

### Chapter III

**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 UNcommon 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.