

Chapter IV

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 annum, 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 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 than ever.