

Chapter XI

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

Miss Nickleby's reflections, as she wended her way homewards, were of that desponding nature which the occurrences of the morning had been sufficiently calculated to awaken. Her uncle's was not a manner likely to dispel any doubts or apprehensions she might have formed, in the outset, neither was the glimpse she had had of Madame Mantalini's establishment by any means encouraging. It was with many gloomy forebodings and misgivings, therefore, that she looked forward, with a heavy heart, to the opening of her new career.

If her mother's consolations could have restored her to a pleasanter and more enviable state of mind, there were abundance of them to produce the effect. By the time Kate reached home, the good lady had called to mind two authentic cases of milliners who had been possessed of considerable property, though whether they had acquired it all in business, or had had a capital to start with, or had been lucky and married to advantage, she could not exactly remember. However, as she very logically remarked, there must have been SOME young person in that way of business who had made a fortune without having anything to begin with, and that being taken for granted, why should not Kate do the same? Miss La Creevy, who was a member of the little council, ventured to insinuate some doubts relative to the probability of Miss Nickleby's arriving at this happy consummation in the compass of an ordinary lifetime; but the good lady set that question entirely at rest, by informing them that she had a presentiment on the subject - a species of second-sight with which she had been in the habit of clenching every argument with the deceased Mr Nickleby, and, in nine cases and three-quarters out of every ten, determining it the wrong way.

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

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

'Perhaps she drank,' suggested Miss La Creevy.

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

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

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

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

'You shall not shake me off, for all that,' replied Miss La Creevy, with as much sprightliness as she could assume. 'I shall see you very often, and come and hear how you get on; and if, in all London, or all the wide world besides, there is no other heart that takes an interest in your welfare, there will be one little lonely woman that prays for it night and day.'

With this, the poor soul, who had a heart big enough for Gog, the guardian genius of London, and enough to spare for Magog to boot, after making a great many extraordinary faces which would have secured her an ample fortune, could she have transferred them to ivory or canvas, sat down in a corner, and had what she termed 'a real good cry.'

But no crying, or talking, or hoping, or fearing, could keep off the dreaded Saturday afternoon, or Newman Noggs either; who, punctual to his time, limped up to the door, and breathed a whiff of cordial gin through the keyhole, exactly as such of the church clocks in the neighbourhood as agreed among themselves about the time, struck five. Newman waited for the last stroke, and then knocked. 'From Mr Ralph Nickleby,' said Newman, announcing his errand, when he got upstairs, with all possible brevity.

'We shall be ready directly,' said Kate. 'We have not much to carry, but I fear we must have a coach.'

'I'll get one,' replied Newman.

'Indeed you shall not trouble yourself,' said Mrs Nickleby.

'I will,' said Newman.

'I can't suffer you to think of such a thing,' said Mrs Nickleby.

'You can't help it,' said Newman.

'Not help it!'

'No; I thought of it as I came along; but didn't get one, thinking you mightn't be ready. I think of a great many things. Nobody can prevent that.'

'Oh yes, I understand you, Mr Noggs,' said Mrs Nickleby. 'Our thoughts are free, of course. Everybody's thoughts are their own, clearly.'

'They wouldn't be, if some people had their way,' muttered Newman.

'Well, no more they would, Mr Noggs, and that's very true,' rejoined Mrs Nickleby. 'Some people to be sure are such - how's your master?'

Newman darted a meaning glance at Kate, and replied with a strong emphasis on the last word of his answer, that Mr Ralph Nickleby was well, and sent his LOVE.

'I am sure we are very much obliged to him,' observed Mrs Nickleby.

'Very,' said Newman. 'I'll tell him so.'

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

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

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

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

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

Newman was very, very far from having the appearance of a gouty subject, and so Kate could not help thinking; but the conference was cut short by Mrs Nickleby's insisting on having the door shut, lest Mr Noggs should take cold, and further persisting in sending the servant girl for a coach, for fear he should bring on another attack of his disorder. To both conditions, Newman was compelled to yield. Presently, the coach came; and, after many sorrowful farewells, and a great deal of running backwards and forwards across the pavement on the part of Miss La Creevy, in the course of which the yellow turban came into violent contact with sundry foot-passengers, it (that is to say the coach, not the turban) went away again, with the two ladies and their luggage inside; and Newman, despite all Mrs Nickleby's assurances that it would be his death - on the box beside the driver.

They went into the city, turning down by the river side; and, after a long and very slow drive, the streets being crowded at that hour with vehicles of every kind, stopped in front of a large old dingy house in Thames Street: the door and windows of which were so bespattered with mud, that it would have appeared to have been uninhabited for years.

The door of this deserted mansion Newman opened with a key which he took out of his hat - in which, by-the-bye, in consequence of the dilapidated state of his pockets, he deposited everything, and would most likely have carried his money if he had had any - and the coach being discharged, he led the way into the interior of the mansion.

Old, and gloomy, and black, in truth it was, and sullen and dark were the rooms, once so bustling with life and enterprise. There was a wharf behind, opening on the Thames. An empty dog-kennel, some bones of animals, fragments of iron hoops, and staves of old casks, lay strewn about, but no life was stirring there. It was a picture of cold, silent decay.

'This house depresses and chills one,' said Kate, 'and seems as if some blight had fallen on it. If I were superstitious, I should be almost inclined to believe that some dreadful crime had been perpetrated within these old walls, and that the place had never prospered since. How frowning and how dark it looks!'

'Lord, my dear,' replied Mrs Nickleby, 'don't talk in that way, or you'll frighten me to death.'

'It is only my foolish fancy, mama,' said Kate, forcing a smile.

'Well, then, my love, I wish you would keep your foolish fancy to yourself, and not wake up MY foolish fancy to keep it company,' retorted Mrs Nickleby. 'Why didn't you think of all this before - you are

so careless - we might have asked Miss La Creevy to keep us company or borrowed a dog, or a thousand things - but it always was the way, and was just the same with your poor dear father. Unless I thought of everything - ' This was Mrs Nickleby's usual commencement of a general lamentation, running through a dozen or so of complicated sentences addressed to nobody in particular, and into which she now launched until her breath was exhausted.

Newman appeared not to hear these remarks, but preceded them to a couple of rooms on the first floor, which some kind of attempt had been made to render habitable. In one, were a few chairs, a table, an old hearth-rug, and some faded baize; and a fire was ready laid in the grate. In the other stood an old tent bedstead, and a few scanty articles of chamber furniture.

'Well, my dear,' said Mrs Nickleby, trying to be pleased, 'now isn't this thoughtful and considerate of your uncle? Why, we should not have had anything but the bed we bought yesterday, to lie down upon, if it hadn't been for his thoughtfulness!'

'Very kind, indeed,' replied Kate, looking round.

Newman Noggs did not say that he had hunted up the old furniture they saw, from attic and cellar; or that he had taken in the halfpennyworth of milk for tea that stood upon a shelf, or filled the rusty kettle on the hob, or collected the woodchips from the wharf, or begged the coals. But the notion of Ralph Nickleby having directed it to be done, tickled his fancy so much, that he could not refrain from cracking all his ten fingers in succession: at which performance Mrs Nickleby was rather startled at first, but supposing it to be in some remote manner connected with the gout, did not remark upon.

'We need detain you no longer, I think,' said Kate.

'Is there nothing I can do?' asked Newman.

'Nothing, thank you,' rejoined Miss Nickleby.

'Perhaps, my dear, Mr Noggs would like to drink our healths,' said Mrs Nickleby, fumbling in her reticule for some small coin.

'I think, mama,' said Kate hesitating, and remarking Newman's averted face, 'you would hurt his feelings if you offered it.'

Newman Noggs, bowing to the young lady more like a gentleman than the miserable wretch he seemed, placed his hand upon his breast, and, pausing for a moment, with the air of a man who struggles to speak but is uncertain what to say, quitted the room.

As the jarring echoes of the heavy house-door, closing on its latch, reverberated dismally through the building, Kate felt half tempted to call him back, and beg him to remain a little while; but she was ashamed to own her fears, and Newman Noggs was on his road homewards.