Chapter XVI

Nicholas seeks to employ himself in a New Capacity, and being unsuccessful, accepts an engagement as Tutor in a Private Family

The first care of Nicholas, next morning, was, to look after some room in which, until better times dawned upon him, he could contrive to exist, without trenching upon the hospitality of Newman Noggs, who would have slept upon the stairs with pleasure, so that his young friend was accommodated.

The vacant apartment to which the bill in the parlour window bore reference, appeared, on inquiry, to be a small back-room on the second floor, reclaimed from the leads, and overlooking a soot-bespeckled prospect of tiles and chimney-pots. For the letting of this portion of the house from week to week, on reasonable terms, the parlour lodger was empowered to treat; he being deputed by the landlord to dispose of the rooms as they became vacant, and to keep a sharp look-out that the lodgers didn't run away. As a means of securing the punctual discharge of which last service he was permitted to live rent-free, lest he should at any time be tempted to run away himself.

Of this chamber, Nicholas became the tenant; and having hired a few common articles of furniture from a neighbouring broker, and paid the first week's hire in advance, out of a small fund raised by the conversion of some spare clothes into ready money, he sat himself down to ruminate upon his prospects, which, like the prospect outside his window, were sufficiently confined and dingy. As they by no means improved on better acquaintance, and as familiarity breeds contempt, he resolved to banish them from his thoughts by dint of hard walking. So, taking up his hat, and leaving poor Smike to arrange and rearrange the room with as much delight as if it had been the costliest palace, he betook himself to the streets, and mingled with the crowd which thronged them.

Although a man may lose a sense of his own importance when he is a mere unit among a busy throng, all utterly regardless of him, it by no means follows that he can dispossess himself, with equal facility, of a very strong sense of the importance and magnitude of his cares. The unhappy state of his own affairs was the one idea which occupied the brain of Nicholas, walk as fast as he would; and when he tried to dislodge it by speculating on the situation and prospects of the people who surrounded him, he caught himself, in a few seconds, contrasting their condition with his own, and gliding almost imperceptibly back into his old train of thought again.

Occupied in these reflections, as he was making his way along one of the great public thoroughfares of London, he chanced to raise his eyes to a blue board, whereon was inscribed, in characters of gold, 'General Agency Office; for places and situations of all kinds inquire within.' It was a shop-front, fitted up with a gauze blind and an inner door; and in the window hung a long and tempting array of written placards, announcing vacant places of every grade, from a secretary's to a foot-boy's.

Nicholas halted, instinctively, before this temple of promise, and ran his eye over the capital-text openings in life which were so profusely displayed. When he had completed his survey he walked on a little way, and then back, and then on again; at length, after pausing irresolutely several times before the door of the General Agency Office, he made up his mind, and stepped in.

He found himself in a little floor-clothed room, with a high desk railed off in one corner, behind which sat a lean youth with cunning eyes and a protruding chin, whose performances in capital-text darkened the window. He had a thick ledger lying open before him, and with the fingers of his right hand inserted between the leaves, and his eyes fixed on a very fat old lady in a mob-cap - evidently the proprietress of the establishment - who was airing herself at the fire, seemed to be only waiting her directions to refer to some entries contained within its rusty clasps.

As there was a board outside, which acquainted the public that servants-of-all-work were perpetually in waiting to be hired from ten till four, Nicholas knew at once that some half-dozen strong young women, each with pattens and an umbrella, who were sitting upon a form in one corner, were in attendance for that purpose: especially as the poor things looked anxious and weary. He was not quite so certain of the callings and stations of two smart young ladies who were in conversation with the fat lady before the fire, until - having sat himself down in a corner, and remarked that he would wait until the other customers had been served - the fat lady resumed the dialogue which his entrance had interrupted.

'Cook, Tom,' said the fat lady, still airing herself as aforesaid.

'Cook,' said Tom, turning over some leaves of the ledger. 'Well!'

'Read out an easy place or two,' said the fat lady.

'Pick out very light ones, if you please, young man,' interposed a genteel female, in shepherd's-plaid boots, who appeared to be the client.

'"Mrs Marker," said Tom, reading, "Russell Place, Russell Square; offers eighteen guineas; tea and sugar found. Two in family, and see very little company. Five servants kept. No man. No followers."

'Oh Lor!' tittered the client. 'THAT won't do. Read another, young man, will you?'

'"Mrs Wrymug," said Tom, "Pleasant Place, Finsbury. Wages, twelve guineas. No tea, no sugar. Serious family - "

'Ah! you needn't mind reading that,' interrupted the client.

'"Three serious footmen," said Tom, impressively.

'Three? did you say?' asked the client in an altered tone.

'Three serious footmen,' replied Tom. '"Cook, housemaid, and nursemaid; each female servant required to join the Little Bethel Congregation three times every Sunday - with a serious footman. If the cook is more serious than the footman, she will be expected to improve the footman; if the footman is more serious than the cook, he will be expected to improve the cook."

'I'll take the address of that place,' said the client; 'I don't know but what it mightn't suit me pretty well.'

'Here's another,' remarked Tom, turning over the leaves. '"Family of Mr Gallanbile, MP. Fifteen guineas, tea and sugar, and servants allowed to see male cousins, if godly. Note. Cold dinner in the kitchen on the Sabbath, Mr Gallanbile being devoted to the Observance question. No victuals whatever cooked on the Lord's Day, with the exception of dinner for Mr and Mrs Gallanbile, which, being a work of piety and necessity, is exempted. Mr Gallanbile dines late on the day of rest, in order to prevent the sinfulness of the cook's dressing herself."

'I don't think that'll answer as well as the other,' said the client, after a little whispering with her friend. 'I'll take the other direction, if you please, young man. I can but come back again, if it don't do.'

Tom made out the address, as requested, and the genteel client, having satisfied the fat lady with a small fee, meanwhile, went away accompanied by her friend.

As Nicholas opened his mouth, to request the young man to turn to letter S, and let him know what secretaryships remained undisposed of, there came into the office an applicant, in whose favour he immediately retired, and whose appearance both surprised and interested him.

This was a young lady who could be scarcely eighteen, of very slight and delicate figure, but exquisitely shaped, who, walking timidly up to the desk, made an inquiry, in a very low tone of voice, relative to some situation as governess, or companion to a lady. She raised her veil, for an instant, while she preferred the inquiry, and disclosed a countenance of most uncommon beauty, though shaded by a cloud of sadness, which, in one so young, was doubly remarkable. Having received a card of reference to some person on the books, she made the usual acknowledgment, and glided away.

She was neatly, but very quietly attired; so much so, indeed, that it seemed as though her dress, if it had been worn by one who imparted fewer graces of her own to it, might have looked poor and shabby. Her attendant - for she had one - was a red-faced, round-eyed, slovenly girl, who, from a certain roughness about the bare arms that peeped from under her draggled shawl, and the half-washed-out traces of smut and blacklead which tattooed her countenance, was clearly of a kin with the servants-of-all-work on the form: between whom and herself there had passed various grins and glances, indicative of the freemasonry of the craft.

This girl followed her mistress; and, before Nicholas had recovered from the first effects of his surprise and admiration, the young lady was gone. It is not a matter of such complete and utter improbability as some sober people may think, that he would have followed them out, had he not been restrained by what passed between the fat lady and her book-keeper.

'When is she coming again, Tom?' asked the fat lady.

'Tomorrow morning,' replied Tom, mending his pen.

'Where have you sent her to?' asked the fat lady.

'Mrs Clark's,' replied Tom.

'She'll have a nice life of it, if she goes there,' observed the fat lady, taking a pinch of snuff from a tin box.

Tom made no other reply than thrusting his tongue into his cheek, and pointing the feather of his pen towards Nicholas - reminders which elicited from the fat lady an inquiry, of 'Now, sir, what can we do for YOU?'

Nicholas briefly replied, that he wanted to know whether there was any such post to be had, as secretary or amanuensis to a gentleman.

'Any such!' rejoined the mistress; 'a-dozen-such. An't there, Tom?'

'I should think so,' answered that young gentleman; and as he said it, he winked towards Nicholas, with a degree of familiarity which he, no doubt, intended for a rather flattering compliment, but with which Nicholas was most ungratefully disgusted.

Upon reference to the book, it appeared that the dozen secretaryships had dwindled down to one. Mr Gregsbury, the great member of parliament, of Manchester Buildings, Westminster, wanted a young man, to keep his papers and correspondence in order; and Nicholas was exactly the sort of young man that Mr Gregsbury wanted.

'I don't know what the terms are, as he said he'd settle them himself with the party,' observed the fat lady; 'but they must be pretty good ones, because he's a member of parliament.'

Inexperienced as he was, Nicholas did not feel quite assured of the force of this reasoning, or the justice of this conclusion; but without troubling himself to question it, he took down the address, and resolved to wait upon Mr Gregsbury without delay.

'I don't know what the number is,' said Tom; 'but Manchester Buildings isn't a large place; and if the worst comes to the worst it won't take you very long to knock at all the doors on both sides of the way till you find him out. I say, what a good-looking gal that was, wasn't she?'

'What girl?' demanded Nicholas, sternly.

'Oh yes. I know - what gal, eh?' whispered Tom, shutting one eye, and cocking his chin in the air. 'You didn't see her, you didn't - I say, don't you wish you was me, when she comes tomorrow morning?'

Nicholas looked at the ugly clerk, as if he had a mind to reward his admiration of the young lady by beating the ledger about his ears, but he refrained, and strode haughtily out of the office; setting at defiance, in his indignation, those ancient laws of chivalry, which not only made it proper and lawful for all good knights to hear the praise of the ladies to whom they were devoted, but rendered it incumbent upon them to roam about the world, and knock at head all such matter-of-fact and un-poetical characters, as declined to exalt, above all the earth, damsels whom they had never chanced to look upon or hear of - as if that were any excuse!

Thinking no longer of his own misfortunes, but wondering what could be those of the beautiful girl he had seen, Nicholas, with many wrong turns, and many inquiries, and almost as many misdirections, bent his steps towards the place whither he had been directed.

Within the precincts of the ancient city of Westminster, and within half a quarter of a mile of its ancient sanctuary, is a narrow and dirty region, the sanctuary of the smaller members of Parliament in modern days. It is all comprised in one street of gloomy lodging-houses, from whose windows, in vacation-time, there frown long melancholy rows of bills, which say, as plainly as did the countenances of their occupiers, ranged on ministerial and opposition benches in the session which slumbers with its fathers, 'To Let', 'To Let'. In busier periods of the year these bills disappear, and the houses swarm with legislators. There are legislators in the parlours, in the first floor, in the second, in the third, in the garrets; the small apartments reek with the breath of deputations and delegates. In damp weather, the place is rendered close, by the steams of moist acts of parliament and frouzy petitions; general postmen grow faint as they enter its infected limits, and shabby figures in quest of franks, flit restlessly to and fro like the troubled ghosts of Complete Letter-writers departed. This is Manchester Buildings; and here, at all hours of the night, may be heard the rattling of latch-keys in their respective keyholes: with now and then - when a gust of wind sweeping across the water which washes the Buildings' feet, impels the sound towards its entrance - the weak, shrill voice of some young member practising tomorrow's speech. All the livelong day, there is a grinding of organs and clashing and clanging of little boxes of music; for Manchester Buildings is an eel-pot, which has no outlet but its awkward mouth - a case-bottle which has no thoroughfare, and a short and narrow neck - and in this respect it may be typical of the fate of some few among its more adventurous residents, who, after wriggling themselves into Parliament by violent efforts and contortions, find that it, too, is no thoroughfare for them; that, like Manchester Buildings, it leads to nothing beyond itself; and that they are fain at last to back out, no wiser, no richer, not one whit more famous, than they went in.

Into Manchester Buildings Nicholas turned, with the address of the great Mr Gregsbury in his hand. As there was a stream of people pouring into a shabby house not far from the entrance, he waited until they had made their way in, and then making up to the servant, ventured to inquire if he knew where Mr Gregsbury lived.

The servant was a very pale, shabby boy, who looked as if he had slept underground from his infancy, as very likely he had. 'Mr Gregsbury?' said he; 'Mr Gregsbury lodges here. It's all right. Come in!'

Nicholas thought he might as well get in while he could, so in he walked; and he had no sooner done so, than the boy shut the door, and made off.

This was odd enough: but what was more embarrassing was, that all along the passage, and all along the narrow stairs, blocking up the

window, and making the dark entry darker still, was a confused crowd of persons with great importance depicted in their looks; who were, to all appearance, waiting in silent expectation of some coming event. From time to time, one man would whisper his neighbour, or a little group would whisper together, and then the whisperers would nod fiercely to each other, or give their heads a relentless shake, as if they were bent upon doing something very desperate, and were determined not to be put off, whatever happened.

As a few minutes elapsed without anything occurring to explain this phenomenon, and as he felt his own position a peculiarly uncomfortable one, Nicholas was on the point of seeking some information from the man next him, when a sudden move was visible on the stairs, and a voice was heard to cry, 'Now, gentleman, have the goodness to walk up!'

So far from walking up, the gentlemen on the stairs began to walk down with great alacrity, and to entreat, with extraordinary politeness, that the gentlemen nearest the street would go first; the gentlemen nearest the street retorted, with equal courtesy, that they couldn't think of such a thing on any account; but they did it, without thinking of it, inasmuch as the other gentlemen pressing some half-dozen (among whom was Nicholas) forward, and closing up behind, pushed them, not merely up the stairs, but into the very sitting-room of Mr Gregsbury, which they were thus compelled to enter with most unseemly precipitation, and without the means of retreat; the press behind them, more than filling the apartment.

'Gentlemen,' said Mr Gregsbury, 'you are welcome. I am rejoiced to see you.'

For a gentleman who was rejoiced to see a body of visitors, Mr Gregsbury looked as uncomfortable as might be; but perhaps this was occasioned by senatorial gravity, and a statesmanlike habit of keeping his feelings under control. He was a tough, burly, thick-headed gentleman, with a loud voice, a pompous manner, a tolerable command of sentences with no meaning in them, and, in short, every requisite for a very good member indeed.

'Now, gentlemen,' said Mr Gregsbury, tossing a great bundle of papers into a wicker basket at his feet, and throwing himself back in his chair with his arms over the elbows, 'you are dissatisfied with my conduct, I see by the newspapers.'

'Yes, Mr Gregsbury, we are,' said a plump old gentleman in a violent heat, bursting out of the throng, and planting himself in the front.

'Do my eyes deceive me,' said Mr Gregsbury, looking towards the speaker, 'or is that my old friend Pugstyles?'

'I am that man, and no other, sir,' replied the plump old gentleman.

'Give me your hand, my worthy friend,' said Mr Gregsbury. 'Pugstyles, my dear friend, I am very sorry to see you here.'

'I am very sorry to be here, sir,' said Mr Pugstyles; 'but your conduct, Mr Gregsbury, has rendered this deputation from your constituents imperatively necessary.'

'My conduct, Pugstyles,' said Mr Gregsbury, looking round upon the deputation with gracious magnanimity - 'my conduct has been, and ever will be, regulated by a sincere regard for the true and real interests of this great and happy country. Whether I look at home, or abroad; whether I behold the peaceful industrious communities of our island home: her rivers covered with steamboats, her roads with locomotives, her streets with cabs, her skies with balloons of a power and magnitude hitherto unknown in the history of aeronautics in this or any other nation - I say, whether I look merely at home, or, stretching my eyes farther, contemplate the boundless prospect of conquest and possession - achieved by British perseverance and British valour - which is outspread before me, I clasp my hands, and turning my eyes to the broad expanse above my head, exclaim, "Thank Heaven, I am a Briton!"

The time had been, when this burst of enthusiasm would have been cheered to the very echo; but now, the deputation received it with chilling coldness. The general impression seemed to be, that as an explanation of Mr Gregsbury's political conduct, it did not enter quite enough into detail; and one gentleman in the rear did not scruple to remark aloud, that, for his purpose, it savoured rather too much of a 'gammon' tendency.

'The meaning of that term - gammon,' said Mr Gregsbury, 'is unknown to me. If it means that I grow a little too fervid, or perhaps even hyperbolical, in extolling my native land, I admit the full justice of the remark. I AM proud of this free and happy country. My form dilates, my eye glistens, my breast heaves, my heart swells, my bosom burns, when I call to mind her greatness and her glory.'

'We wish, sir,' remarked Mr Pugstyles, calmly, 'to ask you a few questions.'

'If you please, gentlemen; my time is yours - and my country's - and my country's - ' said Mr Gregsbury.

This permission being conceded, Mr Pugstyles put on his spectacles, and referred to a written paper which he drew from his pocket; whereupon nearly every other member of the deputation pulled a written paper from HIS pocket, to check Mr Pugstyles off, as he read the questions.

This done, Mr Pugstyles proceeded to business.

'Question number one. - Whether, sir, you did not give a voluntary pledge previous to your election, that in event of your being returned, you would immediately put down the practice of coughing and groaning in the House of Commons. And whether you did not submit to be coughed and groaned down in the very first debate of the session, and have since made no effort to effect a reform in this respect? Whether you did not also pledge yourself to astonish the government, and make them shrink in their shoes? And whether you have astonished them, and made them shrink in their shoes, or not?'

'Go on to the next one, my dear Pugstyles,' said Mr Gregsbury.

'Have you any explanation to offer with reference to that question, sir?' asked Mr Pugstyles.

'Certainly not,' said Mr Gregsbury.

The members of the deputation looked fiercely at each other, and afterwards at the member. 'Dear Pugstyles' having taken a very long stare at Mr Gregsbury over the tops of his spectacles, resumed his list of inquiries.

'Question number two. - Whether, sir, you did not likewise give a voluntary pledge that you would support your colleague on every occasion; and whether you did not, the night before last, desert him and vote upon the other side, because the wife of a leader on that other side had invited Mrs Gregsbury to an evening party?'

'Go on,' said Mr Gregsbury.

'Nothing to say on that, either, sir?' asked the spokesman.

'Nothing whatever,' replied Mr Gregsbury. The deputation, who had only seen him at canvassing or election time, were struck dumb by his coolness. He didn't appear like the same man; then he was all milk and honey; now he was all starch and vinegar. But men ARE so different at different times!

'Question number three - and last,' said Mr Pugstyles, emphatically. 'Whether, sir, you did not state upon the hustings, that it was your

firm and determined intention to oppose everything proposed; to divide the house upon every question, to move for returns on every subject, to place a motion on the books every day, and, in short, in your own memorable words, to play the very devil with everything and everybody?' With this comprehensive inquiry, Mr Pugstyles folded up his list of questions, as did all his backers.

Mr Gregsbury reflected, blew his nose, threw himself further back in his chair, came forward again, leaning his elbows on the table, made a triangle with his two thumbs and his two forefingers, and tapping his nose with the apex thereof, replied (smiling as he said it), 'I deny everything.'

At this unexpected answer, a hoarse murmur arose from the deputation; and the same gentleman who had expressed an opinion relative to the gammoning nature of the introductory speech, again made a monosyllabic demonstration, by growling out 'Resign!' Which growl being taken up by his fellows, swelled into a very earnest and general remonstrance.

'I am requested, sir, to express a hope,' said Mr Pugstyles, with a distant bow, 'that on receiving a requisition to that effect from a great majority of your constituents, you will not object at once to resign your seat in favour of some candidate whom they think they can better trust.'

To this, Mr Gregsbury read the following reply, which, anticipating the request, he had composed in the form of a letter, whereof copies had been made to send round to the newspapers.

'MY DEAR MR PUGSTYLES,

'Next to the welfare of our beloved island - this great and free and happy country, whose powers and resources are, I sincerely believe, illimitable - I value that noble independence which is an Englishman's proudest boast, and which I fondly hope to bequeath to my children, untarnished and unsullied. Actuated by no personal motives, but moved only by high and great constitutional considerations; which I will not attempt to explain, for they are really beneath the comprehension of those who have not made themselves masters, as I have, of the intricate and arduous study of politics; I would rather keep my seat, and intend doing so.

'Will you do me the favour to present my compliments to the constituent body, and acquaint them with this circumstance?

'With great esteem, 'My dear Mr Pugstyles, '&c.&c.'

'Then you will not resign, under any circumstances?' asked the spokesman.

Mr Gregsbury smiled, and shook his head.

'Then, good-morning, sir,' said Pugstyles, angrily.

'Heaven bless you!' said Mr Gregsbury. And the deputation, with many growls and scowls, filed off as quickly as the narrowness of the staircase would allow of their getting down.

The last man being gone, Mr Gregsbury rubbed his hands and chuckled, as merry fellows will, when they think they have said or done a more than commonly good thing; he was so engrossed in this self-congratulation, that he did not observe that Nicholas had been left behind in the shadow of the window-curtains, until that young gentleman, fearing he might otherwise overhear some soliloquy intended to have no listeners, coughed twice or thrice, to attract the member's notice.

'What's that?' said Mr Gregsbury, in sharp accents.

Nicholas stepped forward, and bowed.

'What do you do here, sir?' asked Mr Gregsbury; 'a spy upon my privacy! A concealed voter! You have heard my answer, sir. Pray follow the deputation.'

'I should have done so, if I had belonged to it, but I do not,' said Nicholas.

'Then how came you here, sir?' was the natural inquiry of Mr Gregsbury, MP. 'And where the devil have you come from, sir?' was the question which followed it.

'I brought this card from the General Agency Office, sir,' said Nicholas, 'wishing to offer myself as your secretary, and understanding that you stood in need of one.'

'That's all you have come for, is it?' said Mr Gregsbury, eyeing him in some doubt.

Nicholas replied in the affirmative.

'You have no connection with any of those rascally papers have you?' said Mr Gregsbury. 'You didn't get into the room, to hear what was going forward, and put it in print, eh?'

'I have no connection, I am sorry to say, with anything at present,' rejoined Nicholas, - politely enough, but quite at his ease.

'Oh!' said Mr Gregsbury. 'How did you find your way up here, then?'

Nicholas related how he had been forced up by the deputation.

'That was the way, was it?' said Mr Gregsbury. 'Sit down.'

Nicholas took a chair, and Mr Gregsbury stared at him for a long time, as if to make certain, before he asked any further questions, that there were no objections to his outward appearance.

'You want to be my secretary, do you?' he said at length.

'I wish to be employed in that capacity, sir,' replied Nicholas.

'Well,' said Mr Gregsbury; 'now what can you do?'

'I suppose,' replied Nicholas, smiling, 'that I can do what usually falls to the lot of other secretaries.'

'What's that?' inquired Mr Gregsbury.

'What is it?' replied Nicholas.

'Ah! What is it?' retorted the member, looking shrewdly at him, with his head on one side.

'A secretary's duties are rather difficult to define, perhaps,' said Nicholas, considering. 'They include, I presume, correspondence?'

'Good,' interposed Mr Gregsbury.

'The arrangement of papers and documents?'

'Very good.'

'Occasionally, perhaps, the writing from your dictation; and possibly, sir,' said Nicholas, with a half-smile, 'the copying of your speech for some public journal, when you have made one of more than usual importance.'

'Certainly,' rejoined Mr Gregsbury. 'What else?'

'Really,' said Nicholas, after a moment's reflection, 'I am not able, at this instant, to recapitulate any other duty of a secretary, beyond the general one of making himself as agreeable and useful to his employer

as he can, consistently with his own respectability, and without overstepping that line of duties which he undertakes to perform, and which the designation of his office is usually understood to imply.'

Mr Gregsbury looked fixedly at Nicholas for a short time, and then glancing warily round the room, said in a suppressed voice:

'This is all very well, Mr - what is your name?'

'Nickleby.'

'This is all very well, Mr Nickleby, and very proper, so far as it goes - so far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough. There are other duties, Mr Nickleby, which a secretary to a parliamentary gentleman must never lose sight of. I should require to be crammed, sir.'

'I beg your pardon,' interposed Nicholas, doubtful whether he had heard aright.

' - To be crammed, sir,' repeated Mr Gregsbury.

'May I beg your pardon again, if I inquire what you mean, sir?' said Nicholas.

'My meaning, sir, is perfectly plain,' replied Mr Gregsbury with a solemn aspect. 'My secretary would have to make himself master of the foreign policy of the world, as it is mirrored in the newspapers; to run his eye over all accounts of public meetings, all leading articles, and accounts of the proceedings of public bodies; and to make notes of anything which it appeared to him might be made a point of, in any little speech upon the question of some petition lying on the table, or anything of that kind. Do you understand?'

'I think I do, sir,' replied Nicholas.

'Then,' said Mr Gregsbury, 'it would be necessary for him to make himself acquainted, from day to day, with newspaper paragraphs on passing events; such as 'Mysterious disappearance, and supposed suicide of a potboy,' or anything of that sort, upon which I might found a question to the Secretary of State for the Home Department. Then, he would have to copy the question, and as much as I remembered of the answer (including a little compliment about independence and good sense); and to send the manuscript in a frank to the local paper, with perhaps half-a-dozen lines of leader, to the effect, that I was always to be found in my place in parliament, and never shrunk from the responsible and arduous duties, and so forth. You see?'

Nicholas bowed.

'Besides which,' continued Mr Gregsbury, 'I should expect him, now and then, to go through a few figures in the printed tables, and to pick out a few results, so that I might come out pretty well on timber duty questions, and finance questions, and so on; and I should like him to get up a few little arguments about the disastrous effects of a return to cash payments and a metallic currency, with a touch now and then about the exportation of bullion, and the Emperor of Russia, and bank notes, and all that kind of thing, which it's only necessary to talk fluently about, because nobody understands it. Do you take me?'

'I think I understand,' said Nicholas.

'With regard to such questions as are not political,' continued Mr Gregsbury, warming; 'and which one can't be expected to care a curse about, beyond the natural care of not allowing inferior people to be as well off as ourselves - else where are our privileges? - I should wish my secretary to get together a few little flourishing speeches, of a patriotic cast. For instance, if any preposterous bill were brought forward, for giving poor grubbing devils of authors a right to their own property, I should like to say, that I for one would never consent to opposing an insurmountable bar to the diffusion of literature among THE PEOPLE, - you understand? - that the creations of the pocket, being man's, might belong to one man, or one family; but that the creations of the brain, being God's, ought as a matter of course to belong to the people at large - and if I was pleasantly disposed, I should like to make a joke about posterity, and say that those who wrote for posterity should be content to be rewarded by the approbation OF posterity; it might take with the house, and could never do me any harm, because posterity can't be expected to know anything about me or my jokes either - do you see?'

'I see that, sir,' replied Nicholas.

'You must always bear in mind, in such cases as this, where our interests are not affected,' said Mr Gregsbury, 'to put it very strong about the people, because it comes out very well at election-time; and you could be as funny as you liked about the authors; because I believe the greater part of them live in lodgings, and are not voters. This is a hasty outline of the chief things you'd have to do, except waiting in the lobby every night, in case I forgot anything, and should want fresh cramming; and, now and then, during great debates, sitting in the front row of the gallery, and saying to the people about - 'You see that gentleman, with his hand to his face, and his arm twisted round the pillar - that's Mr Gregsbury - the celebrated Mr Gregsbury,' - with any other little eulogium that might strike you at the moment. And for salary,' said Mr Gregsbury, winding up with

great rapidity; for he was out of breath - 'and for salary, I don't mind saying at once in round numbers, to prevent any dissatisfaction - though it's more than I've been accustomed to give - fifteen shillings a week, and find yourself. There!'

With this handsome offer, Mr Gregsbury once more threw himself back in his chair, and looked like a man who had been most profligately liberal, but is determined not to repent of it notwithstanding.

'Fifteen shillings a week is not much,' said Nicholas, mildly.

'Not much! Fifteen shillings a week not much, young man?' cried Mr Gregsbury. 'Fifteen shillings a - '

'Pray do not suppose that I quarrel with the sum, sir,' replied Nicholas; 'for I am not ashamed to confess, that whatever it may be in itself, to me it is a great deal. But the duties and responsibilities make the recompense small, and they are so very heavy that I fear to undertake them.'

'Do you decline to undertake them, sir?' inquired Mr Gregsbury, with his hand on the bell-rope.

'I fear they are too great for my powers, however good my will may be, sir,' replied Nicholas.

'That is as much as to say that you had rather not accept the place, and that you consider fifteen shillings a week too little,' said Mr Gregsbury, ringing. 'Do you decline it, sir?'

'I have no alternative but to do so,' replied Nicholas.

'Door, Matthews!' said Mr Gregsbury, as the boy appeared.

'I am sorry I have troubled you unnecessarily, sir,' said Nicholas.

'I am sorry you have,' rejoined Mr Gregsbury, turning his back upon him. 'Door, Matthews!'

'Good-morning, sir,' said Nicholas.

'Door, Matthews!' cried Mr Gregsbury.

The boy beckoned Nicholas, and tumbling lazily downstairs before him, opened the door, and ushered him into the street. With a sad and pensive air, he retraced his steps homewards.

Smike had scraped a meal together from the remnant of last night's supper, and was anxiously awaiting his return. The occurrences of the morning had not improved Nicholas's appetite, and, by him, the dinner remained untasted. He was sitting in a thoughtful attitude, with the plate which the poor fellow had assiduously filled with the choicest morsels, untouched, by his side, when Newman Noggs looked into the room.

'Come back?' asked Newman.

'Yes,' replied Nicholas, 'tired to death: and, what is worse, might have remained at home for all the good I have done.'

'Couldn't expect to do much in one morning,' said Newman.

'Maybe so, but I am sanguine, and did expect,' said Nicholas, 'and am proportionately disappointed.' Saying which, he gave Newman an account of his proceedings.

'If I could do anything,' said Nicholas, 'anything, however slight, until Ralph Nickleby returns, and I have eased my mind by confronting him, I should feel happier. I should think it no disgrace to work, Heaven knows. Lying indolently here, like a half-tamed sullen beast, distracts me.'

'I don't know,' said Newman; 'small things offer - they would pay the rent, and more - but you wouldn't like them; no, you could hardly be expected to undergo it - no, no.'

'What could I hardly be expected to undergo?' asked Nicholas, raising his eyes. 'Show me, in this wide waste of London, any honest means by which I could even defray the weekly hire of this poor room, and see if I shrink from resorting to them! Undergo! I have undergone too much, my friend, to feel pride or squeamishness now. Except - ' added Nicholas hastily, after a short silence, 'except such squeamishness as is common honesty, and so much pride as constitutes self-respect. I see little to choose, between assistant to a brutal pedagogue, and toad-eater to a mean and ignorant upstart, be he member or no member.'

'I hardly know whether I should tell you what I heard this morning, or not,' said Newman.

'Has it reference to what you said just now?' asked Nicholas.

'It has.'

'Then in Heaven's name, my good friend, tell it me,' said Nicholas. 'For God's sake consider my deplorable condition; and, while I promise to take no step without taking counsel with you, give me, at least, a vote in my own behalf.'

Moved by this entreaty, Newman stammered forth a variety of most unaccountable and entangled sentences, the upshot of which was, that Mrs Kenwigs had examined him, at great length that morning, touching the origin of his acquaintance with, and the whole life, adventures, and pedigree of, Nicholas; that Newman had parried these questions as long as he could, but being, at length, hard pressed and driven into a corner, had gone so far as to admit, that Nicholas was a tutor of great accomplishments, involved in some misfortunes which he was not at liberty to explain, and bearing the name of Johnson. That Mrs Kenwigs, impelled by gratitude, or ambition, or maternal pride, or maternal love, or all four powerful motives conjointly, had taken secret conference with Mr Kenwigs, and had finally returned to propose that Mr Johnson should instruct the four Miss Kenwigses in the French language as spoken by natives, at the weekly stipend of five shillings, current coin of the realm; being at the rate of one shilling per week, per each Miss Kenwigs, and one shilling over, until such time as the baby might be able to take it out in grammar.

'Which, unless I am very much mistaken,' observed Mrs Kenwigs in making the proposition, 'will not be very long; for such clever children, Mr Noggs, never were born into this world, I do believe.'

'There,' said Newman, 'that's all. It's beneath you, I know; but I thought that perhaps you might - '

'Might!' cried Nicholas, with great alacrity; 'of course I shall. I accept the offer at once. Tell the worthy mother so, without delay, my dear fellow; and that I am ready to begin whenever she pleases.'

Newman hastened, with joyful steps, to inform Mrs Kenwigs of his friend's acquiescence, and soon returning, brought back word that they would be happy to see him in the first floor as soon as convenient; that Mrs Kenwigs had, upon the instant, sent out to secure a second-hand French grammar and dialogues, which had long been fluttering in the sixpenny box at the bookstall round the corner; and that the family, highly excited at the prospect of this addition to their gentility, wished the initiatory lesson to come off immediately.

And here it may be observed, that Nicholas was not, in the ordinary sense of the word, a young man of high spirit. He would resent an affront to himself, or interpose to redress a wrong offered to another, as boldly and freely as any knight that ever set lance in rest; but he lacked that peculiar excess of coolness and great-minded selfishness,

which invariably distinguish gentlemen of high spirit. In truth, for our own part, we are disposed to look upon such gentleman as being rather incumbrances than otherwise in rising families: happening to be acquainted with several whose spirit prevents their settling down to any grovelling occupation, and only displays itself in a tendency to cultivate moustachios, and look fierce; and although moustachios and ferocity are both very pretty things in their way, and very much to be commended, we confess to a desire to see them bred at the owner's proper cost, rather than at the expense of low-spirited people.

Nicholas, therefore, not being a high-spirited young man according to common parlance, and deeming it a greater degradation to borrow, for the supply of his necessities, from Newman Noggs, than to teach French to the little Kenwigses for five shillings a week, accepted the offer with the alacrity already described, and betook himself to the first floor with all convenient speed.

Here, he was received by Mrs Kenwigs with a genteel air, kindly intended to assure him of her protection and support; and here, too, he found Mr Lillyvick and Miss Petowker; the four Miss Kenwigses on their form of audience; and the baby in a dwarf porter's chair with a deal tray before it, amusing himself with a toy horse without a head; the said horse being composed of a small wooden cylinder, not unlike an Italian iron, supported on four crooked pegs, and painted in ingenious resemblance of red wafers set in blacking.

'How do you do, Mr Johnson?' said Mrs Kenwigs. 'Uncle - Mr Johnson.'

'How do you do, sir?' said Mr Lillyvick - rather sharply; for he had not known what Nicholas was, on the previous night, and it was rather an aggravating circumstance if a tax collector had been too polite to a teacher.

'Mr Johnson is engaged as private master to the children, uncle,' said Mrs Kenwigs.

'So you said just now, my dear,' replied Mr Lillyvick.

'But I hope,' said Mrs Kenwigs, drawing herself up, 'that that will not make them proud; but that they will bless their own good fortune, which has born them superior to common people's children. Do you hear, Morleena?'

'Yes, ma,' replied Miss Kenwigs.

'And when you go out in the streets, or elsewhere, I desire that you don't boast of it to the other children,' said Mrs Kenwigs; 'and that if

you must say anything about it, you don't say no more than 'We've got a private master comes to teach us at home, but we ain't proud, because ma says it's sinful.' Do you hear, Morleena?'

'Yes, ma,' replied Miss Kenwigs again.

'Then mind you recollect, and do as I tell you,' said Mrs Kenwigs. 'Shall Mr Johnson begin, uncle?'

'I am ready to hear, if Mr Johnson is ready to commence, my dear,' said the collector, assuming the air of a profound critic. 'What sort of language do you consider French, sir?'

'How do you mean?' asked Nicholas.

'Do you consider it a good language, sir?' said the collector; 'a pretty language, a sensible language?'

'A pretty language, certainly,' replied Nicholas; 'and as it has a name for everything, and admits of elegant conversation about everything, I presume it is a sensible one.'

'I don't know,' said Mr Lillyvick, doubtfully. 'Do you call it a cheerful language, now?'

'Yes,' replied Nicholas, 'I should say it was, certainly.'

'It's very much changed since my time, then,' said the collector, 'very much.'

'Was it a dismal one in your time?' asked Nicholas, scarcely able to repress a smile.

'Very,' replied Mr Lillyvick, with some vehemence of manner. 'It's the war time that I speak of; the last war. It may be a cheerful language. I should be sorry to contradict anybody; but I can only say that I've heard the French prisoners, who were natives, and ought to know how to speak it, talking in such a dismal manner, that it made one miserable to hear them. Ay, that I have, fifty times, sir - fifty times!'

Mr Lillyvick was waxing so cross, that Mrs Kenwigs thought it expedient to motion to Nicholas not to say anything; and it was not until Miss Petowker had practised several blandishments, to soften the excellent old gentleman, that he deigned to break silence by asking,

'What's the water in French, sir?'

'L'EAU,' replied Nicholas.

'Ah!' said Mr Lillyvick, shaking his head mournfully, 'I thought as much. Lo, eh? I don't think anything of that language - nothing at all.'

'I suppose the children may begin, uncle?' said Mrs Kenwigs.

'Oh yes; they may begin, my dear,' replied the collector, discontentedly. 'I have no wish to prevent them.'

This permission being conceded, the four Miss Kenwigses sat in a row, with their tails all one way, and Morleena at the top: while Nicholas, taking the book, began his preliminary explanations. Miss Petowker and Mrs Kenwigs looked on, in silent admiration, broken only by the whispered assurances of the latter, that Morleena would have it all by heart in no time; and Mr Lillyvick regarded the group with frowning and attentive eyes, lying in wait for something upon which he could open a fresh discussion on the language.