Chapter V

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 lady 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.