

Chapter IX

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 stopped 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 about 'un,' said the corn-factor, bestowing a hearty kiss on Miss Matilda; 'let 'un gang on, let 'un gang on.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Not on any account,' rejoined Nicholas, quite alarmed at the proposition. 'What on earth should you do that for?'

'Well,' said Miss Price, beckoning him aside, and speaking with some degree of contempt - 'you ARE a one to keep company.'

'What do you mean?' 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 rivalry 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, curtsying very low. 'Wish you a very good-night, ma'am, and pleasant dreams attend your sleep!'

With this parting benediction, Miss Price swept from the room, followed by the huge Yorkshireman, who exchanged with Nicholas, at parting, that 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.