DICKENS CHARLES

NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

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Содержание

AUTHOR’S PREFACE 4
CHAPTER 1 12
CHAPTER 2 20
CHAPTER 3 38
CHAPTER 4 56
CHAPTER 5 76
CHAPTER 6 93
CHAPTER 7 128
CHAPTER 8 141
CHAPTER 9 161
CHAPTER 10 186
CHAPTER 11 208
CHAPTER 12 217
CHAPTER 13 235
CHAPTER 14 257
CHAPTER 15 276
CHAPTER 16 297
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 319

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

This story was begun, within a few months after the publication of the completed "Pickwick Papers." There were, then, a good many cheap Yorkshire schools in existence. There are very few now.

Of the monstrous neglect of education in England, and the disregard of it by the State as a means of forming good or bad citizens, and miserable or happy men, private schools long afforded a notable example. Although any man who had proved his unfitness for any other occupation in life, was free, without examination or qualification, to open a school anywhere; although preparation for the functions he undertook, was required in the surgeon who assisted to bring a boy into the world, or might one day assist, perhaps, to send him out of it; in the chemist, the attorney, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker; the whole round of crafts and trades, the schoolmaster excepted; and although schoolmasters, as a race, were the blockheads and impostors who might naturally be expected to spring from such a state of things, and to flourish in it; these Yorkshire schoolmasters were the lowest and most rotten

round in the whole ladder. Traders in the avarice, indifference, or imbecility of parents, and the helplessness of children; ignorant, sordid, brutal men, to whom few considerate persons would have entrusted the board and lodging of a horse or a dog; they formed the worthy cornerstone of a structure, which, for absurdity and a magnificent high-minded *Laissez-Aller* neglect, has rarely been exceeded in the world.

We hear sometimes of an action for damages against the unqualified medical practitioner, who has deformed a broken limb in pretending to heal it. But, what of the hundreds of thousands of minds that have been deformed for ever by the incapable pettifoggers who have pretended to form them!

I make mention of the race, as of the Yorkshire schoolmasters, in the past tense. Though it has not yet finally disappeared, it is dwindling daily. A long day's work remains to be done about us in the way of education, Heaven knows; but great improvements and facilities towards the attainment of a good one, have been furnished, of late years.

I cannot call to mind, now, how I came to hear about Yorkshire schools when I was a not very robust child, sitting in bye-places near Rochester Castle, with a head full of *Partridge, Strap, Tom Pipes, and Sancho Panza*; but I know that my first impressions of them were picked up at that time, and that they were somehow or other connected with a suppurated abscess that some boy had come home with, in consequence of his Yorkshire guide, philosopher, and friend, having ripped it open with an inky pen-

knife. The impression made upon me, however made, never left me. I was always curious about Yorkshire schools – fell, long afterwards and at sundry times, into the way of hearing more about them – at last, having an audience, resolved to write about them.

With that intent I went down into Yorkshire before I began this book, in very severe winter time which is pretty faithfully described herein. As I wanted to see a schoolmaster or two, and was forewarned that those gentlemen might, in their modesty, be shy of receiving a visit from the author of the "Pickwick Papers," I consulted with a professional friend who had a Yorkshire connexion, and with whom I concerted a pious fraud. He gave me some letters of introduction, in the name, I think, of my travelling companion; they bore reference to a supposititious little boy who had been left with a widowed mother who didn't know what to do with him; the poor lady had thought, as a means of thawing the tardy compassion of her relations in his behalf, of sending him to a Yorkshire school; I was the poor lady's friend, travelling that way; and if the recipient of the letter could inform me of a school in his neighbourhood, the writer would be very much obliged.

I went to several places in that part of the country where I understood the schools to be most plentifully sprinkled, and had no occasion to deliver a letter until I came to a certain town which shall be nameless. The person to whom it was addressed, was not at home; but he came down at night, through the snow, to the inn where I was staying. It was after dinner; and he needed little

persuasion to sit down by the fire in a warm corner, and take his share of the wine that was on the table.

I am afraid he is dead now. I recollect he was a jovial, ruddy, broad-faced man; that we got acquainted directly; and that we talked on all kinds of subjects, except the school, which he showed a great anxiety to avoid. “Was there any large school near?” I asked him, in reference to the letter. “Oh yes,” he said; “there was a pratty big ‘un.” “Was it a good one?” I asked. “Ey!” he said, “it was as good as anoother; that was a’ a matther of opinion”; and fell to looking at the fire, staring round the room, and whistling a little. On my reverting to some other topic that we had been discussing, he recovered immediately; but, though I tried him again and again, I never approached the question of the school, even if he were in the middle of a laugh, without observing that his countenance fell, and that he became uncomfortable. At last, when we had passed a couple of hours or so, very agreeably, he suddenly took up his hat, and leaning over the table and looking me full in the face, said, in a low voice: “Weel, Misther, we’ve been vara pleasant toogather, and ar’ll spak’ my moind tiv’ee. Dinnot let the weedur send her lattle boy to yan o’ our school-measthers, while there’s a harse to hoold in a’ Lunnun, or a gootther to lie asleep in. Ar wouldn’t mak’ ill words amang my neeburs, and ar speak tiv’ee quiet loike. But I’m dom’d if ar can gang to bed and not tellee, for weedur’s sak’, to keep the lattle boy from a’ sike scoondrels while there’s a harse to hoold in a’ Lunnun, or a gootther to lie asleep in!” Repeating these words

with great heartiness, and with a solemnity on his jolly face that made it look twice as large as before, he shook hands and went away. I never saw him afterwards, but I sometimes imagine that I descry a faint reflection of him in John Browdie.

In reference to these gentry, I may here quote a few words from the original preface to this book.

"It has afforded the Author great amusement and satisfaction, during the progress of this work, to learn, from country friends and from a variety of ludicrous statements concerning himself in provincial newspapers, that more than one Yorkshire schoolmaster lays claim to being the original of Mr. Squeers. One worthy, he has reason to believe, has actually consulted authorities learned in the law, as to his having good grounds on which to rest an action for libel; another, has meditated a journey to London, for the express purpose of committing an assault and battery on his traducer; a third, perfectly remembers being waited on, last January twelve-month, by two gentlemen, one of whom held him in conversation while the other took his likeness; and, although Mr. Squeers has but one eye, and he has two, and the published sketch does not resemble him (whoever he may be) in any other respect, still he and all his friends and neighbours know at once for whom it is meant, because – the character is *so* like him.

"While the Author cannot but feel the full force of the compliment thus conveyed to him, he ventures to suggest that these contentions may arise from the fact, that Mr. Squeers is

the representative of a class, and not of an individual. Where imposture, ignorance, and brutal cupidity, are the stock in trade of a small body of men, and one is described by these characteristics, all his fellows will recognise something belonging to themselves, and each will have a misgiving that the portrait is his own.

"The Author's object in calling public attention to the system would be very imperfectly fulfilled, if he did not state now, in his own person, emphatically and earnestly, that Mr. Squeers and his school are faint and feeble pictures of an existing reality, purposely subdued and kept down lest they should be deemed impossible. That there are, upon record, trials at law in which damages have been sought as a poor recompense for lasting agonies and disfigurements inflicted upon children by the treatment of the master in these places, involving such offensive and foul details of neglect, cruelty, and disease, as no writer of fiction would have the boldness to imagine. And that, since he has been engaged upon these Adventures, he has received, from private quarters far beyond the reach of suspicion or distrust, accounts of atrocities, in the perpetration of which upon neglected or repudiated children, these schools have been the main instruments, very far exceeding any that appear in these pages."

This comprises all I need say on the subject; except that if I had seen occasion, I had resolved to reprint a few of these details of legal proceedings, from certain old newspapers.

One other quotation from the same Preface may serve to introduce a fact that my readers may think curious.

"To turn to a more pleasant subject, it may be right to say, that there *are* two characters in this book which are drawn from life. It is remarkable that what we call the world, which is so very credulous in what professes to be true, is most incredulous in what professes to be imaginary; and that, while, every day in real life, it will allow in one man no blemishes, and in another no virtues, it will seldom admit a very strongly-marked character, either good or bad, in a fictitious narrative, to be within the limits of probability. But those who take an interest in this tale, will be glad to learn that the *Brothers Cheeryble* live; that their liberal charity, their singleness of heart, their noble nature, and their unbounded benevolence, are no creations of the Author's brain; but are prompting every day (and oftenest by stealth) some munificent and generous deed in that town of which they are the pride and honour."

If I were to attempt to sum up the thousands of letters, from all sorts of people in all sorts of latitudes and climates, which this unlucky paragraph brought down upon me, I should get into an arithmetical difficulty from which I could not easily extricate myself. Suffice it to say, that I believe the applications for loans, gifts, and offices of profit that I have been requested to forward to the originals of the *Brothers Cheeryble* (with whom I never interchanged any communication in my life) would have exhausted the combined patronage of all the Lord Chancellors

since the accession of the House of Brunswick, and would have broken the Rest of the Bank of England.

The Brothers are now dead.

There is only one other point, on which I would desire to offer a remark. If Nicholas be not always found to be blameless or agreeable, he is not always intended to appear so. He is a young man of an impetuous temper and of little or no experience; and I saw no reason why such a hero should be lifted out of nature.

CHAPTER 1

I ntroduces all the Rest

There once lived, in a sequestered part of the county of Devonshire, one Mr. Godfrey Nickleby: a worthy gentleman, who, taking it into his head rather late in life that he must get married, and not being young enough or rich enough to aspire to the hand of a lady of fortune, had wedded an old flame out of mere attachment, who in her turn had taken him for the same reason. Thus two people who cannot afford to play cards for money, sometimes sit down to a quiet game for love.

Some ill-conditioned persons who sneer at the life-matrimonial, may perhaps suggest, in this place, that the good couple would be better likened to two principals in a sparring match, who, when fortune is low and backers scarce, will chivalrously set to, for the mere pleasure of the buffeting; and in one respect indeed this comparison would hold good; for, as the adventurous pair of the Fives' Court will afterwards send round a hat, and trust to the bounty of the lookers-on for the means of regaling themselves, so Mr. Godfrey Nickleby and *his* partner, the honeymoon being over, looked out wistfully into the world, relying in no inconsiderable degree upon chance for the improvement of their means. Mr. Nickleby's income, at the period of his marriage, fluctuated between sixty and eighty

pounds *per annum*.

There are people enough in the world, Heaven knows! and even in London (where Mr. Nickleby dwelt in those days) but few complaints prevail, of the population being scanty. It is extraordinary how long a man may look among the crowd without discovering the face of a friend, but it is no less true. Mr. Nickleby looked, and looked, till his eyes became sore as his heart, but no friend appeared; and when, growing tired of the search, he turned his eyes homeward, he saw very little there to relieve his weary vision. A painter who has gazed too long upon some glaring colour, refreshes his dazzled sight by looking upon a darker and more sombre tint; but everything that met Mr. Nickleby's gaze wore so black and gloomy a hue, that he would have been beyond description refreshed by the very reverse of the contrast.

At length, after five years, when Mrs. Nickleby had presented her husband with a couple of sons, and that embarrassed gentleman, impressed with the necessity of making some provision for his family, was seriously revolving in his mind a little commercial speculation of insuring his life next quarter-day, and then falling from the top of the Monument by accident, there came, one morning, by the general post, a black-bordered letter to inform him how his uncle, Mr. Ralph Nickleby, was dead, and had left him the bulk of his little property, amounting in all to five thousand pounds sterling.

As the deceased had taken no further notice of his nephew

in his lifetime, than sending to his eldest boy (who had been christened after him, on desperate speculation) a silver spoon in a morocco case, which, as he had not too much to eat with it, seemed a kind of satire upon his having been born without that useful article of plate in his mouth, Mr. Godfrey Nickleby could, at first, scarcely believe the tidings thus conveyed to him. On examination, however, they turned out to be strictly correct. The amiable old gentleman, it seemed, had intended to leave the whole to the Royal Humane Society, and had indeed executed a will to that effect; but the Institution, having been unfortunate enough, a few months before, to save the life of a poor relation to whom he paid a weekly allowance of three shillings and sixpence, he had, in a fit of very natural exasperation, revoked the bequest in a codicil, and left it all to Mr Godfrey Nickleby; with a special mention of his indignation, not only against the society for saving the poor relation's life, but against the poor relation also, for allowing himself to be saved.

With a portion of this property Mr. Godfrey Nickleby purchased a small farm, near Dawlish in Devonshire, whither he retired with his wife and two children, to live upon the best interest he could get for the rest of his money, and the little produce he could raise from his land. The two prospered so well together that, when he died, some fifteen years after this period, and some five after his wife, he was enabled to leave, to his eldest son, Ralph, three thousand pounds in cash, and to his youngest son, Nicholas, one thousand and the farm, which was as small a

landed estate as one would desire to see.

These two brothers had been brought up together in a school at Exeter; and, being accustomed to go home once a week, had often heard, from their mother's lips, long accounts of their father's sufferings in his days of poverty, and of their deceased uncle's importance in his days of affluence: which recitals produced a very different impression on the two: for, while the younger, who was of a timid and retiring disposition, gleaned from thence nothing but forewarnings to shun the great world and attach himself to the quiet routine of a country life, Ralph, the elder, deduced from the often-repeated tale the two great morals that riches are the only true source of happiness and power, and that it is lawful and just to compass their acquisition by all means short of felony. 'And,' reasoned Ralph with himself, 'if no good came of my uncle's money when he was alive, a great deal of good came of it after he was dead, inasmuch as my father has got it now, and is saving it up for me, which is a highly virtuous purpose; and, going back to the old gentleman, good *did* come of it to him too, for he had the pleasure of thinking of it all his life long, and of being envied and courted by all his family besides.' And Ralph always wound up these mental soliloquies by arriving at the conclusion, that there was nothing like money.

Not confining himself to theory, or permitting his faculties to rust, even at that early age, in mere abstract speculations, this promising lad commenced usurer on a limited scale at school; putting out at good interest a small capital of slate-

pencil and marbles, and gradually extending his operations until they aspired to the copper coinage of this realm, in which he speculated to considerable advantage. Nor did he trouble his borrowers with abstract calculations of figures, or references to ready-reckoners; his simple rule of interest being all comprised in the one golden sentence, 'two-pence for every half-penny,' which greatly simplified the accounts, and which, as a familiar precept, more easily acquired and retained in the memory than any known rule of arithmetic, cannot be too strongly recommended to the notice of capitalists, both large and small, and more especially of money-brokers and bill-discounters. Indeed, to do these gentlemen justice, many of them are to this day in the frequent habit of adopting it, with eminent success.

In like manner, did young Ralph Nickleby avoid all those minute and intricate calculations of odd days, which nobody who has worked sums in simple-interest can fail to have found most embarrassing, by establishing the one general rule that all sums of principal and interest should be paid on pocket-money day, that is to say, on Saturday: and that whether a loan were contracted on the Monday, or on the Friday, the amount of interest should be, in both cases, the same. Indeed he argued, and with great show of reason, that it ought to be rather more for one day than for five, inasmuch as the borrower might in the former case be very fairly presumed to be in great extremity, otherwise he would not borrow at all with such odds against him. This fact is interesting, as illustrating the secret connection and sympathy which always

exist between great minds. Though Master Ralph Nickleby was not at that time aware of it, the class of gentlemen before alluded to, proceed on just the same principle in all their transactions.

From what we have said of this young gentleman, and the natural admiration the reader will immediately conceive of his character, it may perhaps be inferred that he is to be the hero of the work which we shall presently begin. To set this point at rest, for once and for ever, we hasten to undeceive them, and stride to its commencement.

On the death of his father, Ralph Nickleby, who had been some time before placed in a mercantile house in London, applied himself passionately to his old pursuit of money-getting, in which he speedily became so buried and absorbed, that he quite forgot his brother for many years; and if, at times, a recollection of his old playfellow broke upon him through the haze in which he lived – for gold conjures up a mist about a man, more destructive of all his old senses and lulling to his feelings than the fumes of charcoal – it brought along with it a companion thought, that if they were intimate he would want to borrow money of him. So, Mr. Ralph Nickleby shrugged his shoulders, and said things were better as they were.

As for Nicholas, he lived a single man on the patrimonial estate until he grew tired of living alone, and then he took to wife the daughter of a neighbouring gentleman with a dower of one thousand pounds. This good lady bore him two children, a son and a daughter, and when the son was about nineteen,

and the daughter fourteen, as near as we can guess – impartial records of young ladies' ages being, before the passing of the new act, nowhere preserved in the registries of this country – Mr. Nickleby looked about him for the means of repairing his capital, now sadly reduced by this increase in his family, and the expenses of their education.

'Speculate with it,' said Mrs. Nickleby.

'Spec – u – late, my dear?' said Mr. Nickleby, as though in doubt.

'Why not?' asked Mrs. Nickleby.

'Because, my dear, if we *should* lose it,' rejoined Mr. Nickleby, who was a slow and time-taking speaker, 'if we *should* lose it, we shall no longer be able to live, my dear.'

'Fiddle,' said Mrs. Nickleby.

'I am not altogether sure of that, my dear,' said Mr. Nickleby.

'There's Nicholas,' pursued the lady, 'quite a young man – it's time he was in the way of doing something for himself; and Kate too, poor girl, without a penny in the world. Think of your brother! Would he be what he is, if he hadn't speculated?'

'That's true,' replied Mr. Nickleby. 'Very good, my dear. Yes. I *will* speculate, my dear.'

Speculation is a round game; the players see little or nothing of their cards at first starting; gains *may* be great – and so may losses. The run of luck went against Mr. Nickleby. A mania prevailed, a bubble burst, four stock-brokers took villa residences at Florence, four hundred nobodies were ruined, and among

them Mr. Nickleby.

‘The very house I live in,’ sighed the poor gentleman, ‘may be taken from me tomorrow. Not an article of my old furniture, but will be sold to strangers!’

The last reflection hurt him so much, that he took at once to his bed; apparently resolved to keep that, at all events.

‘Cheer up, sir!’ said the apothecary.

‘You mustn’t let yourself be cast down, sir,’ said the nurse.

‘Such things happen every day,’ remarked the lawyer.

‘And it is very sinful to rebel against them,’ whispered the clergyman.

‘And what no man with a family ought to do,’ added the neighbours.

Mr. Nickleby shook his head, and motioning them all out of the room, embraced his wife and children, and having pressed them by turns to his languidly beating heart, sunk exhausted on his pillow. They were concerned to find that his reason went astray after this; for he babbled, for a long time, about the generosity and goodness of his brother, and the merry old times when they were at school together. This fit of wandering past, he solemnly commended them to One who never deserted the widow or her fatherless children, and, smiling gently on them, turned upon his face, and observed, that he thought he could fall asleep.

CHAPTER 2

Of Mr. Ralph Nickleby, and his Establishments, and his Undertakings, and of a great Joint Stock Company of vast national Importance

Mr. Ralph Nickleby was not, strictly speaking, what you would call a merchant, neither was he a banker, nor an attorney, nor a special pleader, nor a notary. He was certainly not a tradesman, and still less could he lay any claim to the title of a professional gentleman; for it would have been impossible to mention any recognised profession to which he belonged. Nevertheless, as he lived in a spacious house in Golden Square, which, in addition to a brass plate upon the street-door, had another brass plate two sizes and a half smaller upon the left hand door-post, surrounding a brass model of an infant's fist grasping a fragment of a skewer, and displaying the word 'Office,' it was clear that Mr. Ralph Nickleby did, or pretended to do, business of some kind; and the fact, if it required any further circumstantial evidence, was abundantly demonstrated by the diurnal attendance, between the hours of half-past nine and five, of a sallow-faced man in rusty brown, who sat upon an uncommonly hard stool in a species of butler's pantry at the end of the passage, and always had a pen behind his ear when he answered the bell.

Although a few members of the graver professions live about Golden Square, it is not exactly in anybody's way to or from anywhere. It is one of the squares that have been; a quarter of the town that has gone down in the world, and taken to letting lodgings. Many of its first and second floors are let, furnished, to single gentlemen; and it takes boarders besides. It is a great resort of foreigners. The dark-complexioned men who wear large rings, and heavy watch-guards, and bushy whiskers, and who congregate under the Opera Colonnade, and about the box-office in the season, between four and five in the afternoon, when they give away the orders, – all live in Golden Square, or within a street of it. Two or three violins and a wind instrument from the Opera band reside within its precincts. Its boarding-houses are musical, and the notes of pianos and harps float in the evening time round the head of the mournful statue, the guardian genius of a little wilderness of shrubs, in the centre of the square. On a summer's night, windows are thrown open, and groups of swarthy moustached men are seen by the passer-by, lounging at the casements, and smoking fearfully. Sounds of gruff voices practising vocal music invade the evening's silence; and the fumes of choice tobacco scent the air. There, snuff and cigars, and German pipes and flutes, and violins and violoncellos, divide the supremacy between them. It is the region of song and smoke. Street bands are on their mettle in Golden Square; and itinerant glee-singers quaver involuntarily as they raise their voices within its boundaries.

This would not seem a spot very well adapted to the transaction of business; but Mr. Ralph Nickleby had lived there, notwithstanding, for many years, and uttered no complaint on that score. He knew nobody round about, and nobody knew him, although he enjoyed the reputation of being immensely rich. The tradesmen held that he was a sort of lawyer, and the other neighbours opined that he was a kind of general agent; both of which guesses were as correct and definite as guesses about other people's affairs usually are, or need to be.

Mr. Ralph Nickleby sat in his private office one morning, ready dressed to walk abroad. He wore a bottle-green spencer over a blue coat; a white waistcoat, grey mixture pantaloons, and Wellington boots drawn over them. The corner of a small-plaited shirt-frill struggled out, as if insisting to show itself, from between his chin and the top button of his spencer; and the latter garment was not made low enough to conceal a long gold watch-chain, composed of a series of plain rings, which had its beginning at the handle of a gold repeater in Mr. Nickleby's pocket, and its termination in two little keys: one belonging to the watch itself, and the other to some patent padlock. He wore a sprinkling of powder upon his head, as if to make himself look benevolent; but if that were his purpose, he would perhaps have done better to powder his countenance also, for there was something in its very wrinkles, and in his cold restless eye, which seemed to tell of cunning that would announce itself in spite of him. However this might be, there he was; and as he was all

alone, neither the powder, nor the wrinkles, nor the eyes, had the smallest effect, good or bad, upon anybody just then, and are consequently no business of ours just now.

Mr. Nickleby closed an account-book which lay on his desk, and, throwing himself back in his chair, gazed with an air of abstraction through the dirty window. Some London houses have a melancholy little plot of ground behind them, usually fenced in by four high whitewashed walls, and frowned upon by stacks of chimneys: in which there withers on, from year to year, a crippled tree, that makes a show of putting forth a few leaves late in autumn when other trees shed theirs, and, drooping in the effort, lingers on, all crackled and smoke-dried, till the following season, when it repeats the same process, and perhaps, if the weather be particularly genial, even tempts some rheumatic sparrow to chirrup in its branches. People sometimes call these dark yards 'gardens'; it is not supposed that they were ever planted, but rather that they are pieces of unreclaimed land, with the withered vegetation of the original brick-field. No man thinks of walking in this desolate place, or of turning it to any account. A few hampers, half-a-dozen broken bottles, and such-like rubbish, may be thrown there, when the tenant first moves in, but nothing more; and there they remain until he goes away again: the damp straw taking just as long to moulder as it thinks proper: and mingling with the scanty box, and stunted everbrowns, and broken flower-pots, that are scattered mournfully about – a prey to 'blacks' and dirt.

It was into a place of this kind that Mr. Ralph Nickleby gazed, as he sat with his hands in his pockets looking out of the window. He had fixed his eyes upon a distorted fir tree, planted by some former tenant in a tub that had once been green, and left there, years before, to rot away piecemeal. There was nothing very inviting in the object, but Mr. Nickleby was wrapt in a brown study, and sat contemplating it with far greater attention than, in a more conscious mood, he would have deigned to bestow upon the rarest exotic. At length, his eyes wandered to a little dirty window on the left, through which the face of the clerk was dimly visible; that worthy chancing to look up, he beckoned him to attend.

In obedience to this summons the clerk got off the high stool (to which he had communicated a high polish by countless gettings off and on), and presented himself in Mr. Nickleby's room. He was a tall man of middle age, with two goggle eyes whereof one was a fixture, a rubicund nose, a cadaverous face, and a suit of clothes (if the term be allowable when they suited him not at all) much the worse for wear, very much too small, and placed upon such a short allowance of buttons that it was marvellous how he contrived to keep them on.

'Was that half-past twelve, Noggs?' said Mr. Nickleby, in a sharp and grating voice.

'Not more than five-and-twenty minutes by the – ' Noggs was going to add public-house clock, but recollecting himself, substituted 'regular time.'

'My watch has stopped,' said Mr. Nickleby; 'I don't know from

what cause.'

'Not wound up,' said Noggs.

'Yes it is,' said Mr. Nickleby.

'Over-wound then,' rejoined Noggs.

'That can't very well be,' observed Mr. Nickleby.

'Must be,' said Noggs.

'Well!' said Mr. Nickleby, putting the repeater back in his pocket; 'perhaps it is.'

Noggs gave a peculiar grunt, as was his custom at the end of all disputes with his master, to imply that he (Noggs) triumphed; and (as he rarely spoke to anybody unless somebody spoke to him) fell into a grim silence, and rubbed his hands slowly over each other: cracking the joints of his fingers, and squeezing them into all possible distortions. The incessant performance of this routine on every occasion, and the communication of a fixed and rigid look to his unaffected eye, so as to make it uniform with the other, and to render it impossible for anybody to determine where or at what he was looking, were two among the numerous peculiarities of Mr Noggs, which struck an inexperienced observer at first sight.

'I am going to the London Tavern this morning,' said Mr. Nickleby.

'Public meeting?' inquired Noggs.

Mr. Nickleby nodded. 'I expect a letter from the solicitor respecting that mortgage of Ruddle's. If it comes at all, it will be here by the two o'clock delivery. I shall leave the city about

that time and walk to Charing Cross on the left-hand side of the way; if there are any letters, come and meet me, and bring them with you.'

Noggs nodded; and as he nodded, there came a ring at the office bell. The master looked up from his papers, and the clerk calmly remained in a stationary position.

'The bell,' said Noggs, as though in explanation. 'At home?'

'Yes.'

'To anybody?'

'Yes.'

'To the tax-gatherer?'

'No! Let him call again.'

Noggs gave vent to his usual grunt, as much as to say 'I thought so!' and, the ring being repeated, went to the door, whence he presently returned, ushering in, by the name of Mr. Bonney, a pale gentleman in a violent hurry, who, with his hair standing up in great disorder all over his head, and a very narrow white cravat tied loosely round his throat, looked as if he had been knocked up in the night and had not dressed himself since.

'My dear Nickleby,' said the gentleman, taking off a white hat which was so full of papers that it would scarcely stick upon his head, 'there's not a moment to lose; I have a cab at the door. Sir Matthew Pupker takes the chair, and three members of Parliament are positively coming. I have seen two of them safely out of bed. The third, who was at Crockford's all night, has just gone home to put a clean shirt on, and take a bottle or two of

soda water, and will certainly be with us, in time to address the meeting. He is a little excited by last night, but never mind that; he always speaks the stronger for it.'

'It seems to promise pretty well,' said Mr. Ralph Nickleby, whose deliberate manner was strongly opposed to the vivacity of the other man of business.

'Pretty well!' echoed Mr. Bonney. 'It's the finest idea that was ever started. "United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and Punctual Delivery Company. Capital, five millions, in five hundred thousand shares of ten pounds each." Why the very name will get the shares up to a premium in ten days.'

'And when they *are* at a premium,' said Mr. Ralph Nickleby, smiling.

'When they are, you know what to do with them as well as any man alive, and how to back quietly out at the right time,' said Mr. Bonney, slapping the capitalist familiarly on the shoulder. 'By-the-bye, what a *very* remarkable man that clerk of yours is.'

'Yes, poor devil!' replied Ralph, drawing on his gloves. 'Though Newman Noggs kept his horses and hounds once.'

'Ay, ay?' said the other carelessly.

'Yes,' continued Ralph, 'and not many years ago either; but he squandered his money, invested it anyhow, borrowed at interest, and in short made first a thorough fool of himself, and then a beggar. He took to drinking, and had a touch of paralysis, and then came here to borrow a pound, as in his better days I had – '

‘Done business with him,’ said Mr. Bonney with a meaning look.

‘Just so,’ replied Ralph; ‘I couldn’t lend it, you know.’

‘Oh, of course not.’

‘But as I wanted a clerk just then, to open the door and so forth, I took him out of charity, and he has remained with me ever since. He is a little mad, I think,’ said Mr. Nickleby, calling up a charitable look, ‘but he is useful enough, poor creature – useful enough.’

The kind-hearted gentleman omitted to add that Newman Noggs, being utterly destitute, served him for rather less than the usual wages of a boy of thirteen; and likewise failed to mention in his hasty chronicle, that his eccentric taciturnity rendered him an especially valuable person in a place where much business was done, of which it was desirable no mention should be made out of doors. The other gentleman was plainly impatient to be gone, however, and as they hurried into the hackney cabriolet immediately afterwards, perhaps Mr. Nickleby forgot to mention circumstances so unimportant.

There was a great bustle in Bishopsgate Street Within, as they drew up, and (it being a windy day) half-a-dozen men were tacking across the road under a press of paper, bearing gigantic announcements that a Public Meeting would be holden at one o’clock precisely, to take into consideration the propriety of petitioning Parliament in favour of the United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and

Punctual Delivery Company, capital five millions, in five hundred thousand shares of ten pounds each; which sums were duly set forth in fat black figures of considerable size. Mr. Bonney elbowed his way briskly upstairs, receiving in his progress many low bows from the waiters who stood on the landings to show the way; and, followed by Mr. Nickleby, dived into a suite of apartments behind the great public room: in the second of which was a business-looking table, and several business-looking people.

'Hear!' cried a gentleman with a double chin, as Mr. Bonney presented himself. 'Chair, gentlemen, chair!'

The new-comers were received with universal approbation, and Mr. Bonney bustled up to the top of the table, took off his hat, ran his fingers through his hair, and knocked a hackney-coachman's knock on the table with a little hammer: whereat several gentlemen cried 'Hear!' and nodded slightly to each other, as much as to say what spirited conduct that was. Just at this moment, a waiter, feverish with agitation, tore into the room, and throwing the door open with a crash, shouted 'Sir Matthew Pupker!'

The committee stood up and clapped their hands for joy, and while they were clapping them, in came Sir Matthew Pupker, attended by two live members of Parliament, one Irish and one Scotch, all smiling and bowing, and looking so pleasant that it seemed a perfect marvel how any man could have the heart to vote against them. Sir Matthew Pupker especially, who had a

little round head with a flaxen wig on the top of it, fell into such a paroxysm of bows, that the wig threatened to be jerked off, every instant. When these symptoms had in some degree subsided, the gentlemen who were on speaking terms with Sir Matthew Pupker, or the two other members, crowded round them in three little groups, near one or other of which the gentlemen who were *not* on speaking terms with Sir Matthew Pupker or the two other members, stood lingering, and smiling, and rubbing their hands, in the desperate hope of something turning up which might bring them into notice. All this time, Sir Matthew Pupker and the two other members were relating to their separate circles what the intentions of government were, about taking up the bill; with a full account of what the government had said in a whisper the last time they dined with it, and how the government had been observed to wink when it said so; from which premises they were at no loss to draw the conclusion, that if the government had one object more at heart than another, that one object was the welfare and advantage of the United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and Punctual Delivery Company.

Meanwhile, and pending the arrangement of the proceedings, and a fair division of the speechifying, the public in the large room were eyeing, by turns, the empty platform, and the ladies in the Music Gallery. In these amusements the greater portion of them had been occupied for a couple of hours before, and as the most agreeable diversions pall upon the taste on a too protracted enjoyment of them, the sterner spirits now began to hammer the

floor with their boot-heels, and to express their dissatisfaction by various hoots and cries. These vocal exertions, emanating from the people who had been there longest, naturally proceeded from those who were nearest to the platform and furthest from the policemen in attendance, who having no great mind to fight their way through the crowd, but entertaining nevertheless a praiseworthy desire to do something to quell the disturbance, immediately began to drag forth, by the coat tails and collars, all the quiet people near the door; at the same time dealing out various smart and tingling blows with their truncheons, after the manner of that ingenious actor, Mr. Punch: whose brilliant example, both in the fashion of his weapons and their use, this branch of the executive occasionally follows.

Several very exciting skirmishes were in progress, when a loud shout attracted the attention even of the belligerents, and then there poured on to the platform, from a door at the side, a long line of gentlemen with their hats off, all looking behind them, and uttering vociferous cheers; the cause whereof was sufficiently explained when Sir Matthew Pupker and the two other real members of Parliament came to the front, amidst deafening shouts, and testified to each other in dumb motions that they had never seen such a glorious sight as that, in the whole course of their public career.

At length, and at last, the assembly left off shouting, but Sir Matthew Pupker being voted into the chair, they underwent a relapse which lasted five minutes. This over, Sir Matthew Pupker

went on to say what must be his feelings on that great occasion, and what must be that occasion in the eyes of the world, and what must be the intelligence of his fellow-countrymen before him, and what must be the wealth and respectability of his honourable friends behind him, and lastly, what must be the importance to the wealth, the happiness, the comfort, the liberty, the very existence of a free and great people, of such an Institution as the United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and Punctual Delivery Company!

Mr. Bonney then presented himself to move the first resolution; and having run his right hand through his hair, and planted his left, in an easy manner, in his ribs, he consigned his hat to the care of the gentleman with the double chin (who acted as a species of bottle-holder to the orators generally), and said he would read to them the first resolution – 'That this meeting views with alarm and apprehension, the existing state of the Muffin Trade in this Metropolis and its neighbourhood; that it considers the Muffin Boys, as at present constituted, wholly underserving the confidence of the public; and that it deems the whole Muffin system alike prejudicial to the health and morals of the people, and subversive of the best interests of a great commercial and mercantile community.' The honourable gentleman made a speech which drew tears from the eyes of the ladies, and awakened the liveliest emotions in every individual present. He had visited the houses of the poor in the various districts of London, and had found them destitute

of the slightest vestige of a muffin, which there appeared too much reason to believe some of these indigent persons did not taste from year's end to year's end. He had found that among muffin-sellers there existed drunkenness, debauchery, and profligacy, which he attributed to the debasing nature of their employment as at present exercised; he had found the same vices among the poorer class of people who ought to be muffin consumers; and this he attributed to the despair engendered by their being placed beyond the reach of that nutritious article, which drove them to seek a false stimulant in intoxicating liquors. He would undertake to prove before a committee of the House of Commons, that there existed a combination to keep up the price of muffins, and to give the bellmen a monopoly; he would prove it by bellmen at the bar of that House; and he would also prove, that these men corresponded with each other by secret words and signs as 'Snooks,' 'Walker,' 'Ferguson,' 'Is Murphy right?' and many others. It was this melancholy state of things that the Company proposed to correct; firstly, by prohibiting, under heavy penalties, all private muffin trading of every description; secondly, by themselves supplying the public generally, and the poor at their own homes, with muffins of first quality at reduced prices. It was with this object that a bill had been introduced into Parliament by their patriotic chairman Sir Matthew Pupker; it was this bill that they had met to support; it was the supporters of this bill who would confer undying brightness and splendour upon England, under the name of the

United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and Punctual Delivery Company; he would add, with a capital of Five Millions, in five hundred thousand shares of ten pounds each.

Mr. Ralph Nickleby seconded the resolution, and another gentleman having moved that it be amended by the insertion of the words 'and crumpet' after the word 'muffin,' whenever it occurred, it was carried triumphantly. Only one man in the crowd cried 'No!' and he was promptly taken into custody, and straightway borne off.

The second resolution, which recognised the expediency of immediately abolishing 'all muffin (or crumpet) sellers, all traders in muffins (or crumpets) of whatsoever description, whether male or female, boys or men, ringing hand-bells or otherwise,' was moved by a grievous gentleman of semi-clerical appearance, who went at once into such deep pathetics, that he knocked the first speaker clean out of the course in no time. You might have heard a pin fall – a pin! a feather – as he described the cruelties inflicted on muffin boys by their masters, which he very wisely urged were in themselves a sufficient reason for the establishment of that inestimable company. It seemed that the unhappy youths were nightly turned out into the wet streets at the most inclement periods of the year, to wander about, in darkness and rain – or it might be hail or snow – for hours together, without shelter, food, or warmth; and let the public never forget upon the latter point, that while the muffins were provided with warm

clothing and blankets, the boys were wholly unprovided for, and left to their own miserable resources. (Shame!) The honourable gentleman related one case of a muffin boy, who having been exposed to this inhuman and barbarous system for no less than five years, at length fell a victim to a cold in the head, beneath which he gradually sunk until he fell into a perspiration and recovered; this he could vouch for, on his own authority, but he had heard (and he had no reason to doubt the fact) of a still more heart-rending and appalling circumstance. He had heard of the case of an orphan muffin boy, who, having been run over by a hackney carriage, had been removed to the hospital, had undergone the amputation of his leg below the knee, and was now actually pursuing his occupation on crutches. Fountain of justice, were these things to last!

This was the department of the subject that took the meeting, and this was the style of speaking to enlist their sympathies. The men shouted; the ladies wept into their pocket-handkerchiefs till they were moist, and waved them till they were dry; the excitement was tremendous; and Mr Nickleby whispered his friend that the shares were thenceforth at a premium of five-and-twenty per cent.

The resolution was, of course, carried with loud acclamations, every man holding up both hands in favour of it, as he would in his enthusiasm have held up both legs also, if he could have conveniently accomplished it. This done, the draft of the proposed petition was read at length: and the petition said, as

all petitions *do* say, that the petitioners were very humble, and the petitioned very honourable, and the object very virtuous; therefore (said the petition) the bill ought to be passed into a law at once, to the everlasting honour and glory of that most honourable and glorious Commons of England in Parliament assembled.

Then, the gentleman who had been at Crockford's all night, and who looked something the worse about the eyes in consequence, came forward to tell his fellow-countrymen what a speech he meant to make in favour of that petition whenever it should be presented, and how desperately he meant to taunt the parliament if they rejected the bill; and to inform them also, that he regretted his honourable friends had not inserted a clause rendering the purchase of muffins and crumpets compulsory upon all classes of the community, which he – opposing all half-measures, and preferring to go the extreme animal – pledged himself to propose and divide upon, in committee. After announcing this determination, the honourable gentleman grew jocular; and as patent boots, lemon-coloured kid gloves, and a fur coat collar, assist jokes materially, there was immense laughter and much cheering, and moreover such a brilliant display of ladies' pocket-handkerchiefs, as threw the grievous gentleman quite into the shade.

And when the petition had been read and was about to be adopted, there came forward the Irish member (who was a young gentleman of ardent temperament,) with such a speech as only

an Irish member can make, breathing the true soul and spirit of poetry, and poured forth with such fervour, that it made one warm to look at him; in the course whereof, he told them how he would demand the extension of that great boon to his native country; how he would claim for her equal rights in the muffin laws as in all other laws; and how he yet hoped to see the day when crumpets should be toasted in her lowly cabins, and muffin bells should ring in her rich green valleys. And, after him, came the Scotch member, with various pleasant allusions to the probable amount of profits, which increased the good humour that the poetry had awakened; and all the speeches put together did exactly what they were intended to do, and established in the hearers' minds that there was no speculation so promising, or at the same time so praiseworthy, as the United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and Punctual Delivery Company.

So, the petition in favour of the bill was agreed upon, and the meeting adjourned with acclamations, and Mr. Nickleby and the other directors went to the office to lunch, as they did every day at half-past one o'clock; and to remunerate themselves for which trouble, (as the company was yet in its infancy,) they only charged three guineas each man for every such attendance.

CHAPTER 3

Mr. Ralph Nickleby receives Sad Tidings of his Brother, but bears up nobly against the Intelligence communicated to him. The Reader is informed how he liked Nicholas, who is herein introduced, and how kindly he proposed to make his Fortune at once.

Having rendered his zealous assistance towards dispatching the lunch, with all that promptitude and energy which are among the most important qualities that men of business can possess, Mr. Ralph Nickleby took a cordial farewell of his fellow-speculators, and bent his steps westward in unwonted good humour. As he passed St 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.

'Ah! Newman,' said Mr. Nickleby, looking up as he pursued his occupation. 'The letter about the mortgage has come, has it? I thought it would.'

'Wrong,' replied Newman.

'What! and nobody called respecting it?' inquired Mr. Nickleby, pausing. Noggs shook his head.

'What *has* come, then?' inquired Mr. Nickleby.

'I have,' said Newman.

'What else?' demanded the master, sternly.

‘This,’ said Newman, drawing a sealed letter slowly from his pocket. ‘Post-mark, Strand, black wax, black border, woman’s hand, C. N. in the corner.’

‘Black wax?’ said Mr. Nickleby, glancing at the letter. ‘I know something of that hand, too. Newman, I shouldn’t be surprised if my brother were dead.’

‘I don’t think you would,’ said Newman, quietly.

‘Why not, sir?’ demanded Mr. Nickleby.

‘You never are surprised,’ replied Newman, ‘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 now hit the time to a second, began winding up his watch.

‘It is as I expected, Newman,’ said Mr. Nickleby, while he was thus engaged. ‘He *is* dead. Dear me! Well, that’s sudden thing. I shouldn’t have thought it, really.’ With these touching expressions of sorrow, Mr Nickleby replaced his watch in his fob, and, fitting on his gloves to a nicety, turned upon his way, and walked slowly westward with his hands behind him.

‘Children alive?’ inquired Noggs, 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 paralysis, or grief, or inward laughter, nobody but himself could possibly explain. The expression of a man's face is commonly a help to his thoughts, or glossary on his speech; but the countenance of Newman Noggs, in his ordinary moods, was a problem which no stretch of ingenuity could solve.

'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, and many other reflections of a similar kind, Mr. Nickleby made the best of his way to the Strand, and, referring to his letter as if to ascertain the number of the house he wanted, stopped at a private door about half-way down that crowded thoroughfare.

A miniature painter lived there, for there was a large gilt frame screwed upon the street-door, in which were displayed, upon a black velvet ground, two portraits of naval dress coats with faces looking out of them, and telescopes attached; one of a young gentleman in a very vermilion uniform, flourishing a

sabre; and one of a literary character with a high forehead, a pen and ink, six books, and a curtain. There was, moreover, a touching representation of a young lady reading a manuscript in an unfathomable forest, and a charming whole length of a large-headed little boy, sitting on a stool with his legs fore-shortened to the size of salt-spoons. Besides these works of art, there were a great many heads of old ladies and gentlemen smirking at each other out of blue and brown skies, and an elegantly written card of terms with an embossed border.

Mr. Nickleby glanced at these frivolities with great contempt, and gave a double knock, which, having been thrice repeated, was answered by a servant girl with an uncommonly dirty face.

'Is Mrs. Nickleby at home, girl?' demanded Ralph sharply.

'Her name ain't Nickleby,' said the girl, 'La Creevy, you mean.'

Mr. Nickleby looked very indignant at the handmaid on being thus corrected, and demanded with much asperity what she meant; which she was about to state, when a female voice proceeding from a perpendicular staircase at the end of the passage, inquired who was wanted.

'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?'

'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; I can't allow a knock except when the bell's broke, and then it must be two single ones.'

'Here,' said Ralph, walking in without more parley, '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 stepping into the first floor, was received by the wearer of the yellow head-dress, who had a gown to correspond, and was of much the same colour herself. Miss La Creevy was a mincing young lady of fifty, and Miss La Creevy's apartment was the gilt frame downstairs on a larger scale and something dirtier.

'Hem!' said Miss La Creevy, coughing delicately behind her black silk mitten. 'A miniature, I presume. A very strongly-marked countenance for the purpose, sir. Have you ever sat before?'

'You mistake my purpose, I see, ma'am,' replied Mr. Nickleby, in his usual blunt fashion. 'I have no money to throw away on miniatures, ma'am, and nobody to give one to (thank God) if I had. Seeing you on the stairs, I wanted to ask a question of you, about some lodgers here.'

Miss La Creevy coughed once more – this cough was to conceal her disappointment – and said, 'Oh, indeed!'

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

Yes it did, Miss La Creevy replied. The upper part of the house belonged to her, and as she had no necessity for the second-floor rooms just then, she was in the habit of letting them. Indeed, there was a lady from the country and her two children in them, at that present speaking.

‘A widow, ma’am?’ said Ralph.

‘Yes, she is a widow,’ replied the lady.

‘A *poor* widow, ma’am,’ said Ralph, with a powerful emphasis on that little adjective which conveys so much.

‘Well, I’m afraid she *is* poor,’ rejoined Miss La Creevy.

‘I happen to know that she is, ma’am,’ said Ralph. ‘Now, what business has a poor widow in such a house as this, ma’am?’

‘Very true,’ replied Miss La Creevy, not at all displeased with this implied compliment to the apartments. ‘Exceedingly true.’

‘I know her circumstances intimately, ma’am,’ said Ralph; ‘in fact, I am a relation of the family; and I should recommend you not to keep them here, ma’am.’

‘I should hope, if there was any incompatibility to meet the pecuniary obligations,’ said Miss La Creevy with another cough, ‘that the lady’s family would – ’

‘No they wouldn’t, ma’am,’ interrupted Ralph, hastily. ‘Don’t think it.’

‘If I am to understand that,’ said Miss La Creevy, ‘the case wears a very different appearance.’

‘You may understand it then, ma’am,’ said Ralph, ‘and make your arrangements accordingly. 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,’ replied Miss La Creevy. ‘Mrs. Nickleby paid the first week in advance.’

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

‘Certainly,’ said Miss La Creevy, rubbing her hands, ‘if Mrs. Nickleby took the apartments without the means of paying for them, it was very unbecoming a lady.’

‘Of course it was, ma’am,’ said Ralph.

‘And naturally,’ continued Miss La Creevy, ‘I who am, *at present*– hem – an unprotected female, cannot afford to lose by the apartments.’

‘Of course you can’t, ma’am,’ replied Ralph.

‘Though at the same time,’ added Miss La Creevy, who was plainly wavering between her good-nature and her interest, ‘I have nothing whatever to say against the lady, who is extremely pleasant and affable, though, poor thing, she seems 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, for these encomiums on poverty irritated him; ‘I have done my duty, and

perhaps more than I ought: of course nobody will thank me for saying what I have.'

'I am sure I am very much obliged to you at least, sir,' said Miss La Creevy in a gracious manner. 'Would you do me the favour to look at a few specimens of my portrait painting?'

'You're very good, ma'am,' said Mr. Nickleby, making off with great speed; 'but as I have a visit to pay upstairs, and my time is precious, I really can't.'

'At any other time when you are passing, I shall be most happy,' said Miss La Creevy. 'Perhaps you will have the kindness to take a card of terms with you? Thank you – good-morning!'

'Good-morning, ma'am,' said Ralph, shutting the door abruptly after him to prevent any further conversation. 'Now for my sister-in-law. Bah!'

Climbing up another perpendicular flight, composed with great mechanical ingenuity of nothing but corner stairs, Mr. Ralph Nickleby stopped to take breath on the landing, when he was overtaken by the handmaid, whom the politeness of Miss La Creevy had dispatched to announce him, and who had apparently been making a variety of unsuccessful attempts, since their last interview, to wipe her dirty face clean, upon an apron much dirtier.

'What name?' said the girl.

'Nickleby,' replied Ralph.

'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 leant 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, with an ill-favoured frown, 'you are Nicholas, I suppose?'

'That is my name, sir,' replied the youth.

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

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

'It was no *un*common loss, ma'am,' returned Ralph, as he coolly unbuttoned his spencer. '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 pug-dogs 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. '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, quietly.

'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 very nearly nineteen,' replied the widow.

'Nineteen, eh!' said Ralph; '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 the uncle, eyeing him contemptuously.

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

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

'Dear Nicholas, pray,' urged the young lady.

'Hold your tongue, 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. The face of the old man was stern, hard-featured, and forbidding; that of the

young one, open, handsome, and ingenuous. The old man's eye was keen with the twinklings of avarice and cunning; the young man's bright with the light of intelligence and spirit. His figure was somewhat slight, but manly and well formed; and, apart from all the grace of youth and comeliness, there was an emanation from the warm young heart in his look and bearing which kept the old man down.

However striking such a contrast as this may be to lookers-on, none ever feel it with half the keenness or acuteness of perfection with which it strikes to the very soul of him whose inferiority it marks. It galled Ralph to the heart's core, and he hated Nicholas from that hour.

The mutual inspection was at length brought to a close by Ralph withdrawing his eyes, with a great show of disdain, and calling Nicholas 'a boy.' This word is much used as a term of reproach by elderly gentlemen towards their juniors: probably with the view of deluding society into the belief that if they could be young again, they wouldn't on any account.

'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 children. 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, very unceremoniously.

‘We must try and get you apprenticed at some boarding-school,’ said Ralph. ‘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 (stretch a point, and say the latter). ‘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 someday,’ 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, instead of being a burden upon you, and increasing your distress. My brother was a thoughtless, inconsiderate man, Mrs. Nickleby, and nobody, I am sure, can have better reason to feel that, than you.'

This appeal set the widow upon thinking that perhaps she might have made a more successful venture with her one thousand pounds, and then she began to reflect what a comfortable sum it would have been just then; which dismal thoughts made her tears flow faster, and in the excess of these griefs she (being a well-meaning woman enough, but weak withal) fell first to deploring her hard fate, and then to remarking, with many sobs, that to be sure she had been a slave to poor Nicholas, and had often told him she might have married better (as indeed she had, very often), and that she never knew in his lifetime how the money went, but that if he had confided in her they might all have been better off that day; with other bitter recollections common to most married ladies, either during their coverture, or afterwards, or at both periods. Mrs. Nickleby concluded by lamenting that the dear departed had never deigned to profit by her advice, save on one occasion; which was a strictly veracious statement, inasmuch as he had only acted upon it once, and had ruined himself in consequence.

Mr. Ralph Nickleby heard all this with a half-smile; and when

the widow had finished, quietly took up the subject where it had been left before the above outbreak.

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

'Of course I am,' replied Nicholas haughtily.

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

With this exordium, Mr. Ralph Nickleby took a newspaper from his pocket, and after unfolding it, 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, single stick (if required), writing, arithmetic, fortification, 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, Snow Hill. N.B. An able assistant wanted. Annual salary 5 pounds. 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 situation, 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 hitherto remained silent and absorbed in thought. ‘If I am fortunate enough to be appointed to this post, sir, for which I am so imperfectly qualified, what will become of those I leave behind?’

‘Your mother and sister, sir,’ replied Ralph, ‘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 me. Let us try our fortune with Mr Squeers at once; he can but refuse.’

‘He won’t do that,’ said Ralph. ‘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 come back from the continent, procured me some handsome appointment. 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, and burst

into tears.

This simple family, born and bred in retirement, and wholly unacquainted with what is called the world – a conventional phrase which, being interpreted, often signifieth all the rascals in it – mingled their tears together at the thought of their first separation; and, this first gush of feeling over, were proceeding to dilate with all the buoyancy of untried hope on the bright prospects before them, when Mr. Ralph Nickleby suggested, that if they lost time, some more fortunate candidate might deprive Nicholas of the stepping-stone to fortune which the advertisement pointed out, and so undermine all their air-built castles. This timely reminder effectually stopped the conversation. Nicholas, having carefully copied the address of Mr. Squeers, the uncle and nephew issued forth together in quest of that accomplished gentleman; Nicholas firmly persuading himself that he had done his relative great injustice in disliking him at first sight; and Mrs. Nickleby being at some pains to inform her daughter that she was sure he was a much more kindly disposed person than he seemed; which, Miss Nickleby dutifully remarked, he might very easily be.

To tell the truth, the good lady's opinion had been not a little influenced by her brother-in-law's appeal to her better understanding, and his implied compliment to her high deserts; and although she had dearly loved her husband, and still doted on her children, he had struck so successfully on one of those little jarring chords in the human heart (Ralph was well acquainted

with its worst weaknesses, though he knew nothing of its best), that she had already begun seriously to consider herself the amiable and suffering victim of her late husband's imprudence.

CHAPTER 4

Nicholas and his Uncle (to secure the Fortune without loss of time) wait upon Mr. Wackford Squeers, the Yorkshire Schoolmaster

Snow Hill! What kind of place can the quiet townspeople who see the words emblazoned, in all the legibility of gilt letters and dark shading, on the north-country coaches, take Snow Hill to be? All people have some undefined and shadowy notion of a place whose name is frequently before their eyes, or often in their ears. What a vast number of random ideas there must be perpetually floating about, regarding this same Snow Hill. The name is such a good one. Snow Hill – Snow Hill too, coupled with a Saracen's Head: picturing to us by a double association of ideas, something stern and rugged! A bleak desolate tract of country, open to piercing blasts and fierce wintry storms – a dark, cold, gloomy heath, lonely by day, and scarcely to be thought of by honest folks at night – a place which solitary wayfarers shun, and where desperate robbers congregate; – this, or something like this, should be the prevalent notion of Snow Hill, in those remote and rustic parts, through which the Saracen's Head, like some grim apparition, rushes each day and night with mysterious and ghost-like punctuality; holding its swift and headlong course in all weathers, and seeming to bid defiance to the very elements

themselves.

The reality is rather different, but by no means to be despised notwithstanding. There, at the very core of London, in the heart of its business and animation, in the midst of a whirl of noise and motion: stemming as it were the giant currents of life that flow ceaselessly on from different quarters, and meet beneath its walls: stands Newgate; and in that crowded street on which it frowns so darkly – within a few feet of the squalid tottering houses – upon the very spot on which the vendors of soup and fish and damaged fruit are now plying their trades – scores of human beings, amidst a roar of sounds to which even the tumult of a great city is as nothing, four, six, or eight strong men at a time, have been hurried violently and swiftly from the world, when the scene has been rendered frightful with excess of human life; when curious eyes have glared from casement and house-top, and wall and pillar; and when, in the mass of white and upturned faces, the dying wretch, in his all-comprehensive look of agony, has met not one – not one – that bore the impress of pity or compassion.

Near to the jail, and by consequence near to Smithfield also, and the Compter, and the bustle and noise of the city; and just on that particular part of Snow Hill where omnibus horses going eastward seriously think of falling down on purpose, and where horses in hackney cabriolets going westward not unfrequently fall by accident, is the coach-yard of the Saracen's Head Inn; its portal guarded by two Saracens' heads and shoulders, which

it was once the pride and glory of the choice spirits of this metropolis to pull down at night, but which have for some time remained in undisturbed tranquillity; possibly because this species of humour is now confined to St James's parish, where door knockers are preferred as being more portable, and bell-wires esteemed as convenient toothpicks. Whether this be the reason or not, there they are, frowning upon you from each side of the gateway. The inn itself garnished with another Saracen's Head, frowns upon you from the top of the yard; while from the door of the hind boot of all the red coaches that are standing therein, there glares a small Saracen's Head, with a twin expression to the large Saracens' Heads below, so that the general appearance of the pile is decidedly of the Saracenic order.

When you walk up this yard, you will see the booking-office on your left, and the tower of St Sepulchre's church, darting abruptly up into the sky, on your right, and a gallery of bedrooms on both sides. Just before you, you will observe a long window with the words 'coffee-room' legibly painted above it; and looking out of that window, you would have seen in addition, 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, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two. The eye he had, was unquestionably useful, but decidedly not ornamental: being of a greenish grey, and in shape resembling the fan-light 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 middle 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, and as if he were in a perpetual state of astonishment at finding himself so respectable.

Mr. Squeers was standing in a box by one of the coffee-room fire-places, fitted with one such table as is usually seen in coffee-rooms, and two of extraordinary shapes and dimensions made to suit the angles of the partition. In a corner of the seat, was a very small deal trunk, tied round with a scanty piece of cord; and on the trunk was perched – his lace-up half-boots and corduroy trousers dangling in the air – 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, resuming his complaint, '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 an 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,' replied the little boy.

'Nothing, sir!' exclaimed Mr. Squeers.

'Please sir, I sneezed,' rejoined the boy, trembling till the little 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 the 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 very hard with the Beggar’s Petition in printed calico.

‘Then do so at once, sir,’ said Squeers. ‘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 extreme surprise.

'The gentleman,' said the stranger, 'that advertised in the Times newspaper?'

' – 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 gentleman? 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 colour way. My name is Snawley, sir,' said the stranger.

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,' replied Mr. Squeers, 'but I don't think you could possibly do a better thing.'

'Hem!' said the other. 'Twenty pounds per annewum, I believe, Mr. Squeers?'

'Guineas,' 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 to your connection, sir, and make it up that way.’

‘They are not great eaters,’ said Mr. Snawley.

‘Oh! that doesn’t matter at all,’ replied Squeers. ‘We don’t consider the boys’ appetites at our establishment.’ This was strictly true; they did not.

‘Every wholesome luxury, sir, that Yorkshire can afford,’ continued Squeers; ‘every beautiful moral that Mrs. Squeers can instil; 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 pious.’

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

‘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, – a Taunton boy that, sir.'

'Is he, 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 a sitting upon now. Each boy is required to bring, sir, two suits of clothes, six shirts, six pair of stockings, two nightcaps, two pocket-handkerchiefs, two pair 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, and bearing in his countenance an expression of much mortification and sanctity; so, his smiling without any obvious reason was the more remarkable.

'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. What are these boys; – natural children?'

‘No,’ rejoined Snawley, meeting the gaze of the schoolmaster’s one eye. ‘They ain’t.’

‘I thought they might be,’ said Squeers, coolly. ‘We have a good many of them; that boy’s one.’

‘Him in the next box?’ said Snawley.

Squeers nodded in the affirmative; his companion took another peep at the little boy on the trunk, and, turning round again, looked as if he were quite disappointed to see him so much like other boys, and said he should hardly have thought it.

‘He is,’ cried Squeers. ‘But about these boys of yours; you wanted to speak to me?’

‘Yes,’ replied Snawley. ‘The fact is, I am not their father, Mr. Squeers. I’m only their father-in-law.’

‘Oh! Is that it?’ said the schoolmaster. ‘That explains it at once. I was wondering what the devil you were going to send them to Yorkshire for. Ha! ha! Oh, I understand now.’

‘You see I have married the mother,’ pursued Snawley; ‘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 coming 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 father-in-law, 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 father-in-law, 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, as a person whose business it is to take charge of youth, you place the strongest confidence in my unimpeachable integrity, liberality, religious principles, and ability?'

'Certainly I do,' replied the father-in-law, 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 fire-place. '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: as indeed he was.

'Perhaps you recollect me?' said Ralph, looking narrowly at the schoolmaster.

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

'I did,' rejoined Ralph.

'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, testily. 'It's in the advertisement.'

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

‘And in the matter of fact besides,’ 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 instil 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.

‘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!’ said Ralph. ‘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,’ said Nicholas, addressing Mr. Squeers, ‘that you object to my youth, and to my not being a Master of Arts?’

‘The absence of a college degree *is* an objection,’ replied Squeers, looking as grave as he could, and considerably puzzled, no less by the contrast between the simplicity of the nephew and the worldly manner of the uncle, than by the incomprehensible allusion to the young noblemen under his tuition.

‘Look here, sir,’ 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, or thereabouts,’ said Ralph.

‘That I see,’ observed the schoolmaster.

‘So do I,’ said Mr. Snawley, thinking it as well to back his new friend occasionally.

‘His father is dead, he is wholly ignorant of the world, has no resources whatever, and wants something to do,’ said Ralph. ‘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, half imitating the sneer with which the old gentleman was regarding his unconscious relative.

‘I do, of course,’ said Nicholas, eagerly.

‘He does, of course, you observe,’ said Ralph, in the same dry, hard manner. ‘If any caprice of temper should induce him to cast aside this golden opportunity before he has brought it to perfection, I consider myself absolved from extending any assistance to his mother and 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 installed 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,’ replied Nicholas; ‘I never shall forget this kindness.’

‘Take care you don’t,’ replied his uncle. ‘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,’ said Nicholas. ‘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,’ replied Nicholas; ‘and you’re to have the goodness to wait till he comes home, if you please.’

‘Uncle!’ cried Noggs.

‘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, 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 sufficiently 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 (his sanguine imagination warming as he spoke) entered into a fervent and glowing description of all the honours and advantages to be derived from his appointment at that 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 that ever.

CHAPTER 5

Nicholas starts for Yorkshire. Of his Leave-taking and his Fellow-Travellers, and what befell them on the Road

If tears dropped into a trunk were charms to preserve its owner from sorrow and misfortune, Nicholas Nickleby would have commenced his expedition under most happy auspices. There was so much to be done, and so little time to do it in; so many kind words to be spoken, and such bitter pain in the hearts in which they rose to impede their utterance; that the little preparations for his journey were made mournfully indeed. A hundred things which the anxious care of his mother and sister deemed indispensable for his comfort, Nicholas insisted on leaving behind, as they might prove of some after use, or might be convertible into money if occasion required. A hundred affectionate contests on such points as these, took place on the sad night which preceded his departure; and, as the termination of every angerless dispute brought them nearer and nearer to the close of their slight preparations, Kate grew busier and busier, and wept more silently.

The box was packed at last, and then there came supper, with some little delicacy provided for the occasion, and as a set-off against the expense of which, Kate and her mother had feigned to dine when Nicholas was out. The poor lad nearly choked himself

by attempting to partake of it, and almost suffocated himself in affecting a jest or two, and forcing a melancholy laugh. Thus, they lingered on till the hour of separating for the night was long past; and then they found that they might as well have given vent to their real feelings before, for they could not suppress them, do what they would. So, they let them have their way, and even that was a relief.

Nicholas slept well 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 in pencil, to say the goodbye 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,' replied Nicholas.

'It's the fine arts that bring me out of bed, Mr. Nickleby,' returned the lady. 'I'm waiting for the light to carry out an idea.'

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

was like the family.

'To carry out an idea,' repeated Miss La Creevy; 'and that's the great convenience of living in a thoroughfare like the Strand. When I want a nose or an eye for any particular sitter, I have only to look out of window and wait till I get one.'

'Does it take long to get a nose, now?' inquired Nicholas, smiling.

'Why, that depends in a great measure on the pattern,' replied Miss La Creevy. 'Snubs and Romans are plentiful enough, and there are flats of all sorts and sizes when there's a meeting at Exeter Hall; but perfect aquilines, I am sorry to say, are scarce, and we generally use them for uniforms or public characters.'

'Indeed!' said Nicholas. 'If I should meet with any in my travels, I'll endeavour to sketch them for you.'

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

'I do, indeed,' replied Nicholas. 'Needs must, you know, when somebody drives. Necessity is my driver, and that is only another name for the same gentleman.'

'Well, I am very sorry for it; that's all I can say,' said Miss La Creevy; '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 intersected 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.'

It was very little that Nicholas knew of the world, but he guessed enough about its ways to think, that if he gave Miss La Creevy one little kiss, perhaps she might not be the less kindly disposed towards those he was leaving behind. So, he gave her three or four with a kind of jocose gallantry, and Miss La Creevy evinced no greater symptoms of displeasure than declaring, as she adjusted her yellow turban, that she had never heard of such a thing, and couldn't have believed it possible.

Having terminated the unexpected interview in this satisfactory manner, Nicholas hastily withdrew himself from the house. By the time he had found a man to carry his box it was only seven o'clock, so he walked slowly on, a little in advance of the porter, and very probably with not half as light a heart in his breast as the man had, although he had no waistcoat to cover it with, and had evidently, from the appearance of his other garments, been spending the night in a stable, and taking his breakfast at a pump.

Regarding, with no small curiosity and interest, all the busy preparations for the coming day which every street and almost

every house displayed; and thinking, now and then, that it seemed rather hard that so many people of all ranks and stations could earn a livelihood in London, and that he should be compelled to journey so far in search of one; Nicholas speedily arrived at the Saracen's Head, Snow Hill. Having dismissed his attendant, and seen the box safely deposited in the coach-office, he looked into the coffee-room in search of Mr. Squeers.

He found that learned gentleman 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 little boys.

'This is twopenn'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 twopenn'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 wery top, sir?' inquired the waiter. 'Why, the milk will be drownded.'

'Never you mind that,' replied Mr. Squeers. '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,’ said Squeers; ‘there’s plenty of time. Conquer your passions, boys, and don’t be eager after vittles.’ As he uttered this moral precept, Mr. Squeers took a large bite out of the cold beef, and recognised Nicholas.

‘Sit down, Mr. Nickleby,’ said Squeers. ‘Here we are, a breakfasting 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?’ said Squeers. ‘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, isn’t it, Mr. Nickleby?’

‘Very shocking, sir,’ said Nicholas.

‘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 as many portions as there were children, ‘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 (who was in high good humour after his meal) 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, and all these offices were in his department. 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 coach-yard.

'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, and thus prevented Mr. Squeers from being impressed with the fact in a peculiarly disagreeable manner.

'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 goodbye! Mother, look forward to our meeting again someday! 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 way-bill; 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 too, and rattling over the stones of Smithfield.

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. Between the manual exertion and the mental anxiety attendant upon this task, he was not a little relieved when the coach stopped at the Peacock at Islington. He was still more relieved when a hearty-looking gentleman, with a very good-humoured face, and a very fresh colour, got up behind, and proposed to take the other corner of the seat.

'If we put some of these youngsters in the middle,' said the new-comer, 'they'll be safer in case of their going to sleep; eh?'

‘If you’ll have the goodness, sir,’ replied Squeers, ‘that’ll be the very thing. Mr. Nickleby, take three of them boys between you and the gentleman. Belling and the youngest Snawley can sit between me and the guard. Three children,’ said Squeers, explaining to the stranger, ‘books as two.’

‘I have not the least objection I am sure,’ said the fresh-coloured gentleman; ‘I have a brother who wouldn’t object to book his six children as two at any butcher’s or baker’s in the kingdom, I dare say. Far from it.’

‘Six children, sir?’ exclaimed Squeers.

‘Yes, and all boys,’ replied the stranger.

‘Mr. Nickleby,’ said Squeers, in great haste, ‘catch hold of that basket. Let me give you a card, sir, of an establishment where those six boys can be brought up in an enlightened, liberal, and moral manner, with no mistake at all about it, for twenty guineas a year each – twenty guineas, sir – or I’d take all the boys together upon a average right through, and say a hundred pound a year for the lot.’

‘Oh!’ said the gentleman, glancing at the card, ‘you are the Mr. Squeers mentioned here, I presume?’

‘Yes, I am, sir,’ replied the worthy pedagogue; ‘Mr. Wackford Squeers is my name, and I’m very far from being ashamed of it. These are some of my boys, sir; that’s one of my assistants, sir – Mr. Nickleby, a gentleman’s son, and a good scholar, mathematical, classical, and commercial. We don’t do things by halves at our shop. All manner of learning my boys take

down, sir; the expense is never thought of; and they get paternal treatment and washing in.'

'Upon my word,' said the gentleman, glancing at Nicholas with a half-smile, and a more than half expression of surprise, 'these are advantages indeed.'

'You may say that, sir,' rejoined Squeers, thrusting his hands into his great-coat pockets. 'The most unexceptionable references are given and required. I wouldn't take a reference with any boy, that wasn't responsible for the payment of five pound five a quarter, no, not if you went down on your knees, and asked me, with the tears running down your face, to do it.'

'Highly considerate,' said the passenger.

'It's my great aim and end to be considerate, sir,' rejoined Squeers. 'Snawley, junior, if you don't leave off chattering your teeth, and shaking with the cold, I'll warm you with a severe thrashing in about half a minute's time.'

'Sit fast here, genelmen,' said the guard as he clambered up.

'All right behind there, Dick?' cried the coachman.

'All right,' was the reply. 'Off she goes!' And off she did go – if coaches be feminine – amidst a loud flourish from the guard's horn, and the calm approval of all the judges of coaches and coach-horses congregated at the Peacock, but more especially of the helpers, who stood, with the cloths over their arms, watching the coach till it disappeared, and then lounged admiringly stablewards, bestowing various gruff encomiums on the beauty of the turn-out.

When the guard (who was a stout old Yorkshireman) had blown himself quite out of breath, he put the horn into a little tunnel of a basket fastened to the coach-side for the purpose, and giving himself a plentiful shower of blows on the chest and shoulders, observed it was uncommon cold; after which, he demanded of every person separately whether he was going right through, and if not, where he *was* going. Satisfactory replies being made to these queries, he surmised that the roads were pretty heavy arter that fall last night, and took the liberty of asking whether any of them gentlemen carried a snuff-box. It happening that nobody did, he remarked with a mysterious air that he had heard a medical gentleman as went down to Grantham last week, say how that snuff-taking was bad for the eyes; but for his part he had never found it so, and what he said was, that everybody should speak as they found. Nobody attempting to controvert this position, he took a small brown-paper parcel out of his hat, and putting on a pair of horn spectacles (the writing being crabbed) read the direction half-a-dozen times over; having done which, he consigned the parcel to its old place, put up his spectacles again, and stared at everybody in turn. After this, he took another blow at the horn by way of refreshment; and, having now exhausted his usual topics of conversation, folded his arms as well as he could in so many coats, and falling into a solemn silence, looked carelessly at the familiar objects which met his eye on every side as the coach rolled on; the only things he seemed to care for, being horses and

droves of cattle, which he scrutinised with a critical air as they were passed upon the road.

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 – to stretch his legs as he said – and as he always came back from such excursions with a very red nose, 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. Nicholas and the good-tempered man found so many things to talk about, that between conversing together, and cheering up the boys, the time passed with them as rapidly as it could, under such adverse circumstances.

So the day wore on. At Eton Slocomb there was a good coach dinner, of which the box, the four front outsides, the one inside, Nicholas, the good-tempered man, and Mr. Squeers, partook; while the five little boys were put to thaw by the fire, and regaled with sandwiches. A stage or two further on, the lamps were lighted, and a great to-do occasioned by the taking up, at a roadside inn, of a very fastidious lady with an infinite variety of cloaks and small parcels, who loudly lamented, for the behoof of the outsides, the non-arrival of her own carriage which was

to have taken her on, and made the guard solemnly promise to stop every green chariot he saw coming; which, as it was a dark night and he was sitting with his face the other way, that officer undertook, with many fervent asseverations, to do. Lastly, the fastidious lady, finding there was a solitary gentleman inside, had a small lamp lighted which she carried in reticule, and being after much trouble shut in, the horses were put into a brisk canter and the coach was once more in rapid motion.

The night and the snow came on together, and dismal enough they were. There was no sound to be heard but the howling of the wind; for the noise of the wheels, and the tread of the horses' feet, were rendered inaudible by the thick coating of snow which covered the ground, and was fast increasing every moment. The streets of Stamford were deserted as they passed through the town; and its old churches rose, frowning and dark, from the whitened ground. Twenty miles further on, two of the front outside passengers, wisely availing themselves of their arrival at one of the best inns in England, turned in, for the night, at the George at Grantham. The remainder wrapped themselves more closely in their coats and cloaks, and leaving the light and warmth of the town behind them, pillowed themselves against the luggage, and prepared, with many half-suppressed moans, again to encounter the piercing blast which swept across the open country.

They were little more than a stage out of Grantham, or about halfway between it and Newark, when Nicholas, who had been

asleep for a short time, was suddenly roused by a violent jerk which nearly threw him from his seat. Grasping the rail, he found that the coach had sunk greatly on one side, though it was still dragged forward by the horses; and while – confused by their plunging and the loud screams of the lady inside – he hesitated, for an instant, whether to jump off or not, the vehicle turned easily over, and relieved him from all further uncertainty by flinging him into the road.

CHAPTER 6

In which the Occurrence of the Accident mentioned in the last Chapter, affords an Opportunity to a couple of Gentlemen to tell Stories against each other

'Wo ho!' cried the guard, on his legs in a minute, and running to the leaders' heads. 'Is there ony genelmen there as can len' a hond here? Keep quiet, dang ye! Wo ho!'

'What's the matter?' demanded Nicholas, looking sleepily up.

'Matther mun, matter eneaf for one neight,' replied the guard; 'dang the wall-eyed bay, he's gane mad wi' glory I think, carse t'coorch is over. Here, can't ye len' a hond? Dom it, I'd ha' dean it if all my boans were brokken.'

'Here!' cried Nicholas, staggering to his feet, 'I'm ready. I'm only a little abroad, that's all.'

'Hoold 'em toight,' cried the guard, 'while ar coot treaces. Hang on tiv'em sumhoo. Well deane, my lod. That's it. Let'em goa noo. Dang 'em, they'll gang whoam fast eneaf!'

In truth, the animals were no sooner released than they trotted back, with much deliberation, to the stable they had just left, which was distant not a mile behind.

'Can you blo' a harn?' asked the guard, disengaging one of the coach-lamps.

'I dare say I can,' replied Nicholas.

‘Then just blo’ away into that ‘un as lies on the grund, fit to wakken the deead, will’ee,’ said the man, ‘while I stop sum o’ this here squealing inside. Cumin’, cumin’. Dean’t make that noise, wooman.’

As the man spoke, he proceeded to wrench open the uppermost door of the coach, while Nicholas, seizing the horn, awoke the echoes far and wide with one of the most extraordinary performances on that instrument ever heard by mortal ears. It had its effect, however, not only in rousing such of their fall, but in summoning assistance to their relief; for lights gleamed in the distance, and people were already astir.

In fact, a man on horseback galloped down, before the passengers were well collected together; and a careful investigation being instituted, it appeared that the lady inside had broken her lamp, and the gentleman his head; that the two front outsides had escaped with black eyes; the box with a bloody nose; the coachman with a contusion on the temple; Mr Squeers with a portmanteau bruise on his back; and the remaining passengers without any injury at all – thanks to the softness of the snow-drift in which they had been overturned. These facts were no sooner thoroughly ascertained, than the lady gave several indications of fainting, but being forewarned that if she did, she must be carried on some gentleman’s shoulders to the nearest public-house, she prudently thought better of it, and walked back with the rest.

They found on reaching it, that it was a lonely place with no very great accommodation in the way of apartments – that

portion of its resources being all comprised in one public room with a sanded floor, and a chair or two. However, a large faggot and a plentiful supply of coals being heaped upon the fire, the appearance of things was not long in mending; and, by the time they had washed off all effaceable marks of the late accident, the room was warm and light, which was a most agreeable exchange for the cold and darkness out of doors.

'Well, Mr. Nickleby,' said Squeers, insinuating himself into the warmest corner, 'you did very right to catch hold of them horses. I should have done it myself if I had come to in time, but I am very glad you did it. You did it very well; very well.'

'So well,' said the merry-faced gentleman, who did not seem to approve very much of the patronising tone adopted by Squeers, 'that if they had not been firmly checked when they were, you would most probably have had no brains left to teach with.'

This remark called up a discourse relative to the promptitude Nicholas had displayed, and he was overwhelmed with compliments and commendations.

'I am very glad to have escaped, of course,' observed Squeers: 'every man is glad when he escapes from danger; but if any one of my charges had been hurt – if I had been prevented from restoring any one of these little boys to his parents whole and sound as I received him – what would have been my feelings? Why the wheel a-top of my head would have been far preferable to it.'

'Are they all brothers, sir?' inquired the lady who had carried

the ‘Davy’ or safety-lamp.

‘In one sense they are, ma’am,’ replied Squeers, diving into his greatcoat pocket for cards. ‘They are all under the same parental and affectionate treatment. Mrs. Squeers and myself are a mother and father to every one of ‘em. Mr. Nickleby, hand the lady them cards, and offer these to the gentleman. Perhaps they might know of some parents that would be glad to avail themselves of the establishment.’

Expressing himself to this effect, Mr. Squeers, who lost no opportunity of advertising gratuitously, placed his hands upon his knees, and looked at the pupils with as much benignity as he could possibly affect, while Nicholas, blushing with shame, handed round the cards as directed.

‘I hope you suffer no inconvenience from the overturn, ma’am?’ said the merry-faced gentleman, addressing the fastidious lady, as though he were charitably desirous to change the subject.

‘No bodily inconvenience,’ replied the lady.

‘No mental inconvenience, I hope?’

‘The subject is a very painful one to my feelings, sir,’ replied the lady with strong emotion; ‘and I beg you as a gentleman, not to refer to it.’

‘Dear me,’ said the merry-faced gentleman, looking merrier still, ‘I merely intended to inquire – ’

‘I hope no inquiries will be made,’ said the lady, ‘or I shall be compelled to throw myself on the protection of the other

gentlemen. Landlord, pray direct a boy to keep watch outside the door – and if a green chariot passes in the direction of Grantham, to stop it instantly.'

The people of the house were evidently overcome by this request, and when the lady charged the boy to remember, as a means of identifying the expected green chariot, that it would have a coachman with a gold-laced hat on the box, and a footman, most probably in silk stockings, behind, the attentions of the good woman of the inn were redoubled. Even the box-passenger caught the infection, and growing wonderfully deferential, immediately inquired whether there was not very good society in that neighbourhood, to which the lady replied yes, there was: in a manner which sufficiently implied that she moved at the very tiptop and summit of it all.

'As the guard has gone on horseback to Grantham to get another coach,' said the good-tempered gentleman when they had been all sitting round the fire, for some time, in silence, 'and as he must be gone a couple of hours at the very least, I propose a bowl of hot punch. What say you, sir?'

This question was addressed to the broken-headed inside, who was a man of very genteel appearance, dressed in mourning. He was not past the middle age, but his hair was grey; it seemed to have been prematurely turned by care or sorrow. He readily acceded to the proposal, and appeared to be prepossessed by the frank good-nature of the individual from whom it emanated.

This latter personage took upon himself the office of tapster

when the punch was ready, and after dispensing it all round, led the conversation to the antiquities of York, with which both he and the grey-haired gentleman appeared to be well acquainted. When this topic flagged, he turned with a smile to the grey-headed gentleman, and asked if he could sing.

'I cannot indeed,' replied gentleman, smiling in his turn.

'That's a pity,' said the owner of the good-humoured countenance. 'Is there nobody here who can sing a song to lighten the time?'

The passengers, one and all, protested that they could not; that they wished they could; that they couldn't remember the words of anything without the book; and so forth.

'Perhaps the lady would not object,' said the president with great respect, and a merry twinkle in his eye. 'Some little Italian thing out of the last opera brought out in town, would be most acceptable I am sure.'

As the lady condescended to make no reply, but tossed her head contemptuously, and murmured some further expression of surprise regarding the absence of the green chariot, one or two voices urged upon the president himself, the propriety of making an attempt for the general benefit.

'I would if I could,' said he of the good-tempered face; 'for I hold that in this, as in all other cases where people who are strangers to each other are thrown unexpectedly together, they should endeavour to render themselves as pleasant, for the joint sake of the little community, as possible.'

‘I wish the maxim were more generally acted on, in all cases,’ said the grey-headed gentleman.

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ returned the other. ‘Perhaps, as you can’t sing, you’ll tell us a story?’

‘Nay. I should ask you.’

‘After you, I will, with pleasure.’

‘Indeed!’ said the grey-haired gentleman, smiling, ‘Well, let it be so. I fear the turn of my thoughts is not calculated to lighten the time you must pass here; but you have brought this upon yourselves, and shall judge. We were speaking of York Minster just now. My story shall have some reference to it. Let us call it

THE FIVE SISTERS OF YORK

After a murmur of approbation from the other passengers, during which the fastidious lady drank a glass of punch unobserved, the grey-headed gentleman thus went on:

‘A great many years ago – for the fifteenth century was scarce two years old at the time, and King Henry the Fourth sat upon the throne of England – there dwelt, in the ancient city of York, five maiden sisters, the subjects of my tale.

‘These five sisters were all of surpassing beauty. The eldest was in her twenty-third year, the second a year younger, the third a year younger than the second, and the fourth a year younger than the third. They were tall stately figures, with dark flashing eyes and hair of jet; dignity and grace were in their every

movement; and the fame of their great beauty had spread through all the country round.

'But, if the four elder sisters were lovely, how beautiful was the youngest, a fair creature of sixteen! The blushing tints in the soft bloom on the fruit, or the delicate painting on the flower, are not more exquisite than was the blending of the rose and lily in her gentle face, or the deep blue of her eye. The vine, in all its elegant luxuriance, is not more graceful than were the clusters of rich brown hair that sported round her brow.

'If we all had hearts like those which beat so lightly in the bosoms of the young and beautiful, what a heaven this earth would be! If, while our bodies grow old and withered, our hearts could but retain their early youth and freshness, of what avail would be our sorrows and sufferings! But, the faint image of Eden which is stamped upon them in childhood, chafes and rubs in our rough struggles with the world, and soon wears away: too often to leave nothing but a mournful blank remaining.

'The heart of this fair girl bounded with joy and gladness. Devoted attachment to her sisters, and a fervent love of all beautiful things in nature, were its pure affections. Her gleesome voice and merry laugh were the sweetest music of their home. She was its very light and life. The brightest flowers in the garden were reared by her; the caged birds sang when they heard her voice, and pined when they missed its sweetness. Alice, dear Alice; what living thing within the sphere of her gentle witchery, could fail to love her!

‘You may seek in vain, now, for the spot on which these sisters lived, for their very names have passed away, and dusty antiquaries tell of them as of a fable. But they dwelt in an old wooden house – old even in those days – with overhanging gables and balconies of rudely-carved oak, which stood within a pleasant orchard, and was surrounded by a rough stone wall, whence a stout archer might have winged an arrow to St Mary’s Abbey. The old abbey flourished then; and the five sisters, living on its fair domains, paid yearly dues to the black monks of St Benedict, to which fraternity it belonged.

‘It was a bright and sunny morning in the pleasant time of summer, when one of those black monks emerged from the abbey portal, and bent his steps towards the house of the fair sisters. Heaven above was blue, and earth beneath was green; the river glistened like a path of diamonds in the sun; the birds poured forth their songs from the shady trees; the lark soared high above the waving corn; and the deep buzz of insects filled the air. Everything looked gay and smiling; but the holy man walked gloomily on, with his eyes bent upon the ground. The beauty of the earth is but a breath, and man is but a shadow. What sympathy should a holy preacher have with either?

‘With eyes bent upon the ground, then, or only raised enough to prevent his stumbling over such obstacles as lay in his way, the religious man moved slowly forward until he reached a small postern in the wall of the sisters’ orchard, through which he passed, closing it behind him. The noise of soft voices in

conversation, and of merry laughter, fell upon his ears ere he had advanced many paces; and raising his eyes higher than was his humble wont, he descried, at no great distance, the five sisters seated on the grass, with Alice in the centre: all busily plying their customary task of embroidering.

'"Save you, fair daughters!" said the friar; and fair in truth they were. Even a monk might have loved them as choice masterpieces of his Maker's hand.

'The sisters saluted the holy man with becoming reverence, and the eldest motioned him to a mossy seat beside them. But the good friar shook his head, and bumped himself down on a very hard stone, – at which, no doubt, approving angels were gratified.

'"Ye were merry, daughters," said the monk.

'"You know how light of heart sweet Alice is," replied the eldest sister, passing her fingers through the tresses of the smiling girl.

'"And what joy and cheerfulness it wakes up within us, to see all nature beaming in brightness and sunshine, father," added Alice, blushing beneath the stern look of the recluse.

'The monk answered not, save by a grave inclination of the head, and the sisters pursued their task in silence.

'"Still wasting the precious hours," said the monk at length, turning to the eldest sister as he spoke, "still wasting the precious hours on this vain trifling. Alas, alas! that the few bubbles on the surface of eternity – all that Heaven wills we should see of that dark deep stream – should be so lightly scattered!"

‘“Father,” urged the maiden, pausing, as did each of the others, in her busy task, “we have prayed at matins, our daily alms have been distributed at the gate, the sick peasants have been tended, – all our morning tasks have been performed. I hope our occupation is a blameless one?’

‘“See here,” said the friar, taking the frame from her hand, “an intricate winding of gaudy colours, without purpose or object, unless it be that one day it is destined for some vain ornament, to minister to the pride of your frail and giddy sex. Day after day has been employed upon this senseless task, and yet it is not half accomplished. The shade of each departed day falls upon our graves, and the worm exults as he beholds it, to know that we are hastening thither. Daughters, is there no better way to pass the fleeting hours?”

‘The four elder sisters cast down their eyes as if abashed by the holy man’s reproof, but Alice raised hers, and bent them mildly on the friar.

‘“Our dear mother,” said the maiden; “Heaven rest her soul!”

‘“Amen!” cried the friar in a deep voice.

‘“Our dear mother,” faltered the fair Alice, “was living when these long tasks began, and bade us, when she should be no more, ply them in all discretion and cheerfulness, in our leisure hours; she said that if in harmless mirth and maidenly pursuits we passed those hours together, they would prove the happiest and most peaceful of our lives, and that if, in later times, we went forth into the world, and mingled with its cares and trials – if,

allured by its temptations and dazzled by its glitter, we ever forgot that love and duty which should bind, in holy ties, the children of one loved parent – a glance at the old work of our common girlhood would awaken good thoughts of bygone days, and soften our hearts to affection and love."

'"Alice speaks truly, father," said the elder sister, somewhat proudly. And so saying she resumed her work, as did the others.

'It was a kind of sampler of large size, that each sister had before her; the device was of a complex and intricate description, and the pattern and colours of all five were the same. The sisters bent gracefully over their work; the monk, resting his chin upon his hands, looked from one to the other in silence.

'"How much better," he said at length, "to shun all such thoughts and chances, and, in the peaceful shelter of the church, devote your lives to Heaven! Infancy, childhood, the prime of life, and old age, wither as rapidly as they crowd upon each other. Think how human dust rolls onward to the tomb, and turning your faces steadily towards that goal, avoid the cloud which takes its rise among the pleasures of the world, and cheats the senses of their votaries. The veil, daughters, the veil!"

'"Never, sisters," cried Alice. "Barter not the light and air of heaven, and the freshness of earth and all the beautiful things which breathe upon it, for the cold cloister and the cell. Nature's own blessings are the proper goods of life, and we may share them sinlessly together. To die is our heavy portion, but, oh, let us die with life about us; when our cold hearts cease to beat, let

warm hearts be beating near; let our last look be upon the bounds which God has set to his own bright skies, and not on stone walls and bars of iron! Dear sisters, let us live and die, if you list, in this green garden's compass; only shun the gloom and sadness of a cloister, and we shall be happy."

'The tears fell fast from the maiden's eyes as she closed her impassioned appeal, and hid her face in the bosom of her sister.

'"Take comfort, Alice," said the eldest, kissing her fair forehead. "The veil shall never cast its shadow on thy young brow. How say you, sisters? For yourselves you speak, and not for Alice, or for me."

'The sisters, as with one accord, cried that their lot was cast together, and that there were dwellings for peace and virtue beyond the convent's walls.

'"Father," said the eldest lady, rising with dignity, "you hear our final resolve. The same pious care which enriched the abbey of St Mary, and left us, orphans, to its holy guardianship, directed that no constraint should be imposed upon our inclinations, but that we should be free to live according to our choice. Let us hear no more of this, we pray you. Sisters, it is nearly noon. Let us take shelter until evening!" With a reverence to the friar, the lady rose and walked towards the house, hand in hand with Alice; the other sisters followed.

'The holy man, who had often urged the same point before, but had never met with so direct a repulse, walked some little distance behind, with his eyes bent upon the earth, and his lips

moving *as if* in prayer. As the sisters reached the porch, he quickened his pace, and called upon them to stop.

"'Stay!" said the monk, raising his right hand in the air, and directing an angry glance by turns at Alice and the eldest sister. "Stay, and hear from me what these recollections are, which you would cherish above eternity, and awaken – if in mercy they slumbered – by means of idle toys. The memory of earthly things is charged, in after life, with bitter disappointment, affliction, death; with dreary change and wasting sorrow. The time will one day come, when a glance at those unmeaning baubles will tear open deep wounds in the hearts of some among you, and strike to your inmost souls. When that hour arrives – and, mark me, come it will – turn from the world to which you clung, to the refuge which you spurned. Find me the cell which shall be colder than the fire of mortals grows, when dimmed by calamity and trial, and there weep for the dreams of youth. These things are Heaven's will, not mine," said the friar, subduing his voice as he looked round upon the shrinking girls. "The Virgin's blessing be upon you, daughters!"

'With these words he disappeared through the postern; and the sisters hastening into the house were seen no more that day.

'But nature will smile though priests may frown, and next day the sun shone brightly, and on the next, and the next again. And in the morning's glare, and the evening's soft repose, the five sisters still walked, or worked, or beguiled the time by cheerful conversation, in their quiet orchard.

‘Time passed away as a tale that is told; faster indeed than many tales that are told, of which number I fear this may be one. The house of the five sisters stood where it did, and the same trees cast their pleasant shade upon the orchard grass. The sisters too were there, and lovely as at first, but a change had come over their dwelling. Sometimes, there was the clash of armour, and the gleaming of the moon on caps of steel; and, at others, jaded coursers were spurred up to the gate, and a female form glided hurriedly forth, as if eager to demand tidings of the weary messenger. A goodly train of knights and ladies lodged one night within the abbey walls, and next day rode away, with two of the fair sisters among them. Then, horsemen began to come less frequently, and seemed to bring bad tidings when they did, and at length they ceased to come at all, and footsore peasants slunk to the gate after sunset, and did their errand there, by stealth. Once, a vassal was dispatched in haste to the abbey at dead of night, and when morning came, there were sounds of woe and wailing in the sisters’ house; and after this, a mournful silence fell upon it, and knight or lady, horse or armour, was seen about it no more.

‘There was a sullen darkness in the sky, and the sun had gone angrily down, tinting the dull clouds with the last traces of his wrath, when the same black monk walked slowly on, with folded arms, within a stone’s-throw of the abbey. A blight had fallen on the trees and shrubs; and the wind, at length beginning to break the unnatural stillness that had prevailed all day, sighed heavily from time to time, as though foretelling in grief the ravages of the

coming storm. The bat skimmed in fantastic flights through the heavy air, and the ground was alive with crawling things, whose instinct brought them forth to swell and fatten in the rain.

'No longer were the friar's eyes directed to the earth; they were cast abroad, and roamed from point to point, as if the gloom and desolation of the scene found a quick response in his own bosom. Again he paused near the sisters' house, and again he entered by the postern.

'But not again did his ear encounter the sound of laughter, or his eyes rest upon the beautiful figures of the five sisters. All was silent and deserted. The boughs of the trees were bent and broken, and the grass had grown long and rank. No light feet had pressed it for many, many a day.

'With the indifference or abstraction of one well accustomed to the change, the monk glided into the house, and entered a low, dark room. Four sisters sat there. Their black garments made their pale faces whiter still, and time and sorrow had worked deep ravages. They were stately yet; but the flush and pride of beauty were gone.

'And Alice – where was she? In Heaven.

'The monk – even the monk – could bear with some grief here; for it was long since these sisters had met, and there were furrows in their blanched faces which years could never plough. He took his seat in silence, and motioned them to continue their speech.

'"They are here, sisters," said the elder lady in a trembling voice. "I have never borne to look upon them since, and now I

blame myself for my weakness. What is there in her memory that we should dread? To call up our old days shall be a solemn pleasure yet."

'She glanced at the monk as she spoke, and, opening a cabinet, brought forth the five frames of work, completed long before. Her step was firm, but her hand trembled as she produced the last one; and, when the feelings of the other sisters gushed forth at sight of it, her pent-up tears made way, and she sobbed "God bless her!"

'The monk rose and advanced towards them. "It was almost the last thing she touched in health," he said in a low voice.

'"It was," cried the elder lady, weeping bitterly.

'The monk turned to the second sister.

'"The gallant youth who looked into thine eyes, and hung upon thy very breath when first he saw thee intent upon this pastime, lies buried on a plain whereof the turf is red with blood. Rusty fragments of armour, once brightly burnished, lie rotting on the ground, and are as little distinguishable for his, as are the bones that crumble in the mould!"

'The lady groaned, and wrung her hands.

'"The policy of courts," he continued, turning to the two other sisters, "drew ye from your peaceful home to scenes of revelry and splendour. The same policy, and the restless ambition of – proud and fiery men, have sent ye back, widowed maidens, and humbled outcasts. Do I speak truly?"

'The sobs of the two sisters were their only reply.

‘“There is little need,” said the monk, with a meaning look, “to fritter away the time in gewgaws which shall raise up the pale ghosts of hopes of early years. Bury them, heap penance and mortification on their heads, keep them down, and let the convent be their grave!”

‘The sisters asked for three days to deliberate; and felt, that night, as though the veil were indeed the fitting shroud for their dead joys. But, morning came again, and though the boughs of the orchard trees drooped and ran wild upon the ground, it was the same orchard still. The grass was coarse and high, but there was yet the spot on which they had so often sat together, when change and sorrow were but names. There was every walk and nook which Alice had made glad; and in the minster nave was one flat stone beneath which she slept in peace.

‘And could they, remembering how her young heart had sickened at the thought of cloistered walls, look upon her grave, in garbs which would chill the very ashes within it? Could they bow down in prayer, and when all Heaven turned to hear them, bring the dark shade of sadness on one angel’s face? No.

‘They sent abroad, to artists of great celebrity in those times, and having obtained the church’s sanction to their work of piety, caused to be executed, in five large compartments of richly stained glass, a faithful copy of their old embroidery work. These were fitted into a large window until that time bare of ornament; and when the sun shone brightly, as she had so well loved to see it, the familiar patterns were reflected in their original colours,

and throwing a stream of brilliant light upon the pavement, fell warmly on the name of Alice.

'For many hours in every day, the sisters paced slowly up and down the nave, or knelt by the side of the flat broad stone. Only three were seen in the customary place, after many years; then but two, and, for a long time afterwards, but one solitary female bent with age. At length she came no more, and the stone bore five plain Christian names.

'That stone has worn away and been replaced by others, and many generations have come and gone since then. Time has softened down the colours, but the same stream of light still falls upon the forgotten tomb, of which no trace remains; and, to this day, the stranger is shown in York Cathedral, an old window called the Five Sisters.'

'That's a melancholy tale,' said the merry-faced gentleman, emptying his glass.

'It is a tale of life, and life is made up of such sorrows,' returned the other, courteously, but in a grave and sad tone of voice.

'There are shades in all good pictures, but there are lights too, if we choose to contemplate them,' said the gentleman with the merry face. 'The youngest sister in your tale was always light-hearted.'

'And died early,' said the other, gently.

'She would have died earlier, perhaps, had she been less happy,' said the first speaker, with much feeling. 'Do you think

the sisters who loved her so well, would have grieved the less if her life had been one of gloom and sadness? If anything could soothe the first sharp pain of a heavy loss, it would be – with me – the reflection, that those I mourned, by being innocently happy here, and loving all about them, had prepared themselves for a purer and happier world. The sun does not shine upon this fair earth to meet frowning eyes, depend upon it.'

'I believe you are right,' said the gentleman who had told the story.

'Believe!' retorted the other, 'can anybody doubt it? Take any subject of sorrowful regret, and see with how much pleasure it is associated. The recollection of past pleasure may become pain – '

'It does,' interposed the other.

'Well; it does. To remember happiness which cannot be restored, is pain, but of a softened kind. Our recollections are unfortunately mingled with much that we deplore, and with many actions which we bitterly repent; still in the most chequered life I firmly think there are so many little rays of sunshine to look back upon, that I do not believe any mortal (unless he had put himself without the pale of hope) would deliberately drain a goblet of the waters of Lethe, if he had it in his power.'

'Possibly you are correct in that belief,' said the grey-haired gentleman after a short reflection. 'I am inclined to think you are.'

'Why, then,' replied the other, 'the good in this state of existence preponderates over the bad, let miscalled philosophers tell us what they will. If our affections be tried, our affections are

our consolation and comfort; and memory, however sad, is the best and purest link between this world and a better. But come! I'll tell you a story of another kind.'

After a very brief silence, the merry-faced gentleman sent round the punch, and glancing slyly at the fastidious lady, who seemed desperately apprehensive that he was going to relate something improper, began

THE BARON OF GROGZWIG

'The Baron Von Koeldwethout, of Grogzwig in Germany, was as likely a young baron as you would wish to see. I needn't say that he lived in a castle, because that's of course; neither need I say that he lived in an old castle; for what German baron ever lived in a new one? There were many strange circumstances connected with this venerable building, among which, not the least startling and mysterious were, that when the wind blew, it rumbled in the chimneys, or even howled among the trees in the neighbouring forest; and that when the moon shone, she found her way through certain small loopholes in the wall, and actually made some parts of the wide halls and galleries quite light, while she left others in gloomy shadow. I believe that one of the baron's ancestors, being short of money, had inserted a dagger in a gentleman who called one night to ask his way, and it *was* supposed that these miraculous occurrences took place in consequence. And yet I hardly know how that could have been, either, because the baron's ancestor, who was an amiable man, felt very sorry afterwards for having been so rash, and laying violent hands upon

a quantity of stone and timber which belonged to a weaker baron, built a chapel as an apology, and so took a receipt from Heaven, in full of all demands.

'Talking of the baron's ancestor puts me in mind of the baron's great claims to respect, on the score of his pedigree. I am afraid to say, I am sure, how many ancestors the baron had; but I know that he had a great many more than any other man of his time; and I only wish that he had lived in these latter days, that he might have had more. It is a very hard thing upon the great men of past centuries, that they should have come into the world so soon, because a man who was born three or four hundred years ago, cannot reasonably be expected to have had as many relations before him, as a man who is born now. The last man, whoever he is – and he may be a cobbler or some low vulgar dog for aught we know – will have a longer pedigree than the greatest nobleman now alive; and I contend that this is not fair.

'Well, but the Baron Von Koeldwethout of Grogzwig! He was a fine swarthy fellow, with dark hair and large moustachios, who rode a-hunting in clothes of Lincoln green, with russet boots on his feet, and a bugle slung over his shoulder like the guard of a long stage. When he blew this bugle, four-and-twenty other gentlemen of inferior rank, in Lincoln green a little coarser, and russet boots with a little thicker soles, turned out directly: and away galloped the whole train, with spears in their hands like lacquered area railings, to hunt down the boars, or perhaps encounter a bear: in which latter case the baron killed him first,

and greased his whiskers with him afterwards.

'This was a merry life for the Baron of Grogzwig, and a merrier still for the baron's retainers, who drank Rhine wine every night till they fell under the table, and then had the bottles on the floor, and called for pipes. Never were such jolly, roystering, rollicking, merry-making blades, as the jovial crew of Grogzwig.

'But the pleasures of the table, or the pleasures of under the table, require a little variety; especially when the same five-and-twenty people sit daily down to the same board, to discuss the same subjects, and tell the same stories. The baron grew weary, and wanted excitement. He took to quarrelling with his gentlemen, and tried kicking two or three of them every day after dinner. This was a pleasant change at first; but it became monotonous after a week or so, and the baron felt quite out of sorts, and cast about, in despair, for some new amusement.

'One night, after a day's sport in which he had outdone Nimrod or Gillingwater, and slaughtered "another fine bear," and brought him home in triumph, the Baron Von Koeldwethout sat moodily at the head of his table, eyeing the smoky roof of the hall with a discontented aspect. He swallowed huge bumpers of wine, but the more he swallowed, the more he frowned. The gentlemen who had been honoured with the dangerous distinction of sitting on his right and left, imitated him to a miracle in the drinking, and frowned at each other.

'"I will!" cried the baron suddenly, smiting the table with his

right hand, and twirling his moustache with his left. “Fill to the Lady of Grogzwig!”

‘The four-and-twenty Lincoln greens turned pale, with the exception of their four-and-twenty noses, which were unchangeable.

“‘I said to the Lady of Grogzwig,” repeated the baron, looking round the board.

“‘To the Lady of Grogzwig!” shouted the Lincoln greens; and down their four-and-twenty throats went four-and-twenty imperial pints of such rare old hock, that they smacked their eight-and-forty lips, and winked again.

“‘The fair daughter of the Baron Von Swillenhausen,” said Koeldwethout, condescending to explain. “We will demand her in marriage of her father, ere the sun goes down tomorrow. If he refuse our suit, we will cut off his nose.”

‘A hoarse murmur arose from the company; every man touched, first the hilt of his sword, and then the tip of his nose, with appalling significance.

‘What a pleasant thing filial piety is to contemplate! If the daughter of the Baron Von Swillenhausen had pleaded a preoccupied heart, or fallen at her father’s feet and corned them in salt tears, or only fainted away, and complimented the old gentleman in frantic ejaculations, the odds are a hundred to one but Swillenhausen Castle would have been turned out at window, or rather the baron turned out at window, and the castle demolished. The damsel held her peace, however, when an early

messenger bore the request of Von Koeldwethout next morning, and modestly retired to her chamber, from the casement of which she watched the coming of the suitor and his retinue. She was no sooner assured that the horseman with the large moustachios was her proffered husband, than she hastened to her father's presence, and expressed her readiness to sacrifice herself to secure his peace. The venerable baron caught his child to his arms, and shed a wink of joy.

'There was great feasting at the castle, that day. The four-and-twenty Lincoln greens of Von Koeldwethout exchanged vows of eternal friendship with twelve Lincoln greens of Von Swillenhausen, and promised the old baron that they would drink his wine "Till all was blue" – meaning probably until their whole countenances had acquired the same tint as their noses. Everybody slapped everybody else's back, when the time for parting came; and the Baron Von Koeldwethout and his followers rode gaily home.

'For six mortal weeks, the bears and boars had a holiday. The houses of Koeldwethout and Swillenhausen were united; the spears rusted; and the baron's bugle grew hoarse for lack of blowing.

'Those were great times for the four-and-twenty; but, alas! their high and palmy days had taken boots to themselves, and were already walking off.

'"My dear," said the baroness.

'"My love," said the baron.

‘“Those coarse, noisy men – ”

‘“Which, ma’am?” said the baron, starting.

‘The baroness pointed, from the window at which they stood, to the courtyard beneath, where the unconscious Lincoln greens were taking a copious stirrup-cup, preparatory to issuing forth after a boar or two.

‘“My hunting train, ma’am,” said the baron.

‘“Disband them, love,” murmured the baroness.

‘“Disband them!” cried the baron, in amazement.

‘“To please me, love,” replied the baroness.

‘“To please the devil, ma’am,” answered the baron.

‘Whereupon the baroness uttered a great cry, and swooned away at the baron’s feet.

‘What could the baron do? He called for the lady’s maid, and roared for the doctor; and then, rushing into the yard, kicked the two Lincoln greens who were the most used to it, and cursing the others all round, bade them go – but never mind where. I don’t know the German for it, or I would put it delicately that way.

‘It is not for me to say by what means, or by what degrees, some wives manage to keep down some husbands as they do, although I may have my private opinion on the subject, and may think that no Member of Parliament ought to be married, inasmuch as three married members out of every four, must vote according to their wives’ consciences (if there be such things), and not according to their own. All I need say, just now, is, that the Baroness Von Koeldwethout somehow or other acquired

great control over the Baron Von Koeldwethout, and that, little by little, and bit by bit, and day by day, and year by year, the baron got the worst of some disputed question, or was slyly unhorsed from some old hobby; and that by the time he was a fat hearty fellow of forty-eight or thereabouts, he had no feasting, no revelry, no hunting train, and no hunting – nothing in short that he liked, or used to have; and that, although he was as fierce as a lion, and as bold as brass, he was decidedly snubbed and put down, by his own lady, in his own castle of Grogzwig.

'Nor was this the whole extent of the baron's misfortunes. About a year after his nuptials, there came into the world a lusty young baron, in whose honour a great many fireworks were let off, and a great many dozens of wine drunk; but next year there came a young baroness, and next year another young baron, and so on, every year, either a baron or baroness (and one year both together), until the baron found himself the father of a small family of twelve. Upon every one of these anniversaries, the venerable Baroness Von Swillenhausen was nervously sensitive for the well-being of her child the Baroness Von Koeldwethout; and although it was not found that the good lady ever did anything material towards contributing to her child's recovery, still she made it a point of duty to be as nervous as possible at the castle of Grogzwig, and to divide her time between moral observations on the baron's housekeeping, and bewailing the hard lot of her unhappy daughter. And if the Baron of Grogzwig, a little hurt and irritated at this, took heart, and ventured to suggest that his

wife was at least no worse off than the wives of other barons, the Baroness Von Swillenhausen begged all persons to take notice, that nobody but she, sympathised with her dear daughter's sufferings; upon which, her relations and friends remarked, that to be sure she did cry a great deal more than her son-in-law, and that if there were a hard-hearted brute alive, it was that Baron of Grogzwig.

'The poor baron bore it all as long as he could, and when he could bear it no longer lost his appetite and his spirits, and sat himself gloomily and dejectedly down. But there were worse troubles yet in store for him, and as they came on, his melancholy and sadness increased. Times changed. He got into debt. The Grogzwig coffers ran low, though the Swillenhausen family had looked upon them as inexhaustible; and just when the baroness was on the point of making a thirteenth addition to the family pedigree, Von Koeldwethout discovered that he had no means of replenishing them.

'"I don't see what is to be done," said the baron. "I think I'll kill myself."

'This was a bright idea. The baron took an old hunting-knife from a cupboard hard by, and having sharpened it on his boot, made what boys call "an offer" at his throat.

'"Hem!" said the baron, stopping short. "Perhaps it's not sharp enough."

'The baron sharpened it again, and made another offer, when his hand was arrested by a loud screaming among the young

barons and baronesses, who had a nursery in an upstairs tower with iron bars outside the window, to prevent their tumbling out into the moat.

"'If I had been a bachelor," said the baron sighing, "I might have done it fifty times over, without being interrupted. Hallo! Put a flask of wine and the largest pipe in the little vaulted room behind the hall."

'One of the domestics, in a very kind manner, executed the baron's order in the course of half an hour or so, and Von Koeldwethout being apprised thereof, strode to the vaulted room, the walls of which, being of dark shining wood, gleamed in the light of the blazing logs which were piled upon the hearth. The bottle and pipe were ready, and, upon the whole, the place looked very comfortable.

"'Leave the lamp," said the baron.

"'Anything else, my lord?" inquired the domestic.

"'The room," replied the baron. The domestic obeyed, and the baron locked the door.

"'I'll smoke a last pipe," said the baron, "and then I'll be off." So, putting the knife upon the table till he wanted it, and tossing off a goodly measure of wine, the Lord of Grogzwig threw himself back in his chair, stretched his legs out before the fire, and puffed away.

'He thought about a great many things – about his present troubles and past days of bachelorship, and about the Lincoln greens, long since dispersed up and down the country, no

one knew whither: with the exception of two who had been unfortunately beheaded, and four who had killed themselves with drinking. His mind was running upon bears and boars, when, in the process of draining his glass to the bottom, he raised his eyes, and saw, for the first time and with unbounded astonishment, that he was not alone.

'No, he was not; for, on the opposite side of the fire, there sat with folded arms a wrinkled hideous figure, with deeply sunk and bloodshot eyes, and an immensely long cadaverous face, shadowed by jagged and matted locks of coarse black hair. He wore a kind of tunic of a dull bluish colour, which, the baron observed, on regarding it attentively, was clasped or ornamented down the front with coffin handles. His legs, too, were encased in coffin plates as though in armour; and over his left shoulder he wore a short dusky cloak, which seemed made of a remnant of some pall. He took no notice of the baron, but was intently eyeing the fire.

'"Halloa!" said the baron, stamping his foot to attract attention.

'"Halloa!" replied the stranger, moving his eyes towards the baron, but not his face or himself "What now?"

'"What now!" replied the baron, nothing daunted by his hollow voice and lustreless eyes. "I should ask that question. How did you get here?"

'"Through the door," replied the figure.

'"What are you?" says the baron.

‘“A man,” replied the figure.

‘“I don’t believe it,” says the baron.

‘“Disbelieve it then,” says the figure.

‘“I will,” rejoined the baron.

‘The figure looked at the bold Baron of Grogzwig for some time, and then said familiarly,

‘“There’s no coming over you, I see. I’m not a man!”

‘“What are you then?” asked the baron.

‘“A genius,” replied the figure.

‘“You don’t look much like one,” returned the baron scornfully.

‘“I am the Genius of Despair and Suicide,” said the apparition. “Now you know me.”

‘With these words the apparition turned towards the baron, as if composing himself for a talk – and, what was very remarkable, was, that he threw his cloak aside, and displaying a stake, which was run through the centre of his body, pulled it out with a jerk, and laid it on the table, as composedly as if it had been a walking-stick.

‘“Now,” said the figure, glancing at the hunting-knife, “are you ready for me?”

‘“Not quite,” rejoined the baron; “I must finish this pipe first.”

‘“Look sharp then,” said the figure.

‘“You seem in a hurry,” said the baron.

‘“Why, yes, I am,” answered the figure; “they’re doing a pretty brisk business in my way, over in England and France just now,

and my time is a good deal taken up."

"'Do you drink?" said the baron, touching the bottle with the bowl of his pipe.

"'Nine times out of ten, and then very hard," rejoined the figure, drily.

"'Never in moderation?" asked the baron.

"'Never," replied the figure, with a shudder, "that breeds cheerfulness."

'The baron took another look at his new friend, whom he thought an uncommonly queer customer, and at length inquired whether he took any active part in such little proceedings as that which he had in contemplation.

"'No," replied the figure evasively; "but I am always present."

"'Just to see fair, I suppose?" said the baron.

"'Just that," replied the figure, playing with his stake, and examining the ferule. "Be as quick as you can, will you, for there's a young gentleman who is afflicted with too much money and leisure wanting me now, I find."

"'Going to kill himself because he has too much money!" exclaimed the baron, quite tickled. "Ha! ha! that's a good one." (This was the first time the baron had laughed for many a long day.)

"'I say," expostulated the figure, looking very much scared; "don't do that again."

"'Why not?" demanded the baron.

"'Because it gives me pain all over," replied the figure. "Sigh

as much as you please: that does me good."

'The baron sighed mechanically at the mention of the word; the figure, brightening up again, handed him the hunting-knife with most winning politeness.

'"It's not a bad idea though," said the baron, feeling the edge of the weapon; "a man killing himself because he has too much money."

'"Pooh!" said the apparition, petulantly, "no better than a man's killing himself because he has none or little."

'Whether the genius unintentionally committed himself in saying this, or whether he thought the baron's mind was so thoroughly made up that it didn't matter what he said, I have no means of knowing. I only know that the baron stopped his hand, all of a sudden, opened his eyes wide, and looked as if quite a new light had come upon him for the first time.

'"Why, certainly," said Von Koeldwethout, "nothing is too bad to be retrieved."

'"Except empty coffers," cried the genius.

'"Well; but they may be one day filled again," said the baron.

'"Scolding wives," snarled the genius.

'"Oh! They may be made quiet," said the baron.

'"Thirteen children," shouted the genius.

'"Can't all go wrong, surely," said the baron.

'The genius was evidently growing very savage with the baron, for holding these opinions all at once; but he tried to laugh it off, and said if he would let him know when he had left off joking

he should feel obliged to him.

"'But I am not joking; I was never farther from it," remonstrated the baron.

"'Well, I am glad to hear that," said the genius, looking very grim, "because a joke, without any figure of speech, *is* the death of me. Come! Quit this dreary world at once."

"'I don't know," said the baron, playing with the knife; "it's a dreary one certainly, but I don't think yours is much better, for you have not the appearance of being particularly comfortable. That puts me in mind – what security have I, that I shall be any the better for going out of the world after all!" he cried, starting up; "I never thought of that."

"'Dispatch," cried the figure, gnashing his teeth.

"'Keep off!" said the baron. 'I'll brood over miseries no longer, but put a good face on the matter, and try the fresh air and the bears again; and if that don't do, I'll talk to the baroness soundly, and cut the Von Swillenhausens dead.' With this the baron fell into his chair, and laughed so loud and boisterously, that the room rang with it.

'The figure fell back a pace or two, regarding the baron meanwhile with a look of intense terror, and when he had ceased, caught up the stake, plunged it violently into its body, uttered a frightful howl, and disappeared.

'Von Koeldwethout never saw it again. Having once made up his mind to action, he soon brought the baroness and the Von Swillenhausens to reason, and died many years afterwards:

not a rich man that I am aware of, but certainly a happy one: leaving behind him a numerous family, who had been carefully educated in bear and boar-hunting under his own personal eye. And my advice to all men is, that if ever they become hipped and melancholy from similar causes (as very many men do), they look at both sides of the question, applying a magnifying-glass to the best one; and if they still feel tempted to retire without leave, that they smoke a large pipe and drink a full bottle first, and profit by the laudable example of the Baron of Grogzwig.'

'The fresh coach is ready, ladies and gentlemen, if you please,' said a new driver, looking in.

This intelligence caused the punch to be finished in a great hurry, and prevented any discussion relative to the last story. Mr. Squeers was observed to draw the grey-headed gentleman on one side, and to ask a question with great apparent interest; it bore reference to the Five Sisters of York, and was, in fact, an inquiry whether he could inform him how much per annum the Yorkshire convents got in those days with their boarders.

The journey was then resumed. Nicholas fell asleep towards morning, and, when he awoke, found, with great regret, that, during his nap, both the Baron of Grogzwig and the grey-haired gentleman had got down and were gone. The day dragged on uncomfortably enough. At about six o'clock that night, he and Mr. Squeers, and the little boys, and their united luggage, were all put down together at the George and New Inn, Greta Bridge.

CHAPTER 7

Mr. and Mrs. Squeers at Home

Mr. Squeers, being safely landed, left Nicholas and the boys standing with the luggage in the road, to amuse themselves by looking at the coach as it changed horses, while he 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 a short hiccup afforded any criterion; and 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,' said Squeers; 'it's a long journey this weather.'

'Is it much farther to Dotheboys Hall, sir?' asked Nicholas.

'About three mile 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 storey high, with a few straggling out-buildings 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,' replied the boy.

‘Then why the devil didn’t you come before?’

‘Please, sir, I fell asleep over the fire,’ answered Smike, with humility.

‘Fire! what fire? Where’s there a fire?’ demanded the schoolmaster, sharply.

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

‘Your missus is a fool,’ retorted Squeers. ‘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,’ replied Nicholas.

‘Come in, then,’ said Squeers ‘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 against the wall, and a couple of tables; one of which bore some preparations for supper; while, on the other, a tutor's assistant, a Murray's grammar, half-a-dozen cards of terms, and a worn letter directed to Wackford Squeers, Esquire, were arranged in picturesque confusion.

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 this lady in a playful manner, and a very hoarse voice.

'Quite well, my love,' replied Squeers. 'How's the cows?'

'All right, every one of'em,' answered the lady.

'And the pigs?' said Squeers.

'As well as they were when you went away.'

'Come; that's a blessing,' said Squeers, pulling off his great-coat. '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!' exclaimed Squeers. 'Damn that boy, he's always at something of that sort.'

'Never was such a boy, I do believe,' said Mrs. Squeers; '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,' rejoined Squeers. '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 shake-down here, tonight, can't you?'

'We must manage it somehow,' replied the lady. 'You don't much mind how you sleep, I suppose, sir?'

No, indeed,' replied Nicholas, '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 great-coat 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 skeleton 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 attenuated frame. In order that the lower part of his legs might be in perfect keeping with this singular dress, he had a very large pair of boots, originally made for tops, 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,’ said the schoolmaster; ‘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 get 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,’ replied Squeers. ‘Have a bit.’

‘I couldn’t eat a morsel,’ replied his wife. ‘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. Knuckleboy?’ inquired Mrs. Squeers.

‘I’ll take a little of the pie, if you please,’ replied Nicholas. ‘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.

‘Ale, Squeery?’ inquired the lady, winking and frowning to give him to understand that the question propounded, was, whether Nicholas should have ale, and not whether he (Squeers) would take any.

‘Certainly,’ said Squeers, re-telegraphing in the same manner. ‘A glassful.’

So Nicholas had a glassful, and being occupied with his own reflections, drank it, in happy innocence of all the foregone proceedings.

‘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 – ’

‘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 rather unintelligible; but popular rumour in the neighbourhood asserted that Mr. Squeers, being amiably opposed to cruelty to animals, not unfrequently purchased for boy consumption the bodies of horned cattle who

had died a natural death; possibly he was apprehensive 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.

Mr. Squeers treated himself to a stiff tumbler of brandy and water, made on the liberal half-and-half principle, allowing for the dissolution of the sugar; and his amiable helpmate mixed Nicholas the ghost of a small glassful of the same compound. This done, Mr. and Mrs. Squeers drew close up to the fire, and sitting with their feet on the fender, talked confidentially in whispers; while Nicholas, taking up the tutor's assistant, read the interesting legends in the miscellaneous questions, and all the figures into the bargain, with as much thought or consciousness of what he was doing, as if he had been in a magnetic slumber.

At length, Mr. Squeers yawned fearfully, and opined 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, Nickelby,' 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,' replied Nicholas. '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,' he said, '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,' replied Mrs. Squeers; '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.'

Mr. Squeers then nudged Mrs. Squeers to bring away the

brandy bottle, lest Nicholas should help himself in the night; and the lady having seized it with great precipitation, they retired together.

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 himself down in a chair, and mentally resolved that, come what come 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.

P.S. If you should go near Barnard Castle, there is good ale at the King's Head. Say you know me, and I am sure they will not charge you for it. You may say Mr. Noggs there, for I was a gentleman then. I was indeed.

It may be a very undignified circumstances 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 8

Of the Internal Economy of Dotheboys Hall

A ride of two hundred and odd miles in severe weather, is one of the best softeners of a hard bed that ingenuity can devise. 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 an expiring candle shone before his eyes, and a voice he had no difficulty in recognising as part and parcel of Mr. Squeers, admonished him that it was time to rise.

'Past seven, Nickleby,' said Mr. Squeers.

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

'Ah! that has it,' replied Squeers, '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,' replied Squeers. 'You can't wash yourself this morning.'

‘Not wash myself!’ exclaimed Nicholas.

‘No, not a bit of it,’ rejoined Squeers tartly. ‘So you must be content with giving yourself a dry polish till we break the ice in the well, and can get a bucketful out for the boys. Don’t stand staring at me, but do 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 consort was heard in the passage, demanding admittance.

‘Come in, my love,’ said Squeers.

Mrs. Squeers came in, still habited in the primitive 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, with much ease and lightness, on the top of the nightcap before mentioned.

‘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!’ retorted Mrs. Squeers sharply; ‘isn’t it brimstone morning?’

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

‘Purify fiddlesticks’ ends,’ said his lady. ‘Don’t think, young man, that we go to the expense of flower 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. 'Hem!'

'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 treacle, 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 head into the closet and instituted a stricter search after the spoon, in which Mr. Squeers assisted. A few words passed between them while they were thus engaged, but as their voices were partially stifled by the cupboard, all that Nicholas could distinguish was, that Mr. Squeers said what Mrs. Squeers had said, was injudicious, and that Mrs. Squeers said what Mr. Squeers said, was 'stuff.'

A vast deal of searching and rummaging ensued, and it proving fruitless, Smike was called in, and pushed by Mrs. Squeers, and boxed by Mr. Squeers; which course of treatment brightening his intellects, enabled him to suggest that possibly Mrs. Squeers might have the spoon in her pocket, as indeed 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; so that he took nothing very advantageous by his motion.

'A most invaluable woman, that, Nickleby,' said Squeers when his consort 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, active, 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,' answered Nicholas.

Now, the fact was, that both Mr. and Mrs. Squeers viewed the boys in the light of their proper and natural enemies; or, in other words, they held and considered that their business and profession was to get as much from every boy as could by possibility be screwed out of him. On this point they were both agreed, and behaved in unison accordingly. The only difference between them was, that Mrs. Squeers waged war against the

enemy openly and fearlessly, and that Squeers covered his rascality, even at home, with a spice of his habitual deceit; as if he really had a notion of someday or other being able to take himself in, and persuade his own mind that he was a very good fellow.

'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 fustian shooting-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 copy-books 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 forms; a detached desk for Squeers; and another for his assistant. The ceiling was supported, like that of a barn, by cross-beams 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 whitewash.

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; there were the bleared eye, the hare-lip, the crooked foot, and every ugliness or distortion that told of unnatural aversion conceived by parents for their offspring, or of young lives which, from the earliest dawn of infancy, had been one horrible endurance of cruelty and neglect. There were little faces which should have been handsome, darkened with the scowl of sullen, dogged suffering; there was childhood with the light of its eye quenched, its beauty gone, and its helplessness alone remaining; there were vicious-faced boys, brooding, with leaden eyes, like malefactors in a jail; and there were young creatures on whom the sins of their frail parents had descended, weeping even for the mercenary nurses they had known, and lonesome even in their loneliness. With every kindly sympathy and affection blasted in 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 brimstone and treacle, of which delicious compound she administered a large instalment to each boy in succession: 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 treacled; 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 motley, ill-assorted, 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 inconveniently 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 could not but observe 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 as 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 latter commodity 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 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 very useful one, at any rate,' answered Nicholas.

'I believe you,' rejoined Squeers, not remarking the emphasis of his usher. 'Third boy, what's 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 coppers 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 semicircle round 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. Squeer's custom to call the boys together, and make a sort of report, after every half-yearly visit to the metropolis, 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 were 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! Sights 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 Squeers'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 you 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're 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 business-like 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 pair 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.'

It was affecting in one sense, for Graymarsh's maternal aunt

was strongly supposed, by her more intimate friends, to be no other than his maternal parent; Squeers, however, without alluding to this part of the story (which would have sounded immoral before boys), proceeded with the business by calling out 'Mobbs,' whereupon another boy rose, and Graymarsh resumed his seat.

'Mobbs's step-mother,' 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 to, 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 which view, she has also stopped his halfpenny 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 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 dispatched, a few slovenly lessons were performed, and Squeers retired to his fireside, leaving Nicholas to take care of the boys in the school-room, 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 there as 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 as 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-n-o.'

'You are shivering.'

'I am not cold,' replied Smike quickly. 'I am used to it.'

There was such an obvious fear of giving offence 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 burst into tears.

'Oh dear, oh dear!' he cried, 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 round 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 – no, not retired; there was no retirement there – followed – to his dirty and crowded dormitory.

CHAPTER 9

Of Miss Squeers, Mrs. Squeers, Master Squeers, and Mr. Squeers; and of various Matters and Persons connected no less with the Squeerses than Nicholas Nickleby

When Mr. Squeers left the schoolroom for the night, he betook himself, as has been before remarked, 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 being engaged in the matronly pursuit of stocking-darning; and the young lady and gentleman being occupied in the adjustment of some youthful differences, 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.

And, in this place, it may be as well to apprise the reader, that Miss Fanny Squeers was in her three-and-twentieth year. If there be any one grace or loveliness inseparable from that particular period of life, Miss Squeers may be presumed to have been possessed of it, as there is no reason to suppose that she was a solitary exception to an universal rule. 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 the 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 ask from curiosity, my dear.'

'Well, then, if you want to know,' rejoined Mrs. Squeers, 'I'll tell you. Because he's a proud, haughty, consequential, turned-up-nosed peacock.'

Mrs. Squeers, when excited, was accustomed to use strong language, and, moreover, to make use of a plurality of epithets, some of which were of a figurative kind, as the word peacock,

and furthermore the allusion to Nicholas's nose, which was not intended to be taken in its literal sense, but rather to bear a latitude of construction according to the fancy of the hearers.

Neither were they meant to bear reference to each other, so much as to the object on whom they were bestowed, as will be seen in the present case: a peacock with a turned-up nose being a novelty in ornithology, and a thing not commonly seen.

'Hem!' said Squeers, as if in mild deprecation of this outbreak. 'He is cheap, my dear; the young man is very cheap.'

'Not a bit of it,' retorted Mrs. Squeers.

'Five pound a year,' said Squeers.

'What of that; it's dear if you don't want him, isn't it?' replied his wife.

'But we *do* want him,' urged Squeers.

'I don't see that you want him any more than the dead,' said Mrs. Squeers. '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? Isn't it done every day by all the masters about? 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,’ replied Mr. Squeers, in a sentimental voice.

‘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 pressed a penny into his hand, and gave vent to his feelings (as did his exemplary wife also), in a shout of approving laughter. The infantine appeal to their common sympathies, at once restored cheerfulness to the conversation, and harmony to the company.

‘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,’ observed Mrs. Squeers, ‘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. If he's a gentleman's son at all, he's a fondling, that's my opinion.'

'Mrs. Squeers intended to say 'foundling,' but, as she frequently remarked when she made any such mistake, it would be all the same a hundred years hence; with which axiom of philosophy, indeed, she was in the constant habit of consoling the boys when they laboured under more than ordinary ill-usage.

'He's nothing of the kind,' said Squeers, in answer to the above

remark, ‘for his father was married to his mother years before he was born, and she is alive now. If he was, it would be no business of ours, for we make a very good friend by having him here; and if he likes to learn the boys anything besides minding them, I have no objection I am sure.’

‘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,’ interposed Mrs. S.

‘That’s right,’ said Squeers; ‘and if he has a touch of pride about him, as I think he has, I don’t believe there’s 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 outward appearance and demeanour of Nicholas; to which queries the girl returned such enthusiastic replies, coupled with so many laudatory remarks 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, or, as she herself significantly phrased it, 'something quite out of the common.' And so Miss Squeers made up her mind that she would take a personal observation of Nicholas the very next day.

In pursuance of this design, 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 a hard or a soft nib?' 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, Miss Squeers 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!'

'Goodbye,' said Nicholas. 'The next I make for you, I hope will be made less clumsily. Take care! You are biting the nib 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 contracted herself unto the son of a small corn-factor, resident in the nearest market town. Miss Squeers and the miller's daughter, being fast friends, had covenanted together some two years before, according to a custom prevalent among young ladies, 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 which 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, and out of her teens (which is also a great matter), had, since, been more than commonly anxious to return the compliment, and possess her friend with a similar secret; but, either in consequence of finding it hard to please herself, or harder still to please anybody else, had never had an opportunity so to do, inasmuch as she had no such secret to disclose. The little interview with Nicholas had no sooner passed, as above described, however, than Miss Squeers, putting on her bonnet, made her way, with great precipitation, to her friend's house, and, upon a solemn renewal of divers old vows of secrecy, 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 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, emphasising the adjective strongly.

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

'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.'

'Did he look in this way?' inquired the miller's daughter, counterfeiting, as nearly as she could, a favourite leer of the corn-factor.

'Very like that – only more genteel,' replied Miss Squeers.

'Ah!' said the friend, 'then he means something, depend on it.'

Miss Squeers, having slight misgivings on the subject, was by no means ill pleased to be confirmed by a competent authority; and discovering, on further conversation and comparison of notes, a great many points of resemblance between the behaviour of Nicholas, and that of the corn-factor, grew so exceedingly confidential, that she intrusted her friend with a vast number of things Nicholas had *not* said, which were all so very complimentary as to be quite conclusive. Then, she dilated on the fearful hardship of having a father and mother strenuously opposed to her intended husband; on which unhappy circumstance she dwelt at great length; for the friend's father and mother were quite agreeable to her being married, and the whole courtship was in consequence as flat and common-place an affair as it was possible to imagine.

'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, to fetch three new boys, and dun the relations of two old ones for the balance of a small account, was fixed that very afternoon, for the next day but one; and on the next day but one, Mrs. Squeers got up outside the coach, as it stopped to change at Greta Bridge, taking with her a small bundle containing something in a bottle, and some sandwiches, and carrying besides a large white top-coat to wear in the night-time; with which baggage she went her way.

Whenever such opportunities as these occurred, it was Squeers's custom to drive over to the market town, every evening, on pretence 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, he readily yielded his full assent thereunto, and willingly communicated to Nicholas that he was expected to take his tea in the parlour that evening, at five o'clock.

To be sure Miss Squeers was in a desperate flutter as the time approached, and to be sure she was dressed out to the best advantage: with her hair – it had more than a tinge of red, and she wore it in a crop – curled in five distinct rows, up to the very top of her head, and arranged dexterously over the doubtful eye; 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 to her entire satisfaction, when the friend arrived with a whity-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 yes; 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.'

We blush to tell it; but his youthful spirits and vivacity getting, for the 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 more at home than in all probability an usher has ever done in his employer's house since ushers were first invented.

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, forming, together with a white waistcoat of similar dimensions, the chief ornament of his person.

'Well, John,' said Miss Matilda Price (which, by-the-bye, 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, with a face and body rather above the due proportion than below it.

'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'ry 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’oother 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 aboot ‘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?’ said Nicholas; ‘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 – really *almost* handsome. I am ashamed at you.’

‘My dear girl, what have I got to do with her dressing beautifully or looking well?’ inquired Nicholas.

‘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.

This was wholly unintelligible to Nicholas, who had no other distinct impression on his mind at the moment, than that Miss Squeers was an ordinary-looking girl, and her friend Miss Price a pretty one; but he had not time to enlighten himself by reflection, for the hearth being by this time swept up, and the candle snuffed, they sat down to play speculation.

'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,' replied Nicholas. 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.

'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!’

‘Nay,’ 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 heavily with his fist, ‘what I say’s this – Dang my boans and boddy, if I stan’ this ony longer. Do ye gang whoam wi’ me, and do yon

loight an' toight young whipster look sharp out for a brokken head, next time he cums 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.

This state of things had been brought about by divers means and workings. Miss Squeers had brought it about, by aspiring to the high state and condition of being matrimonially engaged, without good grounds for so doing; Miss Price had brought it about, by indulging in three motives of action: first, a desire to punish her friend for laying claim to a rivalship in dignity, having no good title: secondly, the gratification of her own vanity, in receiving the compliments of a smart young man: and thirdly, a wish to convince the corn-factor of the great danger he ran, in deferring the celebration of their expected nuptials; while Nicholas had brought it about, by half an hour's gaiety and thoughtlessness, and a very sincere desire to avoid the imputation of inclining at all to Miss Squeers. So the means employed, and the end produced, were alike the most natural in the world; for young ladies will look forward to being married, and will jostle each other in the race to the altar, and will avail themselves of all opportunities of displaying their own attractions to the best

advantage, down to the very end of time, as they have done from its beginning.

'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 are monstrous polite, ma'am,' said Miss Price.

'I shall not come to you to take lessons in the art, ma'am!' retorted Miss Squeers.

'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 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,' said Miss Squeers.

'You pay me a great compliment when you say so,' answered the miller's daughter, curtseying 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 peculiarly 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 quondam friend by giving vent to a most copious burst of tears, and uttering various dismal lamentations and incoherent words. 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 carries 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. 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 now!'

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

CHAPTER 10

How Mr. Ralph Nickleby provided for his Niece and Sister-in-Law

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 towards the full perfection of which, Miss La Creevy had had the street-door case brought upstairs, in order that she might be the better able to infuse into the counterfeit countenance of Miss Nickleby, a bright salmon flesh-tint which she had originally hit upon while executing the miniature of a young officer therein contained, and which bright salmon flesh-tint was considered, by Miss La Creevy's chief friends and patrons, to be quite a novelty in art: as indeed it was.

'I think I have caught it now,' said Miss La Creevy. 'The very shade! This will be the sweetest portrait I have ever done, certainly.'

'It will be your genius that makes it so, then, I am sure,' replied Kate, smiling.

'No, no, I won't allow that, my dear,' rejoined Miss La Creevy. 'It's a very nice subject – a very nice subject, indeed – though, of course, something depends upon the mode of treatment.'

‘And not a little,’ observed Kate.

‘Why, my dear, you are right there,’ said Miss La Creevy, ‘in the main you are right there; though I don’t allow that it is of such very great importance in the present case. Ah! The difficulties of Art, my dear, are great.’

‘They must be, I have no doubt,’ said Kate, humouring her good-natured little friend.

‘They are beyond anything you can form the faintest conception of,’ replied Miss La Creevy. ‘What with bringing out eyes with all one’s power, and keeping down noses with all one’s force, and adding to heads, and taking away teeth altogether, you have no idea of the trouble one little miniature is.’

‘The remuneration can scarcely repay you,’ said Kate.

‘Why, it does not, and that’s the truth,’ answered Miss La Creevy; ‘and then people are so dissatisfied and unreasonable, that, nine times out of ten, there’s no pleasure in painting them. Sometimes they say, “Oh, how very serious you have made me look, Miss La Creevy!” and at others, “La, Miss La Creevy, how very smirking!” when the very essence of a good portrait is, that it must be either serious or smirking, or it’s no portrait at all.’

‘Indeed!’ said Kate, laughing.

‘Certainly, my dear; because the sitters are always either the one or the other,’ replied Miss La Creevy. ‘Look at the Royal Academy! All those beautiful shiny portraits of gentlemen in black velvet waistcoats, with their fists doubled up on round tables, or marble slabs, are serious, you know; and all the ladies

who are playing with little parasols, or little dogs, or little children – it's the same rule in art, only varying the objects – are smirking. In fact,' said Miss La Creevy, sinking her voice to a confidential whisper, 'there are only two styles of portrait painting; the serious and the smirk; and we always use the serious for professional people (except actors sometimes), and the smirk for private ladies and gentlemen who don't care so much about looking clever.'

Kate seemed highly amused by this information, and Miss La Creevy went on painting and talking, with immovable complacency.

'What a number of officers you seem to paint!' said Kate, availing herself of a pause in the discourse, and glancing round the room.

'Number of what, child?' inquired Miss La Creevy, looking up from her work. 'Character portraits, oh yes – they're not real military men, you know.'

'No!'

'Bless your heart, of course not; only clerks and that, who hire a uniform coat to be painted in, and send it here in a carpet bag. Some artists,' said Miss La Creevy, 'keep a red coat, and charge seven-and-sixpence extra for hire and carmine; but I don't do that myself, for I don't consider it legitimate.'

Drawing herself up, as though she plumed herself greatly upon not resorting to these lures to catch sitters, Miss La Creevy applied herself, more intently, to her task: only raising her head

occasionally, to look with unspeakable satisfaction at some touch she had just put in: and now and then giving Miss Nickleby to understand what particular feature she was at work upon, at the moment; 'not,' she expressly observed, 'that you should make it up for painting, my dear, but because it's our custom sometimes to tell sitters what part we are upon, in order that if there's any particular expression they want introduced, they may throw it in, at the time, you know.'

'And when,' said Miss La Creevy, after a long silence, to wit, an interval of full a minute and a half, 'when do you expect to see your uncle again?'

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

'I suppose he has money, hasn't he?' inquired Miss La Creevy.

'He is very rich, I have heard,' rejoined Kate. '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, who was an odd little mixture of shrewdness and simplicity. '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 featherbed 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,' said Kate, '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 taste happiness again, depends upon the fortunes of my dear brother; but if he will do this, 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 no less an individual than Mr. Ralph Nickleby himself.

'Your servant, ladies,' said Ralph, looking sharply at them by turns. 'You were talking so loud, that I was unable to make you hear.'

When the man of business had a more than commonly vicious snarl lurking at his heart, he had a trick of almost concealing his eyes under their thick and protruding brows, for an instant, and then displaying them in their full keenness. As he did so now, and tried to keep down the smile which parted his thin compressed lips, and puckered up the bad lines about his mouth, they both felt certain that some part, if not the whole, of their recent conversation, had been overheard.

'I called in, on my way upstairs, more than half expecting to find you here,' said Ralph, addressing his niece, and looking

contemptuously at the portrait. '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 sittings more will – '

'Have them at once, ma'am,' said Ralph. '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,' said Ralph.

'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, "that after your uncle has provided, in that most ready manner, for Nicholas, 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.

'Kate, my love, let your uncle proceed,' said Mrs. Nickleby.

'I am most anxious that he should, mama,' rejoined Kate.

'Well, my dear, if you are anxious that he should, you had better allow your uncle to say what he has to say, without interruption,' observed Mrs Nickleby, with many small nods and frowns. 'Your uncle's time is very valuable, my dear; and however desirous you may be – and naturally desirous, as I am sure any affectionate relations who have seen so little of your uncle as we have, must naturally be to protract the pleasure of having him among us, still, we are bound not to be selfish, but to take into consideration the important nature of his occupations in the city.'

'I am very much obliged to you, ma'am,' said Ralph with a scarcely perceptible sneer. 'An absence of business habits in this family leads, apparently, to a great waste of words before business – when it does come under consideration – is arrived at, at all.'

'I fear it is so indeed,' replied Mrs. Nickleby with a sigh. 'Your poor brother – '

'My poor brother, ma'am,' interposed Ralph tartly, 'had no

idea what business was – was unacquainted, I verily believe, with the very meaning of the word.'

'I fear he was,' said Mrs. Nickleby, with her handkerchief to her eyes. 'If it hadn't been for me, I don't know what would have become of him.'

What strange creatures we are! The slight bait so skilfully thrown out by Ralph, on their first interview, was dangling on the hook yet. At every small deprivation or discomfort which presented itself in the course of the four-and-twenty hours to remind her of her straitened and altered circumstances, peevish visions of her dower of one thousand pounds had arisen before Mrs. Nickleby's mind, until, at last, she had come to persuade herself that of all her late husband's creditors she was the worst used and the most to be pitied. And yet, she had loved him dearly for many years, and had no greater share of selfishness than is the usual lot of mortals. Such is the irritability of sudden poverty. A decent annuity would have restored her thoughts to their old train, at once.

'Repining is of no use, ma'am,' said Ralph. 'Of all fruitless errands, sending a tear to look after a day that is gone is the most fruitless.'

'So it is,' sobbed Mrs. Nickleby. 'So it is.'

'As you feel so keenly, in your own purse and person, the consequences of inattention to business, ma'am,' said Ralph, 'I am sure you will impress upon your children the necessity of attaching themselves to it early in life.'

‘Of course I must see that,’ rejoined Mrs. Nickleby. ‘Sad experience, you know, brother-in-law. – Kate, my dear, put that down in the next letter to Nicholas, or remind me to do it if I write.’

Ralph paused for a few moments, and seeing that he had now made pretty sure of the mother, in case the daughter objected to his proposition, went on to say:

‘The situation that I have made interest to procure, ma’am, 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, who are so well acquainted with all matters in the ordinary routine of life, make large fortunes, keep equipages, and become persons of great wealth and fortune.’

Now, the first idea 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, 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 trimming, 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, so strikingly illustrative of the opulence of milliners, 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?' inquired Mrs. Nickleby.

'A great deal,' replied Kate; '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 squabs 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,' he said, taking her arm, '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, towards Cavendish Square.

'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,' said Ralph. 'I hope you'll do your duty.'

'I will try to please, uncle,' replied Kate: 'indeed I – '

'Don't begin to cry,' growled Ralph; 'I hate crying.'

'It's very foolish, I know, uncle,' began poor Kate.

'It is,' replied Ralph, stopping her short, 'and very affected besides. Let me see no more of it.'

Perhaps this was not the best way to dry the tears of a young and sensitive female, about to make her first entry on an entirely new scene of life, among cold and uninterested strangers; but it had its effect notwithstanding. Kate coloured deeply, breathed quickly for a few moments, and then walked on with a firmer

and more determined step.

It was a curious contrast to see how the timid country girl shrunk through the crowd that hurried up and down the streets, giving way to the press of people, and clinging closely to Ralph as though she feared to lose him in the throng; and how the stern and hard-featured man of business went doggedly on, elbowing the passengers aside, and now and then exchanging a gruff salutation with some passing acquaintance, who turned to look back upon his pretty charge, with looks expressive of surprise, and seemed to wonder at the ill-assorted companionship. But, it would have been a stranger contrast still, to have read the hearts that were beating side by side; to have laid bare the gentle innocence of the one, and the rugged villainy of the other; to have hung upon the guileless thoughts of the affectionate girl, and been amazed that, among all the wily plots and calculations of the old man, there should not be one word or figure denoting thought of death or of the grave. But so it was; and stranger still – though this is a thing of every day – the warm young heart palpitated with a thousand anxieties and apprehensions, while that of the old worldly man lay rusting in its cell, beating only as a piece of cunning mechanism, and yielding no one throb of hope, or fear, or love, or care, for any living thing.

'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!' replied Ralph; 'where's that?'

'I mean with my mother —*The Widow*,' said Kate

emphatically.

'You will live, to all intents and purposes, here,' rejoined Ralph; '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 mad?'

'The word slipped from my lips, I did not mean it indeed,' urged Kate.

'I hope not,' said Ralph.

'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, and 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. There was a shop to the house, but it was let off to an importer of otto of

roses. Madame Mantalini's shows-rooms were on the first-floor: a fact which was notified to the nobility and gentry by the casual exhibition, near the handsomely curtained windows, of two or three elegant bonnets of the newest fashion, and some costly garments in the most approved taste.

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 the show saloon, which comprised two spacious drawing-rooms, and 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 here 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 which 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 forgetfulness. '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 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 appellation would be of serious injury to the business. He had married on his whiskers; upon which property he had previously subsisted, in a genteel manner, for some years; and which he had recently improved, after patient cultivation by the addition of a moustache, which promised to secure him an easy independence: his share in the labours of the business being at present confined to spending the money, and occasionally, when that ran short, driving to Mr. Ralph Nickleby to procure discount – at a percentage – for the customers’ bills.

‘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 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, – mere little remarks that give a zest to your daily intercourse – lovers' quarrels that add sweetness to those domestic joys which promise to last so long – that's all; that's all.'

If an iron door could be supposed to quarrel with its hinges, and to make a firm resolution to open with slow obstinacy, and grind them to powder in the process, it would emit a pleasanter sound in so doing, than did these words in the rough and bitter voice in which they were uttered by Ralph. Even Mr. Mantalini felt their influence, and turning affrighted round, exclaimed: 'What a demd horrid croaking!'

'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 to Mr. Mantalini the sole honour of showing them downstairs. Ralph relieved her from her perplexity by taking his departure without delay: Madame Mantalini making many gracious inquiries why he never came to see them; and Mr. Mantalini anathematising the stairs with great volubility as he followed them down, in the hope of inducing Kate to look round, – a hope, however, which was destined to remain ungratified.

‘There!’ said Ralph when they got into the street; ‘now you’re provided for.’

Kate was about to thank him again, but he stopped her.

‘I had some idea,’ he said, ‘of providing for your mother in a pleasant part of the country – (he had a presentation to some almshouses on the borders of Cornwall, which had occurred to him more than once) – but as you want to be together, I must do something else for her. She has a little money?’

‘A very little,’ replied Kate.

‘A little will go a long way if it’s used sparingly,’ said Ralph. ‘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, sir?' inquired Kate.

'Pretty well,' said Ralph; 'in another quarter of the town – at the East end; but I'll send my clerk down to you, at five o'clock on Saturday, to take you there. Goodbye. You know your way? Straight on.'

Coldly shaking his niece's hand, Ralph left her at the top of Regent Street, and turned down a by-thoroughfare, intent on schemes of money-getting. Kate walked sadly back to their lodgings in the Strand.

CHAPTER 11

Newman Noggs inducts Mrs. and Miss Nickleby into their New Dwelling in the City

Miss Nickleby's reflections, as she wended her way homewards, were of that desponding nature which the occurrences of the morning had been sufficiently calculated to awaken. Her uncle's was not a manner likely to dispel any doubts or apprehensions she might have formed, in the outset, 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.

If her mother's consolations could have restored her to a pleasanter and more enviable state of mind, there were abundance of them to produce the effect. By the time Kate reached home, the good lady had called to mind two authentic cases of milliners who had been possessed of considerable property, though whether they had acquired it all in business, or had had a capital to start with, or had been lucky and married to advantage, she could not exactly remember. However, as she very logically remarked, there must have been *some* young person in that way of business who had made a fortune without having anything to begin with, and that being taken for granted, why

should not Kate do the same? Miss La Creevy, who was a member of the little council, ventured to insinuate some doubts relative to the probability of Miss Nickleby's arriving at this happy consummation in the compass of an ordinary lifetime; but the good lady set that question entirely at rest, by informing them that she had a presentiment on the subject – a species of second-sight with which she had been in the habit of clenching every argument with the deceased Mr. Nickleby, and, in nine cases and three-quarters out of every ten, determining it the wrong way.

'I am afraid it is an unhealthy occupation,' said Miss La Creevy. 'I recollect getting three young milliners to sit to me, when I first began to paint, and I remember that they were all very pale and sickly.'

'Oh! that's not a general rule by any means,' observed Mrs. Nickleby; 'for I remember, as well as if it was only yesterday, employing one that I was particularly recommended to, to make me a scarlet cloak at the time when scarlet cloaks were fashionable, and she had a very red face – a very red face, indeed.'

'Perhaps she drank,' suggested Miss La Creevy.

'I don't know how that may have been,' returned Mrs. Nickleby: 'but I know she had a very red face, so your argument goes for nothing.'

In this manner, and with like powerful reasoning, did the worthy matron meet every little objection that presented itself to the new scheme of the morning. Happy Mrs. Nickleby! A project had but to be new, and it came home to her mind, brightly

varnished and gilded as a glittering toy.

This question disposed of, Kate communicated her uncle's desire about the empty house, to which Mrs. Nickleby assented with equal readiness, characteristically remarking, that, on the fine evenings, it would be a pleasant amusement for her to walk to the West end to fetch her daughter home; and no less characteristically forgetting, that there were such things as wet nights and bad weather to be encountered in almost every week of the year.

'I shall be sorry – truly sorry to leave you, my kind friend,' said Kate, on whom the good feeling of the poor miniature painter had made a deep impression.

'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 Gog, the guardian genius of London, and enough to spare for Magog to boot, 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 the dreaded Saturday afternoon, or Newman Noggs either;

who, punctual to his time, limped up to the door, and breathed a whiff of cordial gin through the keyhole, exactly as such of the church clocks in the neighbourhood as agreed among themselves about the time, struck five. Newman waited for the last stroke, and then knocked.

'From Mr. Ralph Nickleby,' said Newman, announcing his errand, when he got upstairs, with all possible brevity.

'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.'

It was no very easy matter to mistake Newman Noggs, after having once seen him, and as Kate, attracted by the singularity of his manner (in which on this occasion, however, there was something respectful and even delicate, notwithstanding the abruptness of his speech), looked at him more closely, she recollected having caught a passing glimpse of that strange figure before.

'Excuse my curiosity,' she said, 'but did I not see you in the coachyard, on the morning my brother went away to Yorkshire?'

Newman cast a wistful glance on Mrs. Nickleby and said 'No,' most unblushingly.

'No!' exclaimed Kate, 'I should have said so anywhere.'

'You'd have said wrong,' rejoined Newman. 'It's the first time I've been out for three weeks. I've had the gout.'

Newman was very, very far from having the appearance of a gouty subject, and so Kate could not help thinking; but the conference was cut short by Mrs. Nickleby's insisting on having the door shut, lest Mr. Noggs should take cold, and further persisting in sending the servant girl for a coach, for fear he should bring on another attack of his disorder. To

both conditions, Newman was compelled to yield. Presently, the coach came; and, after many sorrowful farewells, and a great deal of running backwards and forwards across the pavement on the part of Miss La Creevy, in the course of which the yellow turban came into violent contact with sundry foot-passengers, it (that is to say the coach, not the turban) went away again, with the two ladies and their luggage inside; and Newman, despite all Mrs. Nickleby's assurances that it would be his death – on the box beside the driver.

They went into the city, turning down by the river side; and, after a long and very slow drive, the streets being crowded at that hour with vehicles of every kind, stopped in front of a large old dingy house in Thames Street: the door and windows of which were so bespattered with mud, that it would have appeared to have 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-bye, 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 – and the coach being discharged, he led the way into the interior of the mansion.

Old, and gloomy, and black, in truth 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,' retorted Mrs. Nickleby. '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, which some kind of attempt had been made to render habitable. In one, were a few chairs, a table, an old hearth-rug, and some faded baize; and a fire was ready laid in the grate. In the other stood an old tent bedstead, and a few scanty articles of chamber 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 woodchips 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 at first, but supposing it to be in some remote manner connected with the gout, did not remark upon.

‘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 reticule 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 12

Whereby the Reader will be enabled to trace the further course of Miss Fanny Squeer's Love, and to ascertain whether it ran smooth or otherwise.

It was a fortunate circumstance for Miss Fanny Squeers, that when her worthy papa returned home on the night of the small tea-party, he was what the initiated term 'too far gone' to observe the numerous tokens of extreme vexation of spirit which were plainly visible 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, with a foresight and prudence highly commendable, 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. Which he did with his boots on, and an umbrella under his arm.

The hungry servant attended Miss Squeers in her own room according to custom, to curl her hair, perform the other little offices of her toilet, and administer as much flattery as she could get up, for the purpose; for Miss Squeers was quite lazy enough (and sufficiently vain and frivolous withal) to have been a fine lady; and it was only the arbitrary distinctions of rank and station

which prevented her from being one.

'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!' replied Miss Squeers wrathfully.

Some considerable experience prevented the girl from being at all surprised at any outbreak of ill-temper on the part of Miss Squeers. Having a half-perception of what had occurred in the course of the evening, she changed her mode of making herself agreeable, and proceeded on the indirect tack.

'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 very 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 Tom cat talk French grammar, only to see how she tosses her head,' replied the handmaid.

‘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,’ interposed Phib.

‘Well, me, Phib, if you will have it so,’ said Miss Squeers. ‘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?’ demanded Miss Squeers.

‘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.’ (If Miss Squeers were the reason, it was very 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; for I think it highly desirable – most desirable from the very nature of her failings – that she should be married as soon as possible. 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.

Spite is a little word; but it represents as strange a jumble of feelings, and compound of discords, as any polysyllable in the language. Miss Squeers knew as well in her heart of hearts that what the miserable serving-girl had said was sheer, coarse, lying flattery, as did the girl herself; yet the mere opportunity of venting a little ill-nature against the offending Miss Price, and affecting to compassionate her weaknesses and foibles, though only in the presence of a solitary dependant, was almost as great a relief to her spleen as if the whole had been gospel truth. Nay, more. We have such extraordinary powers of persuasion when they are exerted over ourselves, that Miss Squeers felt quite high-minded and great after her noble renunciation of John Browdie's hand, and looked down upon her rival with a kind of holy calmness and tranquillity, that had a mighty effect in soothing her ruffled feelings.

This happy state of mind had some influence in bringing about a reconciliation; for, 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,' replied Miss Squeers, 'but I bear no malice. I am above it.'

'Don't be cross, Fanny,' said Miss Price. '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,’ rejoined Miss Price. ‘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,’ rejoined her companion. ‘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 any more,’ continued Miss Price, ‘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 frock made.’

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 frock 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; to which condolences Miss Squeers added others equally calculated to

raise her friend's spirits and promote her cheerfulness of mind.

'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 avowal of misanthropical sentiments. '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.

'And all this because I happen to have enough of good looks to make people civil to me,' cried Miss Price. 'Persons don't make their own faces, and it's no more my fault if mine is a good one than it is other people's fault if theirs is a bad one.'

'Hold your tongue,' shrieked Miss Squeers, in her shrillest tone; 'or you'll make me slap you, 'Tilda, and afterwards I should be sorry for it!'

It is needless to say, that, by this time, the temper of each young lady was in some slight degree affected by the tone of her conversation, and that a dash of personality was infused into the altercation, in consequence. Indeed, the quarrel, from slight beginnings, rose to a considerable height, and was assuming a very violent complexion, when both parties, falling into a great passion of tears, exclaimed simultaneously, that they had never thought of being spoken to in that way: which exclamation, leading to a remonstrance, gradually brought on an explanation: and the upshot was, that they fell into each other's arms and vowed eternal friendship; the occasion in question making the fifty-second time of repeating the same impressive ceremony within a twelvemonth.

Perfect amicability being thus restored, a dialogue naturally ensued upon the number and nature of the garments which would be indispensable for Miss Price's entrance into the holy state of matrimony, when Miss Squeers clearly showed that a great many

more than the miller could, or would, afford, were absolutely necessary, and could not decently be dispensed with. The young lady then, by an easy digression, led the discourse to her own wardrobe, and after recounting its principal beauties at some length, took her friend upstairs to make inspection thereof. The treasures of two drawers and a closet having been displayed, and all the smaller articles tried on, it was time for Miss Price to return home; and as she had been in raptures with all the frocks, and had been stricken quite dumb with admiration of a new pink scarf, Miss Squeers said in high good humour, that she would walk part of the way with her, for the pleasure of her company; and off they went together: Miss Squeers dilating, as they walked along, upon her father's accomplishments: and multiplying his income by ten, to give her friend some faint notion of the vast importance and superiority of her family.

It happened that that particular time, comprising the short daily interval which was suffered to elapse between what was pleasantly called the dinner of Mr. Squeers's pupils, and their return to the pursuit of useful knowledge, was precisely 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,’ replied Miss Squeers, ‘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, indicative of feelings at a high pressure, her friend made no further 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. 'Pray 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,' cried Miss Squeers; '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 most unfeigned 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 towards Miss Squeers, 'it is a most awkward thing to say – but – the very mention of such a supposition makes one look like a puppy – 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 recipro – '

'Stop,' cried Nicholas hurriedly; 'pray 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 particularly plain and straightforward declaration, which he made with all the vehemence that his indignant and excited feelings could bring to bear upon it, 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, or deprivation, which could not but have some effect on

the most insensible person, and must be acutely felt by one so sensitive as Nicholas. 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.

And here it may be remarked, that Miss Squeers, having bestowed her affections (or whatever it might be that, in the absence of anything better, represented them) on Nicholas Nickleby, had never once seriously contemplated the possibility of his being of a different opinion from herself in the business. Miss Squeers reasoned that she was prepossessing and beautiful, and that her father was master, and Nicholas man, and that her father had saved money, and Nicholas had none, all of which seemed to her conclusive arguments why the young man should feel only too much honoured by her preference. She had not failed to recollect, either, how much more agreeable she could render his situation if she were his friend, and how much more disagreeable if she were his enemy; and, doubtless, many less scrupulous young gentlemen than Nicholas would have encouraged her extravagance had it been only for this very obvious and intelligible reason. However, he had thought proper to do otherwise, and Miss Squeers was outrageous.

'Let him see,' said the irritated young lady, when she had regained her own room, and eased her mind by committing an assault on Phib, '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, dirty lodging, and the being compelled to witness one dull unvarying round of squalid misery, was treated with every special indignity that malice could suggest, or the most grasping cupidity put upon him.

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 care-worn visage, 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 attack.

He had arranged a few regular lessons for the boys; and one night, as he paced up and down the dismal schoolroom, his swollen heart almost bursting to think that his protection and countenance 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, possessed of ordinary powers, 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 13

Nicholas varies the Monotony of Dothebys Hall by a most vigorous and remarkable proceeding, which leads to Consequences of some Importance

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, over which the sombre light shed the same dull heavy colour; with, here and there, a gaunt arm thrust forth: its thinness hidden by no covering, but fully exposed to view, in all its shrunken ugliness. There were some who, lying on their backs with upturned faces and clenched hands, just visible in the leaden light, bore more the aspect of dead bodies than of living creatures; and there were others coiled up into strange and fantastic postures, such as might have been taken for the uneasy efforts of pain to gain some temporary relief, rather than the freaks of slumber. A few – and these were among the youngest of

the children – slept peacefully on, with smiles upon their faces, dreaming perhaps of home; but ever and again a deep and heavy sigh, breaking the stillness of the room, announced that some new sleeper had awakened to the misery of another day; and, as morning took the place of night, the smiles gradually faded away, with the friendly darkness which had given them birth.

Dreams are the bright creatures of poem and legend, who sport on earth in the night season, and melt away in the first beam of the sun, which lights grim care and stern reality on their daily pilgrimage through the world.

Nicholas looked upon the sleepers; at first, with the air of one who gazes upon a scene which, though familiar to him, has lost none of its sorrowful effect in consequence; and, afterwards, with a more intense and searching scrutiny, as a man would 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 stays.

'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 which 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.

‘Damn you, 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?’

‘Tomkins, 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 as yet 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 shall 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 could 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,' replied Nicholas; '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,' replied Nicholas. '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 a 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 rebelling, 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. 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,' replied Squeers.

'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. S., '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 top-coat, 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 next day, when Squeers returned, alone, and unsuccessful.

'No news of the scamp!' said the schoolmaster, who had evidently been stretching his legs, on the old principle, not a few 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 besides 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 bedtime! Come! Get out!'

Nicholas bit his lip and knit his hands involuntarily, for his fingerends 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 most miserable of all miserable servant girls joined: while Nicholas, stung to the quick, drew over his head such bedclothes as he had, and sternly resolved that the outstanding account between himself and Mr. Squeers should be settled rather more speedily than the latter anticipated.

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 under the apron 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.

Upon a hasty consideration of the circumstances, it may be matter of surprise to some persons, that Mr. and Mrs. Squeers should have taken so much trouble to repossess themselves of an incumbrance of which it was their wont to complain so loudly; but their surprise will cease when they are informed that the manifold services of the drudge, if performed by anybody else, would have cost the establishment some ten or twelve shillings per week in the shape of wages; and furthermore, that all runaways were, as a matter of policy, made severe examples of, at Dotheboys Hall, inasmuch as, in consequence of the limited extent of its attractions, there was but little inducement, beyond the powerful impulse of fear, for any pupil, provided with the usual number of legs and the power of using them, to remain.

The news that Smike had been caught and brought back in triumph, ran like wild-fire 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 instrument of flagellation, 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 drooped, 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 satisfaction the universal start which it never failed to occasion. 'Nickleby! to your desk, sir.'

It was remarked 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 – it 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 weapon.

'I have a long series of insults to avenge,' said Nicholas, flushed with passion; 'and my indignation is aggravated by the dastardly cruelties practised 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 instrument of torture, which raised up a bar of livid flesh as it was inflicted. 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, wrested the weapon 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 peeping through the keyhole in expectation of a very different scene, darted in at the very beginning of the attack, and after launching a shower of inkstands at the usher'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, in the full torrent of his violence, felt the blows no more than if they had been dealt with feathers; 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 precipitated Mrs. Squeers completely over an adjacent form; 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 (upon which point he had had some unpleasant doubts at first), Nicholas left his family to restore him, and retired 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.

After a brief consideration, he packed up a few clothes in a small leathern valise, and, finding that nobody offered to oppose his progress, marched boldly out by the front-door, and shortly afterwards, struck into the road which led to Greta Bridge.

When he had cooled sufficiently to be enabled to give his present circumstances some little reflection, they did not appear

in a very encouraging light; he had only four shillings and a few pence in his pocket, and was something more than two hundred and fifty miles from London, whither he resolved to direct his steps, that he might ascertain, among other things, what account of the morning's proceedings Mr. Squeers transmitted to his most affectionate uncle.

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, clad in cords and leather leggings, 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 an altercation with this honest blockhead, and perhaps a blow or two from yonder staff.'

In truth, there appeared some reason to expect 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 honds!’ 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 brokken loike.’

‘It is a cut,’ said Nicholas, turning scarlet as he spoke, – ‘a blow; but I returned it to the giver, and with good interest too.’

‘Noa, did ‘ee though?’ exclaimed John Browdie. ‘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,’ replied Nicholas, ‘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 schoolmeasther! Ho! ho! ho! Beatten the schoolmeasther! who ever heard o’ the loike o’ that noo! Giv’ us thee hond agean, yoongster. Beatten the schoolmeasther! Dang it, I loov’ 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 goodbye!'

'Nay noo,' replied the honest countryman, reining in his impatient horse, 'stan' still, tellee. Hoo much cash hast thee gotten?'

'Not much,' said Nicholas, colouring, '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 solid leather, and insisted that Nicholas should borrow from him whatever he required for his present necessities.

'Dean't be afeard, mun,' he said; 'tak' eneaf to carry thee whoam. Thee'lt pay me yan day, a' warrant.'

Nicholas could by no means be prevailed upon to borrow more than a sovereign, with which loan Mr. Browdie, after many

entreaties that he would accept of more (observing, with a touch of Yorkshire caution, that if he didn't spend it all, he could put the surplus by, till he had an opportunity of remitting it carriage free), was fain to content himself.

'Tak' 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. Beatten the schoolmeasther! 'Cod it's the best thing a've heerd this twonty year!'

So saying, and indulging, with more delicacy than might have been expected from him, 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 the brow of 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 rendered the way toilsome, but the track uncertain and difficult to find, after daylight, save by experienced wayfarers. He lay, that night, at a cottage, where beds were let at a cheap rate to the more humble class of travellers; and, rising betimes next morning, made his way before night to Boroughbridge. Passing through that town in search of some cheap resting-place, he

stumbled upon an empty barn within a couple of hundred yards of 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 – not with the most composed countenance possible – at some motionless object which seemed to be stationed within 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 had no

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 14

Having the Misfortune to treat of none but Common People, is necessarily of a Mean and Vulgar Character

In that quarter of London in which Golden Square is situated, there is a bygone, faded, tumble-down street, with two irregular rows of tall meagre houses, which seem to have stared each other out of countenance years ago. The very chimneys appear to have grown dismal and melancholy, from having had nothing better to look at than the chimneys over the way. Their tops are battered, and broken, and blackened with smoke; and, here and there, some taller stack than the rest, inclining heavily to one side, and toppling over the roof, seems to meditate taking revenge for half a century's neglect, by crushing the inhabitants of the garrets beneath.

The fowls who peck about the kennels, jerking their bodies hither and thither with a gait which none but town fowls are ever seen to adopt, and which any country cock or hen would be puzzled to understand, are perfectly in keeping with the crazy habitations of their owners. Dingy, ill-plumed, drowsy flutterers, sent, like many of the neighbouring children, to get a livelihood in the streets, they hop, from stone to stone, in forlorn search of some hidden eatable in the mud, and can scarcely raise a crow among them. The only one with anything approaching to a

voice, is an aged bantam at the baker's; and even he is hoarse, in consequence of bad living in his last place.

To judge from the size of the houses, they have been, at one time, tenanted by persons of better condition than their present occupants; but they are now let off, by the week, in floors or rooms, and every door has almost as many plates or bell-handles as there are apartments within. The windows are, for the same reason, sufficiently diversified in appearance, being ornamented with every variety of common blind and curtain that can easily be imagined; while every doorway is blocked up, and rendered nearly impassable, by a motley collection of children and porter pots of all sizes, from the baby in arms and the half-pint pot, to the full-grown girl and half-gallon can.

In the parlour of one of these houses, which was perhaps a thought dirtier than any of its neighbours; which exhibited more bell-handles, children, and porter pots, and caught in all its freshness the first gust of the thick black smoke that poured forth, night and day, from a large brewery hard by; hung a bill, announcing that there was yet one room to let within its walls, though on what story the vacant room could be – regard being had to the outward tokens of many lodgers which the whole front displayed, from the mangle in the kitchen window to the flower-pots on the parapet – it would have been beyond the power of a calculating boy to discover.

The common stairs of this mansion were bare and carpetless; but a curious visitor who had to climb his way to the top, might

have observed that there were not wanting indications of the progressive poverty of the inmates, although their rooms were shut. Thus, the first-floor lodgers, being flush of furniture, kept an old mahogany table – real mahogany – on the landing-place outside, which was only taken in, when occasion required. On the second story, the spare furniture dwindled down to a couple of old deal chairs, of which one, belonging to the back-room, was shorn of a leg, and bottomless. The story above, boasted no greater excess than a worm-eaten wash-tub; and the garret landing-place displayed no costlier articles than two crippled pitchers, and some broken blacking-bottles.

It was on this garret landing-place that a hard-featured square-faced man, elderly and shabby, stopped to unlock the door of the front attic, into which, having surmounted the task of turning the rusty key in its still more rusty wards, 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, and it seemed moreover as though the speaker had uttered them from the interior of a mug or other drinking vessel; but they were in the voice of Newman, and conveyed a reply in the affirmative.

‘A nasty night, Mr. Noggs!’ said the man in the nightcap, stepping in to light his candle.

‘Does it rain?’ asked Newman.

‘Does it?’ replied the other pettishly. ‘I am wet through.’

‘It doesn’t take much to wet you and me through, Mr. Crowl,’ said Newman, laying his hand upon the lappel of his threadbare coat.

‘Well; and that makes it the more vexatious,’ observed Mr. Crowl, in the same pettish tone.

Uttering a low querulous growl, the speaker, whose harsh countenance was the very epitome of selfishness, raked the scanty fire nearly out of the grate, and, emptying the glass which Noggs had pushed towards him, 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 Crowl.

Newman pointed to the empty glass, as though it were a sufficient refutation of the charge, and briefly said that he was going downstairs to supper.

‘To the Kenwigses?’ asked Crowl.

Newman nodded assent.

‘Think of that now!’ said Crowl. ‘If I didn’t – thinking that you were certain not to go, because you said you wouldn’t – tell Kenwigs I couldn’t come, and make up my mind to spend the

evening with you!'

'I was obliged to go,' said Newman. 'They would have me.'

'Well; but what's to become of me?' urged the selfish man, who never thought of anybody else. '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 anyone else – gave way to the proposed arrangement. Mr. Crowl immediately went about making himself as comfortable, with Newman Nogg's means, as circumstances would admit of his being made.

The lodgers to whom Crowl had made allusion under the designation of 'the Kenwigses,' were the wife and olive branches of one Mr. Kenwigs, a turner in ivory, who was looked upon as a person of some consideration on the premises, inasmuch as he occupied the whole of the first floor, comprising a suite of two rooms. Mrs. Kenwigs, too, was quite a lady in her manners, and of a very genteel family, having an uncle who collected a water-rate; besides which distinction, the two eldest of her little girls went twice a week to a dancing school in the neighbourhood, and had flaxen hair, tied with blue ribbons, hanging in luxuriant pigtails down their backs; and wore little white trousers with frills round the ankles – for all of which reasons, and many more equally valid but too numerous to mention, Mrs. Kenwigs was considered a very desirable person to know, and was the constant

theme of all the gossips in the street, and even three or four doors round the corner at both ends.

It was the anniversary of that happy day on which the Church of England as by law established, had bestowed Mrs. Kenwigs upon Mr. Kenwigs; and in grateful commemoration of the same, Mrs. Kenwigs had invited a few select friends to cards and a supper in the first floor, and had put on a new gown to receive them in: which gown, being of a flaming colour and made upon a juvenile principle, was so successful that Mr. Kenwigs said the eight years of matrimony and the five children seemed all a dream, and Mrs Kenwigs younger and more blooming than on the very first Sunday he had kept company with her.

Beautiful as Mrs. Kenwigs looked when she was dressed though, and so stately that you would have supposed she had a cook and housemaid at least, and nothing to do but order them about, she had a world of trouble with the preparations; more, indeed, than she, being of a delicate and genteel constitution, could have sustained, had not the pride of housewifery upheld her. At last, however, all the things that had to be got together were got together, and all the things that had to be got out of the way were got out of the way, and everything was ready, and the collector himself having promised to come, fortune smiled upon the occasion.

The party was admirably selected. There were, first of all, Mr. Kenwigs and Mrs. Kenwigs, and four olive Kenwigses who sat up to supper; firstly, because it was but right that they should have

a treat on such a day; and secondly, because their going to bed, in presence of the company, would have been inconvenient, not to say improper. Then, there was a young lady who had made Mrs. Kenwigs's dress, and who – it was the most convenient thing in the world – living in the two-pair back, gave up her bed to the baby, and got a little girl to watch it. Then, to match this young lady, was a young man, who had known Mr. Kenwigs when he was a bachelor, and was much esteemed by the ladies, as bearing the reputation of a rake. To these were added a newly-married couple, who had visited Mr. and Mrs Kenwigs in their courtship; and a sister of Mrs. Kenwigs's, who was quite a beauty; besides whom, there was another young man, supposed to entertain honourable designs upon the lady last mentioned; and Mr. Noggs, who was a genteel person to ask, because he had been a gentleman once. There were also an elderly lady from the back-parlour, and one more young lady, who, next to the collector, perhaps was the great lion of the party, being the daughter of a theatrical fireman, who 'went on' in the pantomime, and had the greatest turn for the stage that was ever known, being able to sing and recite in a manner that brought the tears into Mrs. Kenwigs's eyes. There was only one drawback upon the pleasure of seeing such friends, and that was, that the lady in the back-parlour, who was very fat, and turned of sixty, came in a low book-muslin dress and short kid gloves, which so exasperated Mrs. Kenwigs, that that lady assured her visitors, in private, that if it hadn't happened that the supper was cooking at the back-

parlour grate at that moment, she certainly would have requested its representative to withdraw.

'My dear,' said Mr. Kenwigs, 'wouldn't it be better to begin a round game?'

'Kenwigs, my dear,' returned his wife, 'I am surprised at you. Would you begin without my uncle?'

'I forgot the collector,' said Kenwigs; 'oh no, that would never do.'

'He's so particular,' said Mrs. Kenwigs, turning to the other married lady, 'that if we began without him, I should be out of his will for ever.'

'Dear!' cried the married lady.

'You've no idea what he is,' replied Mrs. Kenwigs; 'and yet as good a creature as ever breathed.'

'The kindest-hearted man as ever was,' said Kenwigs.

'It goes to his heart, I believe, to be forced to cut the water off, when the people don't pay,' observed the bachelor friend, intending a joke.

'George,' said Mr. Kenwigs, solemnly, 'none of that, if you please.'

'It was only my joke,' said the friend, abashed.

'George,' rejoined Mr. Kenwigs, 'a joke is a wery good thing – a wery good thing – but when that joke is made at the expense of Mrs Kenwigs's feelings, I set my face against it. A man in public life expects to be sneered at – it is the fault of his elewated sitiwation, and not of himself. Mrs. Kenwigs's relation is a public

man, and that he knows, George, and that he can bear; but putting Mrs. Kenwigs out of the question (if I *could* put Mrs. Kenwigs out of the question on such an occasion as this), I have the honour to be connected with the collector by marriage; and I cannot allow these remarks in my – ' Mr. Kenwigs was going to say 'house,' but he rounded the sentence with 'apartments'.

At the conclusion of these observations, which drew forth evidences of acute feeling from Mrs. Kenwigs, and had the intended effect of impressing the company with a deep sense of the collector's dignity, a ring was heard at the bell.

'That's him,' whispered Mr. Kenwigs, greatly excited. 'Morleena, my dear, run down and let your uncle in, and kiss him directly you get the door open. Hem! Let's be talking.'

Adopting Mr. Kenwigs's suggestion, the company spoke very loudly, to look easy and unembarrassed; and almost as soon as they had begun to do so, a short old gentleman in drabs and gaiters, with a face that might have been carved out of *Lignum Vitae*, for anything that appeared to the contrary, was led playfully in by Miss Morleena Kenwigs, regarding whose uncommon Christian name it may be here remarked that it had been invented and composed by Mrs. Kenwigs previous to her first lying-in, for the special distinction of her eldest child, in case it should prove a daughter.

'Oh, uncle, I am *so* glad to see you,' said Mrs. Kenwigs, kissing the collector affectionately on both cheeks. 'So glad!'

'Many happy returns of the day, my dear,' replied the

collector, returning the compliment.

Now, this was an interesting thing. Here was a collector of water-rates, without his book, without his pen and ink, without his double knock, without his intimidation, kissing – actually kissing – an agreeable female, and leaving taxes, summonses, notices that he had called, or announcements that he would never call again, for two quarters' due, wholly out of the question. It was pleasant to see how the company looked on, quite absorbed in the sight, and to behold the nods and winks with which they expressed their gratification at finding so much humanity in a tax-gatherer.

'Where will you sit, uncle?' said Mrs. Kenwigs, in the full glow of family pride, which the appearance of her distinguished relation occasioned.

'Anywheres, my dear,' said the collector, 'I am not particular.'

Not particular! What a meek collector! If he had been an author, who knew his place, he couldn't have been more humble.

'Mr. Lillyvick,' said Kenwigs, addressing the collector, 'some friends here, sir, are very anxious for the honour of – thank you – Mr. and Mrs. Cutler, Mr. Lillyvick.'

'Proud to know you, sir,' said Mr. Cutler; 'I've heerd of you very often.' These were not mere words of ceremony; for, Mr. Cutler, having kept house in Mr. Lillyvick's parish, had heard of him very often indeed. His attention in calling had been quite extraordinary.

'George, you know, I think, Mr. Lillyvick,' said Kenwigs; 'lady

from downstairs – Mr. Lillyvick. Mr. Snewkes – Mr. Lillyvick. Miss Green – Mr Lillyvick. Mr. Lillyvick – Miss Petowker of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Very glad to make two public characters acquainted! Mrs. Kenwigs, my dear, will you sort the counters?'

Mrs. Kenwigs, with the assistance of Newman Noggs, (who, as he performed sundry little acts of kindness for the children, at all times and seasons, was humoured in his request to be taken no notice of, and was merely spoken about, in a whisper, as the decayed gentleman), did as he was desired; and the greater part of the guests sat down to speculation, while Newman himself, Mrs. Kenwigs, and Miss Petowker of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, looked after the supper-table.

While the ladies were thus busying themselves, Mr. Lillyvick was intent upon the game in progress, and as all should be fish that comes to a water-collector's net, the dear old gentleman was by no means scrupulous in appropriating to himself the property of his neighbours, which, on the contrary, he abstracted whenever an opportunity presented itself, smiling good-humouredly all the while, and making so many condescending speeches to the owners, that they were delighted with his amiability, and thought in their hearts that he deserved to be Chancellor of the Exchequer at least.

After a great deal of trouble, and the administration of many slaps on the head to the infant Kenwigses, whereof two of the most rebellious were summarily banished, the cloth was laid with

much elegance, and a pair of boiled fowls, a large piece of pork, apple-pie, potatoes and greens, were served; at sight of which, the worthy Mr. Lillyvick vented a great many witticisms, and plucked up amazingly: to the immense delight and satisfaction of the whole body of admirers.

Very well and very fast the supper went off; no more serious difficulties occurring, than those which arose from the incessant demand for clean knives and forks; which made poor Mrs. Kenwigs wish, more than once, that private society adopted the principle of schools, and required that every guest should bring his own knife, fork, and spoon; which doubtless would be a great accommodation in many cases, and to no one more so than to the lady and gentleman of the house, especially if the school principle were carried out to the full extent, and the articles were expected, as a matter of delicacy, not to be taken away again.

Everybody having eaten everything, the table was cleared in a most alarming hurry, and with great noise; and the spirits, whereat the eyes of Newman Noggs glistened, being arranged in order, with water both hot and cold, the party composed themselves for conviviality; Mr. Lillyvick being stationed in a large armchair by the fireside, and the four little Kenwigses disposed on a small form in front of the company with their flaxen tails towards them, and their faces to the fire; an arrangement which was no sooner perfected, than Mrs. Kenwigs was overpowered by the feelings of a mother, and fell upon the left shoulder of Mr. Kenwigs dissolved in tears.

‘They are so beautiful!’ said Mrs. Kenwigs, sobbing.

‘Oh, dear,’ said all the ladies, ‘so they are! it’s very natural you should feel proud of that; but don’t give way, don’t.’

‘I can – not help it, and it don’t signify,’ sobbed Mrs. Kenwigs; ‘oh! they’re too beautiful to live, much too beautiful!’

On hearing this alarming presentiment of their being doomed to an early death in the flower of their infancy, all four little girls raised a hideous cry, and burying their heads in their mother’s lap simultaneously, screamed until the eight flaxen tails vibrated again; Mrs. Kenwigs meanwhile clasping them alternately to her bosom, with attitudes expressive of distraction, which Miss Petowker herself might have copied.

At length, the anxious mother permitted herself to be soothed into a more tranquil state, and the little Kenwigses, being also composed, were distributed among the company, to prevent the possibility of Mrs. Kenwigs being again overcome by the blaze of their combined beauty. This done, the ladies and gentlemen united in prophesying that they would live for many, many years, and that there was no occasion at all for Mrs. Kenwigs to distress herself; which, in good truth, there did not appear to be; the loveliness of the children by no means justifying her apprehensions.

‘This day eight year,’ said Mr. Kenwigs after a pause. ‘Dear me – ah!’

This reflection was echoed by all present, who said ‘Ah!’ first, and ‘dear me,’ afterwards.

‘I was younger then,’ tittered Mrs. Kenwigs.

‘No,’ said the collector.

‘Certainly not,’ added everybody.

‘I remember my niece,’ said Mr. Lillyvick, surveying his audience with a grave air; ‘I remember her, on that very afternoon, when she first acknowledged to her mother a partiality for Kenwigs. “Mother,” she says, “I love him.”’

‘“Adore him,” I said, uncle,’ interposed Mrs. Kenwigs.

‘“Love him,” I think, my dear,’ said the collector, firmly.

‘Perhaps you are right, uncle,’ replied Mrs. Kenwigs, submissively. ‘I thought it was “adore.”’

‘“Love,” my dear,’ retorted Mr. Lillyvick. ‘“Mother,” she says, “I love him!” “What do I hear?” cries her mother; and instantly falls into strong conwulsions.’

A general exclamation of astonishment burst from the company.

‘Into strong conwulsions,’ repeated Mr. Lillyvick, regarding them with a rigid look. ‘Kenwigs will excuse my saying, in the presence of friends, that there was a very great objection to him, on the ground that he was beneath the family, and would disgrace it. You remember, Kenwigs?’

‘Certainly,’ replied that gentleman, in no way displeased at the reminiscence, inasmuch as it proved, beyond all doubt, what a high family Mrs. Kenwigs came of.

‘I shared in that feeling,’ said Mr. Lillyvick: ‘perhaps it was natural; perhaps it wasn’t.’

A gentle murmur seemed to say, that, in one of Mr. Lillyvick's station, the objection was not only natural, but highly praiseworthy.

'I came round to him in time,' said Mr. Lillyvick. 'After they were married, and there was no help for it, I was one of the first to say that Kenwigs must be taken notice of. The family *did* take notice of him, in consequence, and on my representation; and I am bound to say – and proud to say – that I have always found him a very honest, well-behaved, upright, respectable sort of man. Kenwigs, shake hands.'

'I am proud to do it, sir,' said Mr. Kenwigs.

'So am I, Kenwigs,' rejoined Mr. Lillyvick.

'A very happy life I have led with your niece, sir,' said Kenwigs.

'It would have been your own fault if you had not, sir,' remarked Mr Lillyvick.

'Morleena Kenwigs,' cried her mother, at this crisis, much affected, 'kiss your dear uncle!'

The young lady did as she was requested, and the three other little girls were successively hoisted up to the collector's countenance, and subjected to the same process, which was afterwards repeated on them by the majority of those present.

'Oh dear, Mrs. Kenwigs,' said Miss Petowker, 'while Mr. Noggs is making that punch to drink happy returns in, do let Morleena go through that figure dance before Mr. Lillyvick.'

'No, no, my dear,' replied Mrs. Kenwigs, 'it will only worry

my uncle.'

'It can't worry him, I am sure,' said Miss Petowker. 'You will be very much pleased, won't you, sir?'

'That I am sure I shall' replied the collector, glancing at the punch-mixer.

'Well then, I'll tell you what,' said Mrs. Kenwigs, 'Morleena shall do the steps, if uncle can persuade Miss Petowker to recite us the Blood-Drinker's Burial, afterwards.'

There was a great clapping of hands and stamping of feet, at this proposition; the subject whereof, gently inclined her head several times, in acknowledgment of the reception.

'You know,' said Miss Petowker, reproachfully, 'that I dislike doing anything professional in private parties.'

'Oh, but not here!' said Mrs. Kenwigs. 'We are all so very friendly and pleasant, that you might as well be going through it in your own room; besides, the occasion – '

'I can't resist that,' interrupted Miss Petowker; 'anything in my humble power I shall be delighted to do.'

Mrs. Kenwigs and Miss Petowker had arranged a small *programme* of the entertainments between them, of which this was the prescribed order, but they had settled to have a little pressing on both sides, because it looked more natural. The company being all ready, Miss Petowker hummed a tune, and Morleena danced a dance; having previously had the soles of her shoes chalked, with as much care as if she were going on the tight-rope. It was a very beautiful figure, comprising a great deal

of work for the arms, and was received with unbounded applause.

'If I was blessed with a – a child – ' said Miss Petowker, blushing, 'of such genius as that, I would have her out at the Opera instantly.'

Mrs. Kenwigs sighed, and looked at Mr. Kenwigs, who shook his head, and observed that he was doubtful about it.

'Kenwigs is afraid,' said Mrs. K.

'What of?' inquired Miss Petowker, 'not of her failing?'

'Oh no,' replied Mrs. Kenwigs, 'but if she grew up what she is now, – only think of the young dukes and marquises.'

'Very right,' said the collector.

'Still,' submitted Miss Petowker, 'if she took a proper pride in herself, you know – '

'There's a good deal in that,' observed Mrs. Kenwigs, looking at her husband.

'I only know – ' faltered Miss Petowker, – 'it may be no rule to be sure – but I have never found any inconvenience or unpleasantness of that sort.'

Mr. Kenwigs, with becoming gallantry, said that settled the question at once, and that he would take the subject into his serious consideration. This being resolved upon, Miss Petowker was entreated to begin the Blood-Drinker's Burial; to which end, that young lady let down her back hair, and taking up her position at the other end of the room, with the bachelor friend posted in a corner, to rush out at the cue 'in death expire,' and catch her in his arms when she died raving mad, went through the

performance with extraordinary spirit, and to the great terror of the little Kenwigses, who were all but frightened into fits.

The ecstasies consequent upon the effort had not yet subsided, and Newman (who had not been thoroughly sober at so late an hour for a long long time,) had not yet been able to put in a word of announcement, that the punch was ready, when a hasty knock was heard at the room-door, which elicited a shriek from Mrs. Kenwigs, who immediately divined that the baby had fallen out of bed.

'Who is that?' demanded Mr. Kenwigs, sharply.

'Don't be alarmed, it's only me,' said Crowl, looking in, in his nightcap. 'The baby is very comfortable, for I peeped into the room as I came down, and it's fast asleep, and so is the girl; and I don't think the candle will set fire to the bed-curtain, unless a draught was to get into the room – it's Mr. Noggs that's wanted.'

'Me!' cried Newman, much astonished.

'Why, it *is* a queer hour, isn't it?' replied Crowl, 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,' rejoined Crowl.

'Want me? By name?' asked Newman.

'By name,' replied Crowl. '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 Crowl, throwing the door open. 'Hark! Is there any noise above?'

The guests rose in great confusion, and, looking in each other's faces with much perplexity and some fear, stretched their necks forward, and listened attentively.

CHAPTER 15

Acquaints the Reader with the Cause and Origin of the Interruption described in the last Chapter, and with some other Matters necessary to be known

Newman Noggs scrambled in violent haste upstairs with the steaming beverage, which he had so unceremoniously snatched from the table of Mr Kenwigs, and indeed from the very grasp of the water-rate collector, who was eyeing the contents of the tumbler, at the moment of its unexpected abstraction, with lively marks of pleasure visible in his countenance. 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 aperient medicine in his whole life, exhibited various odd manifestations of surprise and delight, during the passage of the liquor down his throat, and turned up his eyes most emphatically when it was all gone.

‘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.’

Newman did not look the less distressed to hear Nicholas talking in this strain; but, upon his young friend grasping him heartily by the hand, and assuring him that nothing but implicit confidence in the sincerity of his professions, and kindness of feeling towards himself, would have induced him, on any consideration, even to have made him acquainted with his arrival in London, Mr. Noggs brightened up again, and went about making such arrangements as were in his power for the comfort of his visitors, with extreme alacrity.

These were simple enough; poor Newman’s means halting at a very considerable distance short of his inclinations; 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 yet 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 bottle of spirits and a pot of porter, there was no ground

for apprehension on the score of hunger or thirst, at all events. Such preparations as Newman had it 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, as an express preliminary, that Nicholas should change his clothes, and that Smike should invest himself in his solitary coat (which no entreaties would 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 Crowl upon the fuel; and Nicholas, who had hitherto been restrained by the extreme anxiety of his friend that he should refresh himself after his journey, now pressed him with earnest questions concerning his mother and sister.

'Well,' replied Newman, with his accustomed taciturnity; 'both well.'

'They are living in the city still?' inquired Nicholas.

'They are,' said Newman.

'And my sister,' – added Nicholas. '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, according to the action of the head that accompanied it, was interpreted by his friends as meaning yes or

no. In the present instance, the pantomime consisted of a nod, and not a shake; 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 his utmost 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, pray.'

'Tomorrow morning,' said Newman; 'hear it tomorrow.'

'What purpose would that answer?' urged Nicholas.

'You would sleep the better,' replied Newman.

'I should sleep the worse,' answered Nicholas, impatiently. 'Sleep! Exhausted as I am, and standing in no common need of rest, 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,'

rejoined Nicholas; '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; and whatever consequences may accrue to myself from it, 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 gentle allusion to the absent Mr. Squeers, Nicholas repressed his rising wrath, and relating to Newman exactly 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; and after sundry extraordinary demonstrations of reluctance, delivered himself in the following terms.

'My dear young man, you mustn't give way to – this sort of thing will never do, you know – as to getting on in the world, if you take everybody's part that's ill-treated – Damn it, I am proud to hear of it; and would have done it myself!'

Newman accompanied this very unusual outbreak with a violent blow upon the table, as if, in the heat of the moment, he had mistaken it for the chest or ribs of Mr. Wackford Squeers. Having, by this open declaration of his feelings, quite precluded himself from offering Nicholas any cautious worldly advice (which had been his first intention), Mr. Noggs went straight to

the point.

'The day before yesterday,' said Newman, 'your uncle received this letter. I took a hasty copy of it, while he was out. Shall I read it?'

'If you please,' replied Nicholas. 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 recuvver 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 forms 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 the 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 only 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 cetrer '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 woe-begone and heart-stricken look.

'Mr. Noggs,' said Nicholas, after a few moments' reflection, 'I must go out at once.'

'Go out!' cried Newman.

'Yes,' said Nicholas, '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 feign 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, chafing violently, and pacing the narrow room with rapid strides.

'Quite,' rejoined Newman. 'He had hardly read it when he was called away. Its contents are known to nobody but himself and us.'

'Are you certain?' demanded Nicholas, precipitately; '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,' said Newman, speaking for the moment, in his earnestness, like any other man – 'make no effort to see even them, till he comes home. I know the man. Do not seem to have been tampering with anybody. When he returns, go straight to him, and speak as boldly as you like. Guessing at the real truth, he knows it 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 during the foregoing conversation 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 mug-full for the joint accommodation of himself and Smike, of which the two partook in great harmony, while Nicholas, leaning his head upon his hand, remained buried in melancholy meditation.

Meanwhile, the company below stairs, after listening attentively and not hearing any noise which would justify them in interfering for the gratification of their curiosity, returned to the chamber of the Kenwigses, and employed themselves in hazarding a great variety of conjectures relative to the cause of Mr. Noggs’ sudden disappearance and detention.

‘Lor, I’ll tell you what,’ said Mrs. Kenwigs. ‘Suppose it should be an express sent up to say that his property has all come back again!’

‘Dear me,’ said Mr. Kenwigs; ‘it’s not impossible. Perhaps, in that case, we’d better send up and ask if he won’t take a little more punch.’

‘Kenwigs!’ said Mr. Lillyvick, in a loud voice, ‘I’m surprised at you.’

‘What’s the matter, sir?’ asked Mr. Kenwigs, with becoming

submission to the collector of water-rates.

'Making such a remark as that, sir,' replied Mr. Lillyvick, angrily. 'He has had punch already, has he not, sir? I consider the way in which that punch was cut off, if I may use the expression, highly disrespectful to this company; scandalous, perfectly scandalous. It may be the custom to allow such things in this house, but it's not the kind of behaviour that I've been used to see displayed, and so I don't mind telling you, Kenwigs. A gentleman has a glass of punch before him to which he is just about to set his lips, when another gentleman comes and collars that glass of punch, without a "with your leave", or "by your leave", and carries that glass of punch away. This may be good manners – I dare say it is – but I don't understand it, that's all; and what's more, I don't care if I never do. It's my way to speak my mind, Kenwigs, and that is my mind; and if you don't like it, it's past my regular time for going to bed, and I can find my way home without making it later.'

Here was an untoward event! The collector had sat swelling and fuming in offended dignity for some minutes, and had now fairly burst out. The great man – the rich relation – the unmarried uncle – who had it in his power to make Morleena an heiress, and the very baby a legatee – was offended. Gracious Powers, where was this to end!

'I am very sorry, sir,' said Mr. Kenwigs, humbly.

'Don't tell me you're sorry,' retorted Mr. Lillyvick, with much sharpness. 'You should have prevented it, then.'

The company were quite paralysed by this domestic crash. The back-parlour sat with her mouth wide open, staring vacantly at the collector, in a stupor of dismay; the other guests were scarcely less overpowered by the great man's irritation. Mr. Kenwigs, not being skilful in such matters, only fanned the flame in attempting to extinguish it.

'I didn't think of it, I am sure, sir,' said that gentleman. 'I didn't suppose that such a little thing as a glass of punch would have put you out of temper.'

'Out of temper! What the devil do you mean by that piece of impertinence, Mr. Kenwigs?' said the collector. 'Morleena, child – give me my hat.'

'Oh, you're not going, Mr. Lillyvick, sir,' interposed Miss Petowker, with her most bewitching smile.

But still Mr. Lillyvick, regardless of the siren, cried obdurately, 'Morleena, my hat!' upon the fourth repetition of which demand, Mrs Kenwigs sunk back in her chair, with a cry that might have softened a water-butt, not to say a water-collector; while the four little girls (privately instructed to that effect) clasped their uncle's drab shorts in their arms, and prayed him, in imperfect English, to remain.

'Why should I stop here, my dears?' said Mr. Lillyvick; 'I'm not wanted here.'

'Oh, do not speak so cruelly, uncle,' sobbed Mrs. Kenwigs, 'unless you wish to kill me.'

'I shouldn't wonder if some people were to say I did,' replied

Mr Lillyvick, glancing angrily at Kenwigs. 'Out of temper!'

'Oh! I cannot bear to see him look so, at my husband,' cried Mrs. Kenwigs. 'It's so dreadful in families. Oh!'

'Mr. Lillyvick,' said Kenwigs, 'I hope, for the sake of your niece, that you won't object to be reconciled.'

The collector's features relaxed, as the company added their entreaties to those of his nephew-in-law. He gave up his hat, and held out his hand.

'There, Kenwigs,' said Mr. Lillyvick; 'and let me tell you, at the same time, to show you how much out of temper I was, that if I had gone away without another word, it would have made no difference respecting that pound or two which I shall leave among your children when I die.'

'Morleena Kenwigs,' cried her mother, in a torrent of affection. 'Go down upon your knees to your dear uncle, and beg him to love you all his life through, for he's more a angel than a man, and I've always said so.'

Miss Morleena approaching to do homage, in compliance with this injunction, was summarily caught up and kissed by Mr. Lillyvick; and thereupon Mrs. Kenwigs darted forward and kissed the collector, and an irrepressible murmur of applause broke from the company who had witnessed his magnanimity.

The worthy gentleman then became once more the life and soul of the society; being again reinstated in his old post of lion, from which high station the temporary distraction of their thoughts had for a moment dispossessed him. Quadruped lions

are said to be savage, only when they are hungry; biped lions are rarely sulky longer than when their appetite for distinction remains unappeased. Mr. Lillyvick stood higher than ever; for he had shown his power; hinted at his property and testamentary intentions; gained great credit for disinterestedness and virtue; and, in addition to all, was finally accommodated with a much larger tumbler of punch than that which Newman Noggs had so feloniously made off with.

'I say! I beg everybody's pardon for intruding again,' said Crowl, looking in at this happy juncture; 'but what a queer business this is, isn't it? Noggs has lived in this house, now going on for five years, and nobody has ever been to see him before, within the memory of the oldest inhabitant.'

'It's a strange time of night to be called away, sir, certainly,' said the collector; 'and the behaviour of Mr. Noggs himself, is, to say the least of it, mysterious.'

'Well, so it is,' rejoined Crowl; 'and I'll tell you what's more – I think these two geniuses, whoever they are, have run away from somewhere.'

'What makes you think that, sir?' demanded the collector, who seemed, by a tacit understanding, to have been chosen and elected mouthpiece to the company. 'You have no reason to suppose that they have run away from anywhere without paying the rates and taxes due, I hope?'

Mr. Crowl, with a look of some contempt, was about to enter a general protest against the payment of rates or taxes, under any

circumstances, when he was checked by a timely whisper from Kenwigs, and several frowns and winks from Mrs. K., which providentially stopped him.

'Why the fact is,' said Crowl, who had been listening at Newman's door with all his might and main; 'the fact is, that they have been talking so loud, that they quite disturbed me in my room, and so I couldn't help catching a word here, and a word there; and all I heard, certainly seemed to refer to their having bolted from some place or other. I don't wish to alarm Mrs. Kenwigs; but I hope they haven't come from any jail or hospital, and brought away a fever or some unpleasantness of that sort, which might be catching for the children.'

Mrs. Kenwigs was so overpowered by this supposition, that it needed all the tender attentions of Miss Petowker, of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, to restore her to anything like a state of calmness; not to mention the assiduity of Mr. Kenwigs, who held a fat smelling-bottle to his lady's nose, until it became matter of some doubt whether the tears which coursed down her face were the result of feelings or *sal volatile*.

The ladies, having expressed their sympathy, singly and separately, fell, according to custom, into a little chorus of soothing expressions, among which, such condolences as 'Poor dear!' – 'I should feel just the same, if I was her' – 'To be sure, it's a very trying thing' – and 'Nobody but a mother knows what a mother's feelings is,' were among the most prominent, and most frequently repeated. In short, the opinion of the company

was so clearly manifested, that Mr. Kenwigs was on the point of repairing to Mr. Noggs's room, to demand an explanation, and had indeed swallowed a preparatory glass of punch, with great inflexibility and steadiness of purpose, when the attention of all present was diverted by a new and terrible surprise.

This was nothing less than the sudden pouring forth of a rapid succession of the shrillest and most piercing screams, from an upper story; and to all appearance from the very two-pair back, in which the infant Kenwigs was at that moment enshrined. They were no sooner audible, than Mrs Kenwigs, opining that a strange cat had come in, and sucked the baby's breath while the girl was asleep, made for the door, wringing her hands, and shrieking dismally; to the great consternation and confusion of the company.

'Mr. Kenwigs, see what it is; make haste!' cried the sister, laying violent hands upon Mrs. Kenwigs, and holding her back by force. 'Oh don't twist about so, dear, or I can never hold you.'

'My baby, my blessed, blessed, blessed, blessed baby!' screamed Mrs Kenwigs, making every blessed louder than the last. 'My own darling, sweet, innocent Lillyvick – Oh let me go to him. Let me go-o-o-o!'

Pending the utterance of these frantic cries, and the wails and lamentations of the four little girls, Mr. Kenwigs rushed upstairs to the room whence the sounds proceeded; at the door of which, he encountered Nicholas, with the child in his arms, who darted out with such violence, that the anxious father was thrown down

six stairs, and alighted on the nearest landing-place, before he had found time to open his mouth to ask what was the matter.

'Don't be alarmed,' cried Nicholas, running down; 'here it is; it's all out, it's all over; pray compose yourselves; there's no harm done;' and with these, and a thousand other assurances, he delivered the baby (whom, in his hurry, he had carried upside down), to Mrs. Kenwigs, and ran back to assist Mr. Kenwigs, who was rubbing his head very hard, and looking much bewildered by his tumble.

Reassured by this cheering intelligence, the company in some degree recovered from their fears, which had been productive of some most singular instances of a total want of presence of mind; thus, the bachelor friend had, for a long time, supported in his arms Mrs. Kenwigs's sister, instead of Mrs. Kenwigs; and the worthy Mr. Lillyvick had been actually seen, in the perturbation of his spirits, to kiss Miss Petowker several times, behind the room-door, as calmly as if nothing distressing were going forward.

'It is a mere nothing,' said Nicholas, returning to Mrs. Kenwigs; 'the little girl, who was watching the child, being tired I suppose, fell asleep, and set her hair on fire.'

'Oh you malicious little wretch!' cried Mrs. Kenwigs, impressively shaking her forefinger at the small unfortunate, who might be thirteen years old, and was looking on with a singed head and a frightened face.

'I heard her cries,' continued Nicholas, 'and ran down, in time

to prevent her setting fire to anything else. You may depend upon it that the child is not hurt; for I took it off the bed myself, and brought it here to convince you.'

This brief explanation over, the infant, who, as he was christened after the collector! rejoiced in the names of Lillyvick Kenwigs, was partially suffocated under the caresses of the audience, and squeezed to his mother's bosom, until he roared again. The attention of the company was then directed, by a natural transition, to the little girl who had had the audacity to burn her hair off, and who, after receiving sundry small slaps and pushes from the more energetic of the ladies, was mercifully sent home: the ninepence, with which she was to have been rewarded, being escheated to the Kenwigs family.

'And whatever we are to say to you, sir,' exclaimed Mrs. Kenwigs, addressing young Lillyvick's deliverer, 'I am sure I don't know.'

'You need say nothing at all,' replied Nicholas. 'I have done nothing to found any very strong claim upon your eloquence, I am sure.'

'He might have been burnt to death, if it hadn't been for you, sir,' simpered Miss Petowker.

'Not very likely, I think,' replied Nicholas; 'for there was abundance of assistance here, which must have reached him before he had been in any danger.'

'You will let us drink your health, anyvays, sir!' said Mr. Kenwigs motioning towards the table.

‘ – In my absence, by all means,’ rejoined Nicholas, with a smile. ‘I have had a very fatiguing journey, and should be most indifferent company – a far greater check upon your merriment, than a promoter of it, even if I kept awake, which I think very doubtful. If you will allow me, I’ll return to my friend, Mr. Noggs, who went upstairs again, when he found nothing serious had occurred. Good-night.’

Excusing himself, in these terms, from joining in the festivities, Nicholas took a most winning farewell of Mrs. Kenwigs and the other ladies, and retired, after making a very extraordinary impression upon the company.

‘What a delightful young man!’ cried Mrs. Kenwigs.

‘Uncommon gentlemanly, really,’ said Mr. Kenwigs. ‘Don’t you think so, Mr Lillyvick?’

‘Yes,’ said the collector, with a dubious shrug of his shoulders, ‘He is gentlemanly, very gentlemanly – in appearance.’

‘I hope you don’t see anything against him, uncle?’ inquired Mrs. Kenwigs.

‘No, my dear,’ replied the collector, ‘no. I trust he may not turn out – well – no matter – my love to you, my dear, and long life to the baby!’

‘Your namesake,’ said Mrs. Kenwigs, with a sweet smile.

‘And I hope a worthy namesake,’ observed Mr. Kenwigs, willing to propitiate the collector. ‘I hope a baby as will never disgrace his godfather, and as may be considered, in arter years, of a piece with the Lillyvicks whose name he bears. I do say –

and Mrs. Kenwigs is of the same sentiment, and feels it as strong as I do – that I consider his being called Lillyvick one of the greatest blessings and Honours of my existence.'

'*The* greatest blessing, Kenwigs,' murmured his lady.

'*The* greatest blessing,' said Mr. Kenwigs, correcting himself. 'A blessing that I hope, one of these days, I may be able to deserve.'

This was a politic stroke of the Kenwigses, because it made Mr. Lillyvick the great head and fountain of the baby's importance. The good gentleman felt the delicacy and dexterity of the touch, and at once proposed the health of the gentleman, name unknown, who had signalised himself, that night, by his coolness and alacrity.

'Who, I don't mind saying,' observed Mr. Lillyvick, as a great concession, 'is a good-looking young man enough, with manners that I hope his character may be equal to.'

'He has a very nice face and style, really,' said Mrs. Kenwigs.

'He certainly has,' added Miss Petowker. 'There's something in his appearance quite – dear, dear, what's that word again?'

'What word?' inquired Mr. Lillyvick.

'Why – dear me, how stupid I am,' replied Miss Petowker, hesitating. 'What do you call it, when Lords break off door-knockers and beat policemen, and play at coaches with other people's money, and all that sort of thing?'

'Aristocratic?' suggested the collector.

'Ah! aristocratic,' replied Miss Petowker; 'something very

aristocratic about him, isn't there?'

The gentleman held their peace, and smiled at each other, as who should say, 'Well! there's no accounting for tastes;' but the ladies resolved unanimously that Nicholas had an aristocratic air; and nobody caring to dispute the position, it was established triumphantly.

The punch being, by this time, drunk out, and the little Kenwigses (who had for some time previously held their little eyes open with their little forefingers) becoming fractious, and requesting rather urgently to be put to bed, the collector made a move by pulling out his watch, and acquainting the company that it was nigh two o'clock; whereat some of the guests were surprised and others shocked, and hats and bonnets being groped for under the tables, and in course of time found, their owners went away, after a vast deal of shaking of hands, and many remarks how they had never spent such a delightful evening, and how they marvelled to find it so late, expecting to have heard that it was half-past ten at the very latest, and how they wished that Mr. and Mrs. Kenwigs had a wedding-day once a week, and how they wondered by what hidden agency Mrs. Kenwigs could possibly have managed so well; and a great deal more of the same kind. To all of which flattering expressions, Mr. and Mrs. Kenwigs replied, by thanking every lady and gentleman, *seriatim*, for the favour of their company, and hoping they might have enjoyed themselves only half as well as they said they had.

As to Nicholas, quite unconscious of the impression he had

produced, he had long since fallen asleep, leaving Mr. Newman Noggs and Smike to empty the spirit bottle between them; and this office they performed with such extreme good-will, that Newman was equally at a loss to determine whether he himself was quite sober, and whether he had ever seen any gentleman so heavily, drowsily, and completely intoxicated as his new acquaintance.

CHAPTER 16

Nicholas seeks to employ himself in a New Capacity, and being unsuccessful, accepts an engagement as Tutor in a Private Family

The first care of Nicholas, next morning, was, to look after some room in which, until better times dawned upon him, he could contrive to exist, without trenching upon the hospitality of Newman Noggs, who would have slept upon the stairs with pleasure, so that his young friend was accommodated.

The vacant apartment to which the bill in the parlour window bore reference, appeared, on inquiry, to be a small back-room on the second floor, reclaimed from the leads, and overlooking a soot-bespeckled prospect of tiles and chimney-pots. For the letting of this portion of the house from week to week, on reasonable terms, the parlour lodger was empowered to treat; he being deputed by the landlord to dispose of the rooms as they became vacant, and to keep a sharp look-out that the lodgers didn't run away. As a means of securing the punctual discharge of which last service he was permitted to live rent-free, lest he should at any time be tempted to run away himself.

Of this chamber, Nicholas became the tenant; and having hired a few common articles of furniture from a neighbouring broker, and paid the first week's hire in advance, out of a small

fund raised by the conversion of some spare clothes into ready money, he sat himself down to ruminate upon his prospects, which, like the prospect outside his window, were sufficiently confined and dingy. As they by no means improved on better acquaintance, and as familiarity breeds contempt, he resolved to banish them from his thoughts by dint of hard walking. So, taking up his hat, and leaving poor Smike to arrange and rearrange the room with as much delight as if it had been the costliest palace, he betook himself to the streets, and mingled with the crowd which thronged them.

Although a man may lose a sense of his own importance when he is a mere unit among a busy throng, all utterly regardless of him, it by no means follows that he can dispossess himself, with equal facility, of a very strong sense of the importance and magnitude of his cares. 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 situation and 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.' It was a shop-front, fitted

up with a gauze blind and an inner door; and in the window hung a long and tempting array of written placards, announcing vacant places of every grade, from a secretary's to a foot-boy's.

Nicholas halted, instinctively, before this temple of promise, and ran his eye over the capital-text openings in life which were so profusely displayed. When he had completed his survey he walked on a little way, and then back, and then on again; at length, after pausing irresolutely several times before the door of the General Agency Office, he made up his mind, and stepped in.

He found himself in a little floor-clothed room, with a high desk railed off in one corner, behind which sat a lean youth with cunning eyes and a protruding chin, whose performances in capital-text darkened the window. He had a thick ledger lying open before him, and with the fingers of his right hand inserted between the leaves, and his eyes fixed on a very fat old lady in a mob-cap – evidently the proprietress of the establishment – who was airing herself at the fire, seemed to be only waiting her directions to refer to some entries contained within its rusty clasps.

As there was a board outside, which acquainted the public that servants-of-all-work were perpetually in waiting to be hired from ten till four, Nicholas knew at once that some half-dozen strong young women, each with pattens and an umbrella, who were sitting upon a form in one corner, were in attendance for that purpose: especially as the poor things looked anxious and weary. He was not quite so certain of the callings and stations of

two smart young ladies who were in conversation with the fat lady before the fire, until – having sat himself down in a corner, and remarked that he would wait until the other customers had been served – the fat lady resumed the dialogue which his entrance had interrupted.

'Cook, Tom,' said the fat lady, still airing herself as aforesaid.

'Cook,' said Tom, turning over some leaves of the ledger. 'Well!'

'Read out an easy place or two,' said the fat lady.

'Pick out very light ones, if you please, young man,' interposed a genteel female, in shepherd's-plaid boots, who appeared to be the client.

'"Mrs. Marker,"' said Tom, reading, '"Russell Place, Russell Square; offers eighteen guineas; tea and sugar found. Two in family, and see very little company. Five servants kept. No man. No followers."'

'Oh Lor!' tittered the client. '*That* won't do. Read another, young man, will you?'

'"Mrs. Wrymug,"' said Tom, '"Pleasant Place, Finsbury. Wages, twelve guineas. No tea, no sugar. Serious family – "'

'Ah! you needn't mind reading that,' interrupted the client.

'"Three serious footmen,"' said Tom, impressively.

'Three? did you say?' asked the client in an altered tone.

'Three serious footmen,' replied Tom. '"Cook, housemaid, and nursemaid; each female servant required to join the Little Bethel Congregation three times every Sunday – with a serious

footman. If the cook is more serious than the footman, she will be expected to improve the footman; if the footman is more serious than the cook, he will be expected to improve the cook.'"

'I'll take the address of that place,' said the client; 'I don't know but what it mightn't suit me pretty well.'

'Here's another,' remarked Tom, turning over the leaves. "'Family of Mr Gallanbile, MP. Fifteen guineas, tea and sugar, and servants allowed to see male cousins, if godly. Note. Cold dinner in the kitchen on the Sabbath, Mr. Gallanbile being devoted to the Observance question. No victuals whatever cooked on the Lord's Day, with the exception of dinner for Mr. and Mrs. Gallanbile, which, being a work of piety and necessity, is exempted. Mr. Gallanbile dines late on the day of rest, in order to prevent the sinfulness of the cook's dressing herself.'"

'I don't think that'll answer as well as the other,' said the client, after a little whispering with her friend. 'I'll take the other direction, if you please, young man. I can but come back again, if it don't do.'

Tom made out the address, as requested, and the genteel client, having satisfied the fat lady with a small fee, meanwhile, went away accompanied by her friend.

As Nicholas opened his mouth, to request the young man to turn to letter S, and let him know what secretaryships remained undisposed of, 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 tone of voice, relative to some situation as governess, or companion to a lady. She raised her veil, for an instant, while she preferred the inquiry, and disclosed a countenance of most uncommon beauty, though shaded by a cloud of sadness, which, in one so young, was doubly remarkable. Having received a card of reference to some person on the books, she made the usual acknowledgment, and glided away.

She was neatly, but very quietly attired; so much so, indeed, that it seemed as though her dress, if it had been worn by one who imparted fewer graces of her own to it, might have looked poor and shabby. Her attendant – for she had one – was a red-faced, round-eyed, slovenly girl, who, from a certain roughness about the bare arms that peeped from under her draggled shawl, and the half-washed-out traces of smut and blacklead which tattooed her countenance, was clearly of a kin with the servants-of-all-work on the form: between whom and herself there had passed various grins and glances, indicative of the freemasonry of the craft.

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 complete and utter 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 lady and her book-keeper.

‘When is she coming again, Tom?’ asked the fat lady.

‘Tomorrow morning,’ replied Tom, mending his pen.

‘Where have you sent her to?’ asked the fat lady.

‘Mrs. Clark’s,’ replied Tom.

‘She’ll have a nice life of it, if she goes there,’ observed the fat lady, taking a pinch of snuff from a tin box.

Tom made no other reply than thrusting his tongue into his cheek, and pointing the feather of his pen towards Nicholas – reminders which elicited from the fat lady an inquiry, of ‘Now, sir, what can we do for *you*?’

Nicholas briefly replied, that he wanted to know whether there was any such post to be had, as secretary or amanuensis to a gentleman.

‘Any such!’ rejoined the mistress; ‘a-dozen-such. An’t there, Tom?’

‘I should think so,’ answered that young gentleman; and as he said it, he winked towards Nicholas, with a degree of familiarity which he, no doubt, intended for a rather flattering compliment, but with which Nicholas was most ungratefully disgusted.

Upon reference to the book, it appeared that the dozen secretaryships had dwindled down to one. Mr. Gregsbury, the great member of parliament, of Manchester Buildings, Westminster, wanted a young man, to keep his papers and correspondence in order; and Nicholas was exactly the sort of young man that Mr. Gregsbury wanted.

‘I don’t know what the terms are, as he said he’d settle them

himself with the party,' observed the fat lady; 'but they must be pretty good ones, because he's a member of parliament.'

Inexperienced as he was, Nicholas did not feel quite assured of the force of this reasoning, or the justice of this conclusion; but without troubling himself to question it, he took down the address, and resolved to wait upon Mr. Gregsbury without delay.

'I don't know what the number is,' said Tom; 'but Manchester Buildings isn't a large place; and if the worst comes to the worst it won't take you very long to knock at all the doors on both sides of the way till you find him out. 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; setting at defiance, in his indignation, those ancient laws of chivalry, which not only made it proper and lawful for all good knights to hear the praise of the ladies to whom they were devoted, but rendered it incumbent upon them to roam about the world, and knock at head all such matter-of-fact and un-poetical characters, as declined to exalt, above all the earth, damsels whom they had never chanced to look upon or hear of

– as if that were any excuse!

Thinking no longer of his own misfortunes, but wondering what could be those of the beautiful girl he had seen, Nicholas, with many wrong turns, and many inquiries, and almost as many misdirections, bent his steps towards the place whither he had been directed.

Within the precincts of the ancient city of Westminster, and within half a quarter of a mile of its ancient sanctuary, is a narrow and dirty region, the sanctuary of the smaller members of Parliament in modern days. It is all comprised in one street of gloomy lodging-houses, from whose windows, in vacation-time, there frown long melancholy rows of bills, which say, as plainly as did the countenances of their occupiers, ranged on ministerial and opposition benches in the session which slumbers with its fathers, 'To Let', 'To Let'. In busier periods of the year these bills disappear, and the houses swarm with legislators. There are legislators in the parlours, in the first floor, in the second, in the third, in the garrets; the small apartments reek with the breath of deputations and delegates. In damp weather, the place is rendered close, by the steams of moist acts of parliament and frouzy petitions; general postmen grow faint as they enter its infected limits, and shabby figures in quest of franks, flit restlessly to and fro like the troubled ghosts of Complete Letter-writers departed. This is Manchester Buildings; and here, at all hours of the night, may be heard the rattling of latch-keys in their respective keyholes: with now and then – when a gust of wind sweeping

across the water which washes the Buildings' feet, impels the sound towards its entrance – the weak, shrill voice of some young member practising tomorrow's speech. All the livelong day, there is a grinding of organs and clashing and clanging of little boxes of music; for Manchester Buildings is an eel-pot, which has no outlet but its awkward mouth – a case-bottle which has no thoroughfare, and a short and narrow neck – and in this respect it may be typical of the fate of some few among its more adventurous residents, who, after wriggling themselves into Parliament by violent efforts and contortions, find that it, too, is no thoroughfare for them; that, like Manchester Buildings, it leads to nothing beyond itself; and that they are fain at last to back out, no wiser, no richer, not one whit more famous, than they went in.

Into Manchester Buildings Nicholas turned, with the address of the great Mr. Gregsbury in his hand. As there was a stream of people pouring into a shabby house not far from the entrance, he waited until they had made their way in, and then making up to the servant, ventured to inquire if he knew where Mr. Gregsbury lived.

The servant was a very pale, shabby boy, who looked as if he had slept underground from his infancy, as very likely he had. 'Mr. Gregsbury?' said he; 'Mr. Gregsbury lodges here. It's all right. Come in!'

Nicholas thought he might as well get in while he could, so in he walked; and he had no sooner done so, than the boy shut the

door, and made off.

This was odd enough: but what was more embarrassing was, that all along the passage, and all along the narrow stairs, blocking up the window, and making the dark entry darker still, was a confused crowd of persons with great importance depicted in their looks; who were, to all appearance, waiting in silent expectation of some coming event. From time to time, one man would whisper to his neighbour, or a little group would whisper together, and then the whisperers would nod fiercely to each other, or give their heads a relentless shake, as if they were bent upon doing something very desperate, and were determined not to be put off, whatever happened.

As a few minutes elapsed without anything occurring to explain this phenomenon, and as he felt his own position a peculiarly uncomfortable one, Nicholas was on the point of seeking some information from the man next him, when a sudden move was visible on the stairs, and a voice was heard to cry, 'Now, gentleman, have the goodness to walk up!'

So far from walking up, the gentlemen on the stairs began to walk down with great alacrity, and to entreat, with extraordinary politeness, that the gentlemen nearest the street would go first; the gentlemen nearest the street retorted, with equal courtesy, that they couldn't think of such a thing on any account; but they did it, without thinking of it, inasmuch as the other gentlemen pressing some half-dozen (among whom was Nicholas) forward, and closing up behind, pushed them, not merely up the stairs, but

into the very sitting-room of Mr. Gregsbury, which they were thus compelled to enter with most unseemly precipitation, and without the means of retreat; the press behind them, more than filling the apartment.

'Gentlemen,' said Mr. Gregsbury, 'you are welcome. I am rejoiced to see you.'

For a gentleman who was rejoiced to see a body of visitors, Mr. Gregsbury looked as uncomfortable as might be; but perhaps this was occasioned by senatorial gravity, and a statesmanlike habit of keeping his feelings under control. He was a tough, burly, thick-headed gentleman, with a loud voice, a pompous manner, a tolerable command of sentences with no meaning in them, and, in short, every requisite for a very good member indeed.

'Now, gentlemen,' said Mr. Gregsbury, tossing a great bundle of papers into a wicker basket at his feet, and throwing himself back in his chair with his arms over the elbows, 'you are dissatisfied with my conduct, I see by the newspapers.'

'Yes, Mr. Gregsbury, we are,' said a plump old gentleman in a violent heat, bursting out of the throng, and planting himself in the front.

'Do my eyes deceive me,' said Mr. Gregsbury, looking towards the speaker, 'or is that my old friend Pugstyles?'

'I am that man, and no other, sir,' replied the plump old gentleman.

'Give me your hand, my worthy friend,' said Mr. Gregsbury. 'Pugstyles, my dear friend, I am very sorry to see you here.'

‘I am very sorry to be here, sir,’ said Mr. Pugstyles; ‘but your conduct, Mr. Gregsbury, has rendered this deputation from your constituents imperatively necessary.’

‘My conduct, Pugstyles,’ said Mr. Gregsbury, looking round upon the deputation with gracious magnanimity – ‘my conduct has been, and ever will be, regulated by a sincere regard for the true and real interests of this great and happy country. Whether I look at home, or abroad; whether I behold the peaceful industrious communities of our island home: her rivers covered with steamboats, her roads with locomotives, her streets with cabs, her skies with balloons of a power and magnitude hitherto unknown in the history of aeronautics in this or any other nation – I say, whether I look merely at home, or, stretching my eyes farther, contemplate the boundless prospect of conquest and possession – achieved by British perseverance and British valour – which is outspread before me, I clasp my hands, and turning my eyes to the broad expanse above my head, exclaim, “Thank Heaven, I am a Briton!”’

The time had been, when this burst of enthusiasm would have been cheered to the very echo; but now, the deputation received it with chilling coldness. The general impression seemed to be, that as an explanation of Mr. Gregsbury’s political conduct, it did not enter quite enough into detail; and one gentleman in the rear did not scruple to remark aloud, that, for his purpose, it savoured rather too much of a ‘gammon’ tendency.

‘The meaning of that term – gammon,’ said Mr. Gregsbury,

‘is unknown to me. If it means that I grow a little too fervid, or perhaps even hyperbolical, in extolling my native land, I admit the full justice of the remark. I *am* proud of this free and happy country. My form dilates, my eye glistens, my breast heaves, my heart swells, my bosom burns, when I call to mind her greatness and her glory.’

‘We wish, sir,’ remarked Mr. Pugstyles, calmly, ‘to ask you a few questions.’

‘If you please, gentlemen; my time is yours – and my country’s – and my country’s – ’ said Mr. Gregsbury.

This permission being conceded, Mr. Pugstyles put on his spectacles, and referred to a written paper which he drew from his pocket; whereupon nearly every other member of the deputation pulled a written paper from *his* pocket, to check Mr. Pugstyles off, as he read the questions.

This done, Mr. Pugstyles proceeded to business.

‘Question number one. – Whether, sir, you did not give a voluntary pledge previous to your election, that in event of your being returned, you would immediately put down the practice of coughing and groaning in the House of Commons. And whether you did not submit to be coughed and groaned down in the very first debate of the session, and have since made no effort to effect a reform in this respect? Whether you did not also pledge yourself to astonish the government, and make them shrink in their shoes? And whether you have astonished them, and made them shrink in their shoes, or not?’

‘Go on to the next one, my dear Pugstyles,’ said Mr. Gregsbury.

‘Have you any explanation to offer with reference to that question, sir?’ asked Mr. Pugstyles.

‘Certainly not,’ said Mr. Gregsbury.

The members of the deputation looked fiercely at each other, and afterwards at the member. ‘Dear Pugstyles’ having taken a very long stare at Mr. Gregsbury over the tops of his spectacles, resumed his list of inquiries.

‘Question number two. – Whether, sir, you did not likewise give a voluntary pledge that you would support your colleague on every occasion; and whether you did not, the night before last, desert him and vote upon the other side, because the wife of a leader on that other side had invited Mrs. Gregsbury to an evening party?’

‘Go on,’ said Mr. Gregsbury.

‘Nothing to say on that, either, sir?’ asked the spokesman.

‘Nothing whatever,’ replied Mr. Gregsbury. The deputation, who had only seen him at canvassing or election time, were struck dumb by his coolness. He didn’t appear like the same man; then he was all milk and honey; now he was all starch and vinegar. But men *are* so different at different times!

‘Question number three – and last,’ said Mr. Pugstyles, emphatically. ‘Whether, sir, you did not state upon the hustings, that it was your firm and determined intention to oppose everything proposed; to divide the house upon every question,

to move for returns on every subject, to place a motion on the books every day, and, in short, in your own memorable words, to play the very devil with everything and everybody?' With this comprehensive inquiry, Mr. Pugstyles folded up his list of questions, as did all his backers.

Mr. Gregsbury reflected, blew his nose, threw himself further back in his chair, came forward again, leaning his elbows on the table, made a triangle with his two thumbs and his two forefingers, and tapping his nose with the apex thereof, replied (smiling as he said it), 'I deny everything.'

At this unexpected answer, a hoarse murmur arose from the deputation; and the same gentleman who had expressed an opinion relative to the gammoning nature of the introductory speech, again made a monosyllabic demonstration, by growling out 'Resign!' Which growl being taken up by his fellows, swelled into a very earnest and general remonstrance.

'I am requested, sir, to express a hope,' said Mr. Pugstyles, with a distant bow, 'that on receiving a requisition to that effect from a great majority of your constituents, you will not object at once to resign your seat in favour of some candidate whom they think they can better trust.'

To this, Mr. Gregsbury read the following reply, which, anticipating the request, he had composed in the form of a letter, whereof copies had been made to send round to the newspapers.

'*My Dear Mr Pugstyles,*

'Next to the welfare of our beloved island – this great and

free and happy country, whose powers and resources are, I sincerely believe, illimitable – I value that noble independence which is an Englishman's proudest boast, and which I fondly hope to bequeath to my children, untarnished and unsullied. Actuated by no personal motives, but moved only by high and great constitutional considerations; which I will not attempt to explain, for they are really beneath the comprehension of those who have not made themselves masters, as I have, of the intricate and arduous study of politics; I would rather keep my seat, and intend doing so.

'Will you do me the favour to present my compliments to the constituent body, and acquaint them with this circumstance?

'With great esteem, 'My dear Mr. Pugstyles, '&c.&c.'

'Then you will not resign, under any circumstances?' asked the spokesman.

Mr. Gregsbury smiled, and shook his head.

'Then, good-morning, sir,' said Pugstyles, angrily.

'Heaven bless you!' said Mr. Gregsbury. And the deputation, with many growls and scowls, filed off as quickly as the narrowness of the staircase would allow of their getting down.

The last man being gone, Mr. Gregsbury rubbed his hands and chuckled, as merry fellows will, when they think they have said or done a more than commonly good thing; he was so engrossed in this self-congratulation, that he did not observe that Nicholas had been left behind in the shadow of the window-curtains, until that young gentleman, fearing he might otherwise overhear some

soliloquy intended to have no listeners, coughed twice or thrice, to attract the member's notice.

'What's that?' said Mr. Gregsbury, in sharp accents.

Nicholas stepped forward, and bowed.

'What do you do here, sir?' asked Mr. Gregsbury; 'a spy upon my privacy! A concealed voter! You have heard my answer, sir. Pray follow the deputation.'

'I should have done so, if I had belonged to it, but I do not,' said Nicholas.

'Then how came you here, sir?' was the natural inquiry of Mr. Gregsbury, MP. 'And where the devil have you come from, sir?' was the question which followed it.

'I brought this card from the General Agency Office, sir,' said Nicholas, 'wishing to offer myself as your secretary, and understanding that you stood in need of one.'

'That's all you have come for, is it?' said Mr. Gregsbury, eyeing him in some doubt.

Nicholas replied in the affirmative.

'You have no connection with any of those rascally papers have you?' said Mr. Gregsbury. 'You didn't get into the room, to hear what was going forward, and put it in print, eh?'

'I have no connection, I am sorry to say, with anything at present,' rejoined Nicholas, – politely enough, but quite at his ease.

'Oh!' said Mr. Gregsbury. 'How did you find your way up here, then?'

Nicholas related how he had been forced up by the deputation.

'That was the way, was it?' said Mr. Gregsbury. 'Sit down.'

Nicholas took a chair, and Mr. Gregsbury stared at him for a long time, as if to make certain, before he asked any further questions, that there were no objections to his outward appearance.

'You want to be my secretary, do you?' he said at length.

'I wish to be employed in that capacity, sir,' replied Nicholas.

'Well,' said Mr. Gregsbury; 'now what can you do?'

'I suppose,' replied Nicholas, smiling, 'that I can do what usually falls to the lot of other secretaries.'

'What's that?' inquired Mr. Gregsbury.

'What is it?' replied Nicholas.

'Ah! What is it?' retorted the member, looking shrewdly at him, with his head on one side.

'A secretary's duties are rather difficult to define, perhaps,' said Nicholas, considering. 'They include, I presume, correspondence?'

'Good,' interposed Mr. Gregsbury.

'The arrangement of papers and documents?'

'Very good.'

'Occasionally, perhaps, the writing from your dictation; and possibly, sir,' said Nicholas, with a half-smile, 'the copying of your speech for some public journal, when you have made one of more than usual importance.'

'Certainly,' rejoined Mr. Gregsbury. 'What else?'

‘Really,’ said Nicholas, after a moment’s reflection, ‘I am not able, at this instant, to recapitulate any other duty of a secretary, beyond the general one of making himself as agreeable and useful to his employer as he can, consistently with his own respectability, and without overstepping that line of duties which he undertakes to perform, and which the designation of his office is usually understood to imply.’

Mr. Gregsbury looked fixedly at Nicholas for a short time, and then glancing warily round the room, said in a suppressed voice:

‘This is all very well, Mr – what is your name?’

‘Nickleby.’

‘This is all very well, Mr. Nickleby, and very proper, so far as it goes – so far as it goes, but it doesn’t go far enough. There are other duties, Mr Nickleby, which a secretary to a parliamentary gentleman must never lose sight of. I should require to be crammed, sir.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ interposed Nicholas, doubtful whether he had heard aright.

‘ – To be crammed, sir,’ repeated Mr. Gregsbury.

‘May I beg your pardon again, if I inquire what you mean, sir?’ said Nicholas.

‘My meaning, sir, is perfectly plain,’ replied Mr. Gregsbury with a solemn aspect. ‘My secretary would have to make himself master of the foreign policy of the world, as it is mirrored in the newspapers; to run his eye over all accounts of public meetings, all leading articles, and accounts of the proceedings of public

bodies; and to make notes of anything which it appeared to him might be made a point of, in any little speech upon the question of some petition lying on the table, or anything of that kind. Do you understand?'

'I think I do, sir,' replied Nicholas.

'Then,' said Mr. Gregsbury, 'it would be necessary for him to make himself acquainted, from day to day, with newspaper paragraphs on passing events; such as "Mysterious disappearance, and supposed suicide of a potboy," or anything of that sort, upon which I might found a question to the Secretary of State for the Home Department. Then, he would have to copy the question, and as much as I remembered of the answer (including a little compliment about independence and good sense); and to send the manuscript in a frank to the local paper, with perhaps half-a-dozen lines of leader, to the effect, that I was always to be found in my place in parliament, and never shrunk from the responsible and arduous duties, and so forth. You see?'

Nicholas bowed.

'Besides which,' continued Mr. Gregsbury, 'I should expect him, now and then, to go through a few figures in the printed tables, and to pick out a few results, so that I might come out pretty well on timber duty questions, and finance questions, and so on; and I should like him to get up a few little arguments about the disastrous effects of a return to cash payments and a metallic currency, with a touch now and then about the exportation of bullion, and the Emperor of Russia, and bank notes, and all that

kind of thing, which it's only necessary to talk fluently about, because nobody understands it. Do you take me?'

'I think I understand,' said Nicholas.

'With regard to such questions as are not political,' continued Mr Gregsbury, warming; 'and which one can't be expected to care a curse about, beyond the natural care of not allowing inferior people to be as well off as ourselves – else where are our privileges? – I should wish my secretary to get together a few little flourishing speeches, of a patriotic cast. For instance, if any preposterous bill were brought forward, for giving poor grubbing devils of authors a right to their own property, I should like to say, that I for one would never consent to opposing an insurmountable bar to the diffusion of literature among *the people*, – you understand? – that the creations of the pocket, being man's, might belong to one man, or one family; but that the creations of the brain, being God's, ought as a matter of course to belong to the people at large – and if I was pleasantly disposed, I should like to make a joke about posterity, and say that those who wrote for posterity should be content to be rewarded by the approbation *of*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.