for he did not want to lose any money. When they had been married nearly seven years and were within a few weeks’ time of the brother’s death, his wife eloped with a younger man, but died soon after. — I was sent to bring the child, a little boy, to the home of Ralph Nickleby, and I did so, putting him in the front garret. Neglect had made him very sickly, and I was obliged to call in a doctor. At this time no one but myself was in the house. *He* had gone in search of his wife, whom he never found. He was gone six weeks.”

He went on, from this point, in a still more humble tone, and spoke in a very low voice.

“Ralph Nickleby had used me cruelly, and I hated him. When the doctor said the child must have a change of air or he would die, I thought of a plan of revenge. I took the child to the school of Mr. Squeers and told his father, when he returned, that the child was dead. I planned very successfully, for no one doubted that the child was dead and buried. I gave the boy the name of Smike. He might have been disappointed in some intention, or he might have had natural affection, but Ralph Nickleby *was* grieved to hear about the death of his only child. I made up my mind that I would open up the secret some day and make it the means of getting money from him. For six years I paid money to the man Squeers, and then I was sent away for eight years as a convict. As soon as I came home, I travelled down into Yorkshire and made inquiries around the school, finding that Smike had run away with a young man bearing the name of his own father. I sought out the father in London, but he repulsed me with threats. I then found out his clerk. One day I went down into the country where I had heard that Smike had been taken for his health. He saw me and recognised me. He had good cause to remember me, poor boy! I would have sworn that he was the same boy if I had met him in the Indies. I knew the piteous face I had seen in the little child. A few days later, I applied to the young man in whose care he was and found that the boy was dead. This young man knows that I was recognised.

“This is my story. I demand to be brought face to face with the schoolmaster, and I will show that it's too true and that I have this guilt upon my soul. This confession can bring nothing upon me but new suffering and punishment. I have been made the instrument of working out this dreadful retribution upon the head of a man who has persecuted

and hunted to death his own child. 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 was thrown to the ground, and they were left in darkness. There was some trifling confusion in obtaining another light; but when the light appeared, Ralph Nickleby was gone.

## CHAPTER XLII

ON the morning after Brooker's disclosure Nicholas returned home. In the meeting between him and those whom he had left there was strong emotion on both sides, for they had been informed by his letters of what had occurred.

“ 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 life — putting you, my dear Nicholas, and Kate, and your poor papa, and that well-behaved nurse, who ran away with the linen and the twelve small forks, out of the question, of course. It will be a comfort to you, my dear Nicholas, to recollect how kind and good you always were to him. It was very natural you should have been attached to him, my dear — very — and, 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 are — nobody can.”

While Mrs. Nickleby gave vent to her sorrows after her own peculiar fashion of considering herself foremost, 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 little Miss La Creevy, who had come up on one of her visits while Nicholas was away, 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, shouldn’t I?” said Nicholas.

“Yes, yes, and bless you for a good creature; but this does seem to a simple soul like me such a poor reward for all you have done.”

“Why,” 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 from being beside him.”

“To be sure,” sobbed Miss La Creevy; “it’s very true, and I’m ungrateful, I know.”

Waiting until they were all tolerably quiet and composed again, Nicholas, who stood in need of rest, 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, saying:

“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; mama and I, and — 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. I can't think of parting from her without sorrow; and surely, Nicholas, *you* don't wish it! ”

“ No, Kate; no, I do not. I might strive to disguise my real feelings from anybody but you; but I will tell you that — briefly and plainly, Kate — 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. No, Kate! Since I have been absent, I have had perpetually before my eyes, the munificent liberality of these noble brothers. As far as in me lies, I will deserve it. If I have wavered in my 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 seemed unable to express what she wished to say.

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. Why, Kate, Kate, be a woman! I think I know what you would tell me. It concerns Mr. Frank, doesn't it? ”

Kate sank her head upon his shoulder, and sobbed out, “ Yes.”

“ And he has offered you his hand, perhaps, since I have been away; is that it? Yes. Well, well; it's 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, that — that 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 and declared that he would not only inform his uncles of the step he had taken, but would tell you, as soon as 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 should — I 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. I was first entrusted with her history because they placed unbounded confidence in me and believed that I was as true as steel. How base it would be of me to take advantage of the circumstances that placed her here. I have determined to remove this weight from my mind. I doubt whether I have not done wrong, even now. Today I shall disclose my real reasons to Mr. Cheeryble and ask him to take 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? You would not dissuade me, Kate, would you?”



“ You may grow rich yourself, some time, Nicholas.”

“ Yes, I may grow rich —— ” repeated her brother with a mournful smile, “ and I may grow old! But rich or poor, old or young, you and I will ever be the same to each other, and in that our comfort lies. Don't you think I shall be doing right, Kate? ”

“ Quite, quite right, 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? ”

“ N — n — no,” said Kate timidly, tracing some pattern upon the ground with her foot. “ I don't regret having done what was honourable and right, of course; but I do regret that it should ever have happened — at least, sometimes I regret it, and sometimes I — I don't know what I say. I am but a weak girl, Nicholas, and it has agitated me very much.”

If Nicholas had had ten thousand pounds at the minute, he would, in his generous affection, have given it all to his sister. But all he could do was to comfort and console her by kind words; and words they were of such love and cheerful encouragement that 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 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 person 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 thing.”

Checking thoughts so little adapted to the business on which he was bound, he proceeded on his way and presented himself before Tim Linkinwater.

“Ah! Mr. Nickleby! God bless you! How d’ye do! Well? Say you’re quite well and never better. Do now.”

“Quite well,” said Nicholas, shaking him by both hands.

“Ah! you look tired, though, now I come to look at you. 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, 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, and often told me to 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. 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.

The warm welcome, the hearty manner, the unaffected commiseration of the good old merchant went to his heart, and he could not help showing it. For a few moments he could not speak.

“Come, come, my dear sir,” said Brother Charles at length, “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 his 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, I assure you,” replied Nicholas.

“ Yes, that’s well, that’s well. — Where is my brother Ned, Tim Linkinwater? ”

“ Gone out to see 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. We have been speaking of you every day.”

“ To tell you the truth 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. Say on, my dear sir, say on.”

“ I scarcely know how or where to begin. If ever a person had reason to love and reverence another with such attachment as would make the hardest service a pleasure and a delight, that is the feeling which I should have for you, and do, from my heart and soul.”

“ I believe you, 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 emboldens me to proceed. When you first told me about Miss Bray, I should have told you that I had seen her long before; that she had made an impression upon me which I could not efface, and that I had fruitlessly endeavoured to find her and become acquainted with her. I did not tell you about this, because I thought I should be able to conquer my own feelings and only think of my duty to you.”

“ Mr. Nickleby, 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, although I found that the necessity for self-command and restraint became greater every day. I never for one instant deserted my trust, nor have I to this time. I never for one instant spoke or looked but as I would have



done had you been by. But I find that constant association with this sweet girl is fatal to my peace of mind. In fact I am afraid I might not be able longer to keep my feeling unknown to her, and I ask you to remove this young lady from under the charge of my mother and sister without delay. 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 love with its object constantly before me, what can I do but ask you to remove it and to leave me to forget her! ”

“ Mr. Nickleby, 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,” said the old merchant.

“ If you would grant me one favour, by never revealing to her this confession, so she would still remember me with —— ”

“ I will take care. And is this all you have to tell me? ”

“ No! ” returned Nicholas, meeting his eye, “ it is not.”

“ I know the rest, which concerns Frank,” said Mr. Cheeryble, apparently 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, though I could have wished to have spoken to Mr. Frank first.”

“ Frank told me last night. You have done well, Mr. Nickleby — very well — and I thank you again.”

Nicholas requested permission to add a few words. He hoped that nothing he had said would lead to the estrangement of Kate and Madeline, who had formed an attachment for each other. When these things were all forgotten, he hoped that Frank and he might still be warm friends.

Creeping from the house and slinking off like a thief, 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. 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.

As he drew nearer and nearer home, he 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 allowed himself to consider it.

His own child, his own child! He never doubted the tale; he felt it was true. 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.

If he had known his child to be alive; if no deceit had ever been practised, and he had grown up beneath his eye, he might have been a careless, indifferent, rough, harsh father, but he might have been otherwise, and 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. His hatred of Nicholas had been fed upon his own defeat. 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 Nicholas 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 for him were 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?”

He spoke no more but, after a pause, softly groped his way out of the room and up the echoing stairs — up to the top — to the front garret — where he closed the door behind him and remained.

It was a mere lumber room now, but it yet contained an old bedstead, the one on which his son had slept. He avoided it hastily and sat down as far from it as he could.



By the glare of the lights in the streets below could be seen old corded trunks and broken furniture scattered about. The room 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. Then 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 Brooker, whom he had seen that night, was to be detained; and although it was now midnight they had sent for an answer, in their anxiety to do right.

“Yes,” cried Ralph, “detain him till tomorrow; then let them bring him here — him and my nephew — and come themselves, and be sure that I will be ready to receive them.”

“At what hour?”

“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 fol-

low 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, all pointed to this. Oh! if men by selling their souls could ride rampant, for how short a term would I barter mine tonight! ”

The sound of a deep bell came along the wind.

“ Lie on,” cried the usurer, “ with your iron tongue! Ring merrily! Call men to prayers who are godly because not found out, and ring chimes for the coming of every year that brings this cursed world nearer to its end. No bell or book for me! ”

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 gentlemen 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 in the road to look at it. The house was close shut and led to a great many suggestions which ended in two or three of the boldest getting round to the back and entering by a window. 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 further. 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, he who had proposed 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 knife from his pocket and dashing into the room cut down the body of Ralph Nickleby. He had torn a rope from one of the old trunks and hanged himself on an iron hook below the trap door in the ceiling — in 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 XLIII

SOME weeks had passed, and the first shock of these events had subsided. Madeline had been removed; Frank had been absent; Nicholas and Kate had begun to try in good earnest to stifle their own regrets and to live for each other and for their mother — who, poor lady, could not be reconciled to this dull and altered state of affairs — when there came one evening, per favour of Mr. Linkinwater, an invitation from the brothers to dinner on the next day but one, including not



only Mrs. Nickleby, Kate, and Nicholas, but little Miss La Creevy, who was most particularly mentioned.

The great day arriving, Mrs. Nickleby, very much excited, put herself under Kate's hands an hour or so after breakfast and, being made ready by easy stages, completed her dressing in sufficient time to allow her daughter to do her own, 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 hand-boxes (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 early to take them, and they went away in a coach sent by the brothers for the purpose.

The old butler received them with respect and many smiles; and ushered them into the drawing-room, where they were received by the brothers with so much cordiality and kindness that Mrs. Nickleby was quite in a flutter. Kate was still more affected by the reception, knowing that the brothers were acquainted with all that had passed between her and Frank. She was trembling on the arm of Nicholas, when Mr. Charles placed her hand within his own arm and led her to another part of the room, saying:

“Have you seen Madeline, my dear, since she left your house?”

“No sir! 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 gentleman, 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."

"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 dear — that door yonder — and 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 went in 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 dinner-time because we had a little business to speak about. Ned, my dear fellow, will mention what we agreed upon. Mr. Nickleby, please 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 finer young fellows could scarcely stand side by side than those to whom he looked with so much pleasure. He thought of that future time when the firm would be Cheeryble and Nickleby. Allowing 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 friends — close and firm friends — and 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, unfolding it, said:

“ This 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. Madeline has obtained her right, and is, or will be, 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 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 worked to get that deed believing she was already promised to one who had a thousand times the claims upon her gratitude, and, if I mistake not, upon her heart, than I or any other man can ever urge. In this it seems I judged hastily.”

“ As you always do,” 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, Frank, although he judged hastily, judged for once correctly. Madeline’s heart *is* occupied. Give me your hand; it is occupied by you, and worthily and naturally. This fortune is destined to be yours, but you have a greater fortune in her than you would have in money were it forty times as much. 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 hand if she had refused it twenty times. He should and he shall! You acted nobly, not knowing our sentiments; but now you know them, you must do as you are bid. Why! You are the children of a worthy gentleman! The time was when my dear brother Ned and I were two poor simple-hearted 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, what a happy day this is for you and me! If our poor mother had only lived to see us now, how proud it would have made her dear heart at last! ”

Brother Ned, who had entered with Mrs. Nickleby, darted forward and fairly hugged Brother Charles in his arms.

“ Bring in my little Kate,” said Brother Charles, 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. 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 came in to shake hands with everybody, his round face all radiant and beaming with smiles.

"Well, Tim Linkinwater," 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. "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? Did you ever know such a villain as Tim Linkinwater? *He* accusing me of being impatient and he the very man 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. 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 if the brothers, seeing that Mrs. Nickleby was labouring to express her feelings and was really overwhelmed by the happiness of the time, had not taken 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 chatty and pleasant together — had always been great friends; 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 an old-fashioned window seat, 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 said in a soothing way:

“Don't cry!”

“I must.”

“No, don't. Please don't. Please 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. 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 again — almost in the same place — and Miss La Creevy said she was sure he'd break it.

“I knew that you would be pleased with this scene,” said Tim.



“It was very thoughtful and kind to remember me. Nothing could have delighted me half so much.”

“It’s a pleasant thing 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,” said Tim.

“Ah, that it is!” cried the little woman with all her heart.

“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.

“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. 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. 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 Creevy — giving way a little, as Tim thought.

“It has been the happiest time in all my life; at least away from the counting-house 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 them 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 four-and-forty years. We shall go to the old church, where I’ve been every Sunday morning all through that time. Let’s be a comfortable couple and take care of each other! 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 in all that time; and five minutes after that, when Miss La Creevy had bustled out to see if her eyes were red and to put her hair to rights, Tim moved with a stately step towards the drawing-room, exclaiming as he went:

“ There ain’t such another woman in all London! I *know* there ain’t! ”

By this time the apoplectic butler was nearly in fits, in consequence of the unheard of 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 a stranger genteelly dressed in black, who was also moving towards the dining room. 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 joy — health, happiness, every blessing! I can’t bear it — it’s too much, my dear boy — it makes a child of me! ”

“Where have you been? What have you been doing?” said Nicholas. “How often have I enquired 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 them. I—I—look at me, Nick. Look at me!”

“You wouldn’t let *me* do that for you,” said Nicholas, in a tone of gentle reproach, looking at the splendid clothes Newman wore.

“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, arm in arm, and sat down side by side.

## CHAPTER XLIV

NICHOLAS was one of those whose joy is not complete unless it is shared by the friends of 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 him on his road to London.

Madeline and he sat down very many times to write a letter which should acquaint John Browdie with his good fortune 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 one-half of what he wished to say. At last he resolved 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 booking office, getting a place for Nicholas on the next day's stagecoach. They had to procure some little necessaries for his journey; and as it was a fine night, they agreed to walk, and ride home.

The Saracen's Head Inn called up so many recollections, and Kate had so many anecdotes of Madeline, and Nicholas had 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 half-hour into a labyrinth of streets without emerging into any large thoroughfare that Nicholas began to think it just possible they might have lost their way.

He was soon sure of this. Looking about and walking first to one end of the street and then to the other, he found no landmark that he could recognise, and had to turn back again in search of some place where he could find out in which direction to go.

It was a by-street, and there was nobody about or in the few wretched shops they passed. Going towards a faint gleam of light, which streamed across the pavement from a cellar, Nicholas was about to descend two or three steps and make his enquiry when he was stopped 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. Hush! ”

“ You nasty, idle, vicious, good-for-nothing brute,” cried the woman, stamping on the ground, “ why don’t you turn the mangle? ”

“ So I am, my life and soul! ” replied a man’s voice. “ I am always turning. I am perpetually turning, like a demd old horse in a demd mill. My life is one demd horrid grind! ”

“ Then why don’t you go and list for a soldier? You’re welcome to.”

“ For a soldier! 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 demnibly? Would she have him fire off real guns, and have his hair cut, and his whiskers shaved, 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! Look at him while I ask the way. 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 clothes baskets and clothes, stripped to his shirt sleeves, 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 dye — there, endeavouring to mollify the wrath of a buxom female — not the lawful Madame Mantalini, but the proprietress of the concern — and grinding meanwhile as if for very life at the mangle, whose creaking noise, mingled with her shrill tones, appeared almost to deafen him — there 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 chick-a-biddy, 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 galavanting 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 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 bow wows. It will have pity? It will not scratch and claw, but pet and comfort? Oh, demmit."

Very little affected by this tender appeal, the lady was on the point of returning some angry reply, when Nicholas, raising his voice, asked his way to the street where he was going.

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 ill luck to thrust his nose from under the bedclothes in his anxiety to ascer-



tain whether the visitors were gone, she suddenly, and with a dexterity which could only have been acquired by long practice, flung a pretty heavy clothes basket at him, with so good an aim that he kicked more violently than before, though without making any effort to disengage his head, which was quite extinguished. Thinking this a favourable opportunity for departing before any 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 Nicholas began his journey. It was now cold winter weather — forcibly recalling to his mind under what circumstances he had first travelled that road.

He slept at the inn at Greta Bridge on the night of his arrival and, rising at a very early hour the 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 everybody 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. “What 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, Tilly, here be Misther Nickleby. Give us thee hond, mun. Coom awa', coom awa'. In wi' 'un, doon beside the fire; I might ha' know'd that nobody but thou would ha' coom wi' s'ike a knock as yon. Ding! But I'm reeght

glod to see thee." John dragged Nicholas into the kitchen, forced him down upon a huge settle beside a blazing fire, and stood with a broad grin of welcome overspreading his great red face, like a jolly giant. "But I say, waa't be a' this about schoolmeaster?" he added, after more welcoming had been made happily and affectionately.

"You know it then?" said Nicholas.

"They were talking about it, doon toon, last neeght, but neane on 'em seemed quite to un'erstan' it loike."

"Squeers 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 consequences of being in a conspiracy. Peg Sliderskew received the same sentence."

"Whew! A conspiracy! Explain it arter breakfast, not noo, for thou bee'st 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! Ding! But I'm reeght glod to see thee."

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 any more discussion, and hastened the breakfast, which was composed of mounds of toast, fresh eggs, boiled ham, Yorkshire pie, and other cold substantials. At last it came to a close, and a fire having been lighted in the best parlour, 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 to get a sight of the Brothers Cheeryble; at another swore that Tim Linkinwater should receive such a ham by coach 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 writing — that 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 he — John 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 cried outright.

"Tell 'ee waa't, though," said John, seriously, when a great deal had been said on both sides, "to return to school-measter. If this news about '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. I dinnot know what they lads mightn't do. When it first got about that school-measter was in trouble, some feythers and moothers sent and took their young chaps awa'. If them as is left should know waa'ts coom tiv um, 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 adversary.

"Thot's true! I should ne'er ha' thought o' thot."

"I must return tomorrow, but I mean to dine with you today; and if Mrs. Browdie can give me a bed ——"



“ Bed! ” cried John, “ I wish thou could'st sleep in four beds at once. Ecod, thou should'st 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 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. He made his way to the schoolroom door, which he found locked on the inside. A tremendous noise and riot arose from within, and looking through a crack in the wall, he saw the meaning of this. The news of Mr. Squeers's downfall had reached Dotheboys; that was quite clear. It had probably just become known to the young gentlemen, for rebellion had just broken out.

It was one of the brimstone-and-treacle mornings. Mrs. Squeers had entered the school with the large bowl and spoon, followed by Miss Squeers and the amiable Wackford, who, during his father's absence, had taken upon himself such 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 similar ways a great comfort and happiness to his mother. This morning their entrance was the signal of revolt. While one detachment rushed to the door and locked it and another mounted the desks and benches, the strongest boy (and consequently the newest) seized the cane and, confronting Mrs. Squeers with a stern countenance, snatched off her cap and beaver bonnet and put them on his own head. Then he armed himself with the wooden spoon and told her they would kill her if she did not get down on her knees and take a dose. Before that estimable lady could recover her-

self, 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 savory by the immersion in the bowl of Mr. Wackford's head, whose ducking was entrusted to another rebel. The success of this first achievement prompted the malicious crowd to further acts of outrage. The leader was insisting upon Mrs. Squeers repeating her dose, Mr. Wackford 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 sternly round. "Waat's to do here, thou young 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. 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. Hip — hip — hip — hurrah!"

"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 noo — Squeers be in jail — the school's brokken oop — it's a' ower — past and gane — think 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! 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! thou bean’t. Think better o’ us, Fanny. I tell ’ee both that I’m glad the auld man has been caught out at last — dom’d glad — but ye’ll soofer 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 that, I tell ’ee noo, that if thou need’st friends to help thee awa’ from this place — dinnot turn up thy nose, Fanny, thou may’st — thou’lt foind Tilly and I wi’a thout o’ old times aboot us, ready to lend thee a hand. And when I say thot, dinnot think I be ashamed of wat I’ve done, for I say agean, ‘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 singing lustily some fragment 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 weeks 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 shillings and sixpences to help them on their way.

In course of time Dotheboys Hall began to be forgotten by the neighbours or to be only spoken of as among things that had been.





# QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

## DICKENS'S BIOGRAPHY

1. Give a brief account of the life of this author, describing his childhood, youth, and later life. 2. Mention some of his works, telling some of the general characteristics of his writings. 3. Compare his works with those of the present. 4. What was a great purpose of the author in writing this book? 5. What result was accomplished? 6. By what means did the author bring about the result he desired?

### CHAPTER I

1. Write a theme of two hundred words containing these words, used in any order desired. Give this theme an appropriate title.

Ralph	nephew	Nicholas	boys	Mrs. Nickle-
clerk	letter	dislike	Kate	by
Nickleby	Mr Squeers	nineteen	position	splendid
school	Newman	widow	fortune	affectionate
Miss La	Noggs	brother	beautiful	hope
Creevy	assistance	brave	poor	advertise-
heartless	promised	death		ment

2. When this story began how old was Kate? 3. What was the occupation of Ralph Nickleby? 4. Is there such an occupation at the present time? 5. When is such an occupation to be condemned? 6. Is it ever right to make some one's necessity your opportunity? Explain this.

### CHAPTERS II AND III

1. Describe Mr. Squeers and his first pupil at the Saracen Hotel. 2. Describe the interview between Mr. Squeers and Mr. Snawley. 3. Describe the interview between Mr. Squeers, Nicholas, and his uncle. 4. Describe the departure of Nicholas

in the stage. 5. Who were the four people to see him go? 6. What was given to Nicholas as he was about to leave? Why was Nicholas somewhat disappointed at this time? (Explain in four sentences.) 7. Describe the journey to Yorkshire.

### CHAPTER IV

1. Write a summary of Chapter IV using these words:

Greta Bridge	gate	letters	bed
Yorkshire	Smike	towel	mattress
weather	clothes	drudge	letter
baggage	Mrs. Squeers	meat	Newman Noggs
boys	supper	pie	father

2. Represent this chapter in a dramatic scene.

### CHAPTER V

Feature this chapter as a motion picture with nine parts. I. Nicholas and Squeers in the bedroom of Nicholas (for one night). II. Mrs. Squeers hunting for the "school spoon." III. Nicholas and Squeers entering Dotheboys Hall. IV. Mrs. Squeers administering brimstone and treacle. V. Breakfast for the school. VI. Mr. Squeers gives a lesson in English spelling and philosophy. VII. Nicholas hears some lessons. VIII. Mr. Squeers holds an assembly of a painful nature in the schoolroom. IX. Nicholas and Smike.

### GENERAL QUESTIONS, CHAPTERS I-V

1. Comment on the manner in which Dickens introduces his hero in this story. 2. Is it according to the dramatic custom of the present day? 3. Give some examples of the way in which heroes are introduced in some modern stories. 4. Take into consideration time, place, circumstances. 5. Was it the duty of Ralph Nickleby to care for his brother's family? 6. To what extent, at the present time, are relatives obliged by law to care for each other? 7. Would it be a good plan to make such laws stricter and make relatives absolutely responsible for the care of all dependent relations? Explain. 8. Would it be a good idea to make all parents responsible for the care,



morally and physically, of their children, and punish the parents as well as the children for any misdemeanor? Explain in a few sentences. 9. In what way did Ralph Nickleby observe that people who have no money always want to manage the money of others? 10. Was he obliged to help his brother's family according to the English law? 11. What is this law at present?

## CHAPTER VI

Make of this chapter an act of four scenes. If you wish to shorten the sketch, what can well be left out?

Scene I. *Time*: 1850, winter evening. *Place*: The schoolmaster's family apartment, Dotheboys Hall, Yorkshire. *Persons*: Mr. Squeers, Mrs. Squeers, Miss Fanny Squeers, Master Wackford Squeers.

Scene II. *Time*: Next day. *Place*: The schoolroom. *Persons*: Nicholas, Fanny, the Boys.

Scene III. *Time*: Later in the same day. *Place*: Home of Matilda Price. *Persons*: Fanny and Matilda.

Scene IV. *Time*: A day or two later. *Place*: Living room of the Squeers home. *Persons*: Fanny Squeers, Matilda, Nicholas, John Browdie. *Order of events*: The arrival of Nicholas, the arrival of John, the game of cards, a disappointment, a misunderstanding, reflections of Nicholas.

## CHAPTER VII

1. In 1850 what kinds of positions were open to girls? 2. What position did Ralph obtain for his niece? 3. What work was she required to do? 4. How many hours did she work? 5. What was her salary? 6. What were Kate's impressions of Mr. Mantalini? Why? 7. How did Newman Noggs assist Kate and her mother just after Kate obtained her position at the Mantalini house?

## CHAPTER VIII

1. Describe the return of Mr. Squeers from the tavern and his retirement for the night. 2. What was the conversation

between Fanny and Phoebe? 3. Describe the interview with Nicholas the day after the party and the future intentions of Fanny Squeers regarding him. 4. In what way was Smike affected by this? 5. Relate the conversation between Nicholas and Smike at the end of this chapter.

## CHAPTER IX

1. Relate the conversation Kate overheard between Madame Mantalini and her husband. 2. How did Kate prosper at first in her new position? 3. How was she affected by the first letter of Nicholas?

## CHAPTER X

Prepare this chapter for dramatic reading in seven scenes. I. The flight of Smike discovered. II. The preparations for the recovery of Smike. III. The return of Mrs. Squeers with Smike. IV. The attempted punishment of Smike by Squeers. V. The schoolmaster beaten. VI. The departure of Nicholas Nickleby and his meeting with Mr. Browdie. VII. The meeting of Nicholas with Smike and their departure together.

## CHAPTER XI

1. Describe the visit of Nicholas and Smike to Newman Noggs. 2. What were the contents of the letter of Fanny Squeers to Ralph Nickleby? 3. What experience did Nicholas have at the employment office that affected him in a different way from any other experience he had ever had?

## CHAPTER XII

1. Describe the visit of the old lord and his intended bride to the Mantalini establishment and the result as far as Kate and Miss Knag were concerned. 2. Describe the dinner party at the home of Ralph Nickleby,

CHAPTER XIII

1. Why did Nicholas go to see Miss La Creevy after he returned from Yorkshire? 2. Relate the conversation at the Nickleby home between Nicholas, Ralph, Mrs. Nickleby, and Kate. 3. What were the final words between Smike and Nicholas on the evening of this same day? 4. What characteristics in the dispositions of Nicholas do all these conversations show? 5. What was he forced to do?

CHAPTER XIV

1. Why was Nicholas going to Portsmouth? 2. Did he do what he expected to do? Why? 3. Does Dickens show much knowledge of dramatic art? 4. Explain fully by giving illustrations of acting and of making plays. 5. For what parts were Nicholas and Smike booked in a certain play?

CHAPTER XV

1. What calamity happened at the Mantalini establishment that affected the position of Kate? 2. Who was the cause of this catastrophe? 3. Why was it so hard for Kate Nickleby to obtain a good position? 4. What could she have done at the present time? 5. What was her next position? 6. Are there such positions as this at the present time? 7. How many hours did she work? 8. What kind of work?

CHAPTER XVI

1. Why did Lord Verisopht and Sir Mulberry Hawk call upon Ralph Nickleby after Kate left home to take her new position? 2. Describe the visit of Mr. Pluck and Mr. Pyke at the home of Mrs. Nickleby. 3. Who had planned this visit? 4. Tell about the theatre party of the same evening, describing the actions of seven important people in this party. 5. What complaint did Lord Frederick Verisopht make? 6. What conclusion regarding Sir Mulberry did he finally reach?



## CHAPTER XVII

1. In what plan had Sir Mulberry succeeded regarding the Witterly home? 2. What were the experiences of Kate at this time? 3. Why did she call upon her uncle? 4. Why did Mrs. Witterly denounce her? 5. Would a modern girl have been able to overcome this disagreeable and rather dangerous situation? How?

## CHAPTER XVIII

1. Nicholas Nickleby was what kind of an actor? 2. Describe the result of the benefit performance. 3. What did he do with his first money? 4. Why did Newman Noggs call upon Miss La Creevy after writing to Nicholas?

## CHAPTER XIX

1. Describe the encounter of Nicholas with Sir Mulberry Hawk. 2. Could he have acted any differently? 3. What was the final result of this interview?

## CHAPTER XX

1. Describe the removal of the Nickleby family to the home of Miss La Creevy. 2. What was in the letter that Nicholas sent to his uncle?

## CHAPTER XXI

1. Why did Mr. Mantalini call upon Ralph Nickleby with some papers belonging to his wife? 2. Why did Madame Mantalini call upon Ralph Nickleby? 3. In what way was her husband occupied when she called? 4. How did the call terminate as far as she and her husband were concerned? 5. Describe the visit of Wackford Squeers to Ralph Nickleby and the conversation that took place between them. 6. Why did Squeers think Newman both crazy and drunk?

CHAPTER XXII

1. Describe the meeting of Nicholas with Mr. Charles Cheeryble, Tim Linkinwater, and Mr. Ned Cheeryble. 2. Describe the new home of the Nicklebys.

CHAPTER XXIII

1. For what purpose did Ralph Nickleby call upon Sir Mulberry Hawk? 2. Was he successful in the object of his visit? 3. What opinion did Lord Verisopht express concerning the plan of Ralph and Sir Mulberry?

CHAPTER XXIV

1. Describe the birthday dinner of Tim Linkinwater. 2. What did the Cheeryble brothers give him for a present? 3. The anniversary of whose death was observed always at this time? 4. What impression must Nicholas have had about these brothers? 5. What was their nationality? 6. Relate some of their early history. 7. What was their business? 8. What did Mrs. Nickleby say about the man next door?

CHAPTER XXV

1. Describe the second time Nicholas saw the young lady who had so impressed him at the employment office. 2. Prepare for dramatic reading the scene with the mad gentleman next door. *Persons:* Mrs. Nickleby, Mad Gentleman, Kate, His Keeper. *Place and time:* One afternoon in the garden of the Nicklebys.

CHAPTER XXVI

1. Describe the capture of Smike by the pair of Wackfords; the ride in the cab; the arrival at Snawley's; the imprisonment of Smike; the arrival of John Browdie, his wife, and Fanny Squeers in London. 2. How did Smike escape? 3. Where did he go? 4. Describe his return to the cottage.

## CHAPTER XXVII

Prepare this chapter for dramatic reading. *Place*: Small dining room at the Saracen Hotel. *Time*: Evening. *Persons*: Mr. John Browdie, his wife, Nicholas Nickleby, Fanny Squeers, Mr. Squeers, young Wackford Squeers.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

1. Who was Mr. Frank Cheeryble? 2. Where does he first make his appearance in the story? 3. What news does Newman give Ralph that disappointed him for a time in his plan for vengeance on Nicholas? 4. What was the conversation between Ralph Nickleby and a beggar named Brooker? 5. Describe the complete financial fall of Mr. Mantalini. 6. Who had a great share in bringing this about (man and woman)?

## CHAPTER XXIX

1. Give a description, oral or written, of Mr. and Mrs. Browdie's last night in London. 2. Who was the most important character of the evening entertainment? Why? 3. What important documents were shown to Nicholas by his uncle? 4. What is the strongest feeling aroused in the reader? 5. What two feelings are blended in this chapter which show Dickens as a master of style?

## CHAPTER XXX

1. On the day when the Browdies left London, why did Ralph Nickleby make a visit to the Cheeryble brothers? 2. On that same day what secret commission for the Cheeryble brothers did Nicholas undertake? 3. Did Madeline Bray show strength or weakness of character? 4. Should she have abandoned her father and cared more for herself? 5. Explain her position in life. 6. Why did the Cheeryble brothers befriend her?



7. Dickens said that the character of these brothers was taken from real life. Have you ever known any one like them?
8. Do they seem natural in the story?

### CHAPTER XXXI

1. In what way did Nicholas sacrifice his feelings in the secret commission he undertook for the Cheeryble brothers?
2. Describe the visit of the mad gentleman next door to the Nickleby cottage.

### CHAPTER XXXII

1. What duel took place in this book? 2. What was the cause? 3. Is a duel ever justifiable? 4. Was it against the law in England at that time? 5. How do you know? 6. Compare the characters of Sir Mulberry Hawk and Lord Frederick Verisopht.

### CHAPTER XXXIII

1. What request did Arthur Gride make of Ralph Nickleby?
2. What exchange of favors was planned? 3. What was the idea of Dickens concerning marriages for money? 4. What argument did Ralph Nickleby use with Mr. Bray?

### CHAPTER XXXIV

Prepare this chapter as the act of a play in three scenes.  
 Scene I. *Time:* Evening. *Place:* Living room of Arthur Gride. *Persons:* Arthur Gride, Peg Sliderskew, Newman Noggs.

Scene II. *Time:* Later the same evening. *Place:* Ralph Nickleby's office. *Persons:* Ralph Nickleby and Newman Noggs.

Scene III. *Time:* Still later the same evening. *Place:* On the street. *Persons:* Nicholas Nickleby and Newman Noggs.

## CHAPTER XXXV

1. What plea did Nicholas Nickleby make of Mr. Bray?
2. What plea did Nicholas make of Madeline Bray?
3. What offer does Nicholas make to Arthur Gride?

## CHAPTER XXXVI

Describe the wedding of Arthur Gride, making use of the following words:

Arthur Gride	Nicholas	cruel	angry
Peg Sliderskew	Nickleby	dream	loss
Ralph Nickle-	Kate Nickleby	remorse	away
by	Mr. Bray	funeral	dazed
bottle green	Madeline	fall	coach
white favors	Bray	knocked down	

## CHAPTER XXXVII

1. What surprise did Arthur Gride receive when he went home from Mr. Bray's home on the day of Mr. Bray's death?
2. What proposition did Ralph Nickleby make to Mr. Squeers regarding Peg Sliderskew?

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

1. Describe the dramatic scene between Mr. Squeers and Peg Sliderskew, with the intervention of Newman Noggs and Frank Cheeryble.
2. How did Newman Noggs get his information respecting Mr. Squeers?
3. What was the weapon he used?
4. Who found the address of Peg Sliderskew?
5. What was the object of Squeers?

## CHAPTERS XXXIX AND XL

1. Describe the condition of Madeline Bray after the death of her father.
2. Who was her nurse?
3. Where was she

staying? 4. What advice did Mrs. Nickleby give Nicholas regarding Kate and Frank Cheeryble? 5. Why did Nicholas refuse to act on this advice? 6. In what unusual way did the Cheeryble brothers show kindness to Smike after his health became impaired? 7. To what place did Nicholas and Smike go?

## CHAPTER XLI

1. Why did Mr. Charles Cheeryble call upon Ralph Nickleby? 2. Describe the visit of Ralph Nickleby to the Snawley home. 3. Why did Arthur Gride refuse to let Ralph Nickleby enter his house, and why did he speak fearfully from an upper window? 4. Why did Ralph Nickleby call at the house of Cheeryble Brothers after Gride and Snawley refused to talk to him? 5. What did Newman Noggs tell Ralph at Cheeryble Brothers' house? 6. What advice did Charles Cheeryble give Ralph? 7. Describe the interview of Ralph with Squeers at the police station. 8. What advice did Ralph give Squeers at this time? 9. In what manner did Squeers respond? 10. Of what crime was Squeers accused? 11. Describe the second visit of Ralph to Cheeryble Brothers in order to get important information according to the message of Tim Linkinwater. 12. What information did Brooker give Ralph Nickleby at Cheeryble Brothers? 13. Describe the effect of the terrible disclosure of Brooker on Ralph Nickleby.

## CHAPTER XLII

1. What was the attitude of Nicholas towards Madeline Bray, and what was his request to the Cheeryble brothers on account of this? 2. Was this foolish on the part of Nicholas? 3. Is Dickens inconsistent here in making *a lack* of money a great drawback in selecting a wife? 4. Has he shown any different view before? 5. Were Kate and Nicholas both taking too many chances in losing their greatest happiness in life? 6. Do you think Nicholas right or wrong according to present-day customs? 7. Was Kate like the present girl? 8. Was she a girl any brother would like to have for a sister? 9. Describe the death of Ralph Nickleby.



## CHAPTER XLIII

1. Describe the dinner party in this book at which time there were three engagements announced. 2. Who were responsible for this happy occasion? How? 3. What change in circumstances did Newman Noggs experience at the close of this story?

## CHAPTER XLIV

1. Describe the last time Kate saw Mr. Mantalini. 2. What was learned about his circumstances at that time? 3. Why did Nicholas pay a second visit to Yorkshire? 4. What was the fate of Mr. Squeers? Of Peg Sliderskew? 5. What charges were preferred against those two people? 6. For what reason did John Browdie visit Dotheboys School after Nicholas told him the fate of Squeers? 7. What did John Browdie do at the school at this time? 8. Describe the fate of the school. 9. Is John Browdie a likable character? Why?

## GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. A coincidence is the coinciding or meeting, accidentally, of the same ideas, the same things, or people in some way connected. Mention a few coincidences in this book. Does Dickens make too much use of coincidence? 2. What can be said of the religious element in the character of Dickens? Give examples of this. 3. What scene is the most humorous in the book? Prepare it for reading. 4. What scene is the most pathetic? Prepare it for reading. 5. What scene is the most dramatic? Prepare it for reading. 6. Do you think the death of Smike injures the story, or is it a natural part of the events?



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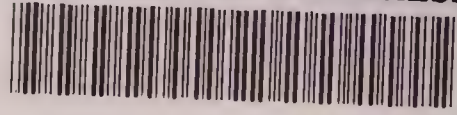
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