

Chapter XVII

Follows the Fortunes of Miss Nickleby

It was with a heavy heart, and many sad forebodings which no effort could banish, that Kate Nickleby, on the morning appointed for the commencement of her engagement with Madame Mantalini, left the city when its clocks yet wanted a quarter of an hour of eight, and threaded her way alone, amid the noise and bustle of the streets, towards the west end of London.

At this early hour many sickly girls, whose business, like that of the poor worm, is to produce, with patient toil, the finery that bedecks the thoughtless and luxurious, traverse our streets, making towards the scene of their daily labour, and catching, as if by stealth, in their hurried walk, the only gasp of wholesome air and glimpse of sunlight which cheer their monotonous existence during the long train of hours that make a working day. As she drew nigh to the more fashionable quarter of the town, Kate marked many of this class as they passed by, hurrying like herself to their painful occupation, and saw, in their unhealthy looks and feeble gait, but too clear an evidence that her misgivings were not wholly groundless.

She arrived at Madame Mantalini's some minutes before the appointed hour, and after walking a few times up and down, in the hope that some other female might arrive and spare her the embarrassment of stating her business to the servant, knocked timidly at the door: which, after some delay, was opened by the footman, who had been putting on his striped jacket as he came upstairs, and was now intent on fastening his apron.

'Is Madame Mantalini in?' faltered Kate.

'Not often out at this time, miss,' replied the man in a tone which rendered 'Miss,' something more offensive than 'My dear.'

'Can I see her?' asked Kate.

'Eh?' replied the man, holding the door in his hand, and honouring the inquirer with a stare and a broad grin, 'Lord, no.'

'I came by her own appointment,' said Kate; 'I am - I am - to be employed here.'

'Oh! you should have rung the worker's bell,' said the footman, touching the handle of one in the door-post. 'Let me see, though, I forgot - Miss Nickleby, is it?'

'Yes,' replied Kate.

'You're to walk upstairs then, please,' said the man. 'Madame Mantalini wants to see you - this way - take care of these things on the floor.'

Cautioning her, in these terms, not to trip over a heterogeneous litter of pastry-cook's trays, lamps, waiters full of glasses, and piles of rout seats which were strewn about the hall, plainly bespeaking a late party on the previous night, the man led the way to the second story, and ushered Kate into a back-room, communicating by folding-doors with the apartment in which she had first seen the mistress of the establishment.

'If you'll wait here a minute,' said the man, 'I'll tell her presently.' Having made this promise with much affability, he retired and left Kate alone.

There was not much to amuse in the room; of which the most attractive feature was, a half-length portrait in oil, of Mr Mantalini, whom the artist had depicted scratching his head in an easy manner, and thus displaying to advantage a diamond ring, the gift of Madame Mantalini before her marriage. There was, however, the sound of voices in conversation in the next room; and as the conversation was loud and the partition thin, Kate could not help discovering that they belonged to Mr and Mrs Mantalini.

'If you will be odiously, demnebly, outrigeously jealous, my soul,' said Mr Mantalini, 'you will be very miserable - horrid miserable - demnition miserable.' And then, there was a sound as though Mr Mantalini were sipping his coffee.

'I AM miserable,' returned Madame Mantalini, evidently pouting.

'Then you are an ungrateful, unworthy, demd unthankful little fairy,' said Mr Mantalini.

'I am not,' returned Madame, with a sob.

'Do not put itself out of humour,' said Mr Mantalini, breaking an egg. 'It is a pretty, bewitching little demd countenance, and it should not be out of humour, for it spoils its loveliness, and makes it cross and gloomy like a frightful, naughty, demd hobgoblin.'

'I am not to be brought round in that way, always,' rejoined Madame, sulkily.

'It shall be brought round in any way it likes best, and not brought round at all if it likes that better,' retorted Mr Mantalini, with his egg-spoon in his mouth.

'It's very easy to talk,' said Mrs Mantalini.

'Not so easy when one is eating a demnition egg,' replied Mr Mantalini; 'for the yolk runs down the waistcoat, and yolk of egg does not match any waistcoat but a yellow waistcoat, demmit.'

'You were flirting with her during the whole night,' said Madame Mantalini, apparently desirous to lead the conversation back to the point from which it had strayed.

'No, no, my life.'

'You were,' said Madame; 'I had my eye upon you all the time.'

'Bless the little winking twinkling eye; was it on me all the time!' cried Mantalini, in a sort of lazy rapture. 'Oh, demmit!'

'And I say once more,' resumed Madame, 'that you ought not to waltz with anybody but your own wife; and I will not bear it, Mantalini, if I take poison first.'

'She will not take poison and have horrid pains, will she?' said Mantalini; who, by the altered sound of his voice, seemed to have moved his chair, and taken up his position nearer to his wife. 'She will not take poison, because she had a demd fine husband who might have married two countesses and a dowager - '

'Two countesses,' interposed Madame. 'You told me one before!'

'Two!' cried Mantalini. 'Two demd fine women, real countesses and splendid fortunes, demmit.'

'And why didn't you?' asked Madame, playfully.

'Why didn't I!' replied her husband. 'Had I not seen, at a morning concert, the demdest little fascinator in all the world, and while that little fascinator is my wife, may not all the countesses and dowagers in England be - '

Mr Mantalini did not finish the sentence, but he gave Madame Mantalini a very loud kiss, which Madame Mantalini returned; after which, there seemed to be some more kissing mixed up with the progress of the breakfast.

'And what about the cash, my existence's jewel?' said Mantalini, when these endearments ceased. 'How much have we in hand?'

'Very little indeed,' replied Madame.

'We must have some more,' said Mantalini; 'we must have some discount out of old Nickleby to carry on the war with, demmit.'

'You can't want any more just now,' said Madame coaxingly.

'My life and soul,' returned her husband, 'there is a horse for sale at Scrubbs's, which it would be a sin and a crime to lose - going, my senses' joy, for nothing.'

'For nothing,' cried Madame, 'I am glad of that.'

'For actually nothing,' replied Mantalini. 'A hundred guineas down will buy him; mane, and crest, and legs, and tail, all of the demdest beauty. I will ride him in the park before the very chariots of the rejected countesses. The demd old dowager will faint with grief and rage; the other two will say 'He is married, he has made away with himself, it is a demd thing, it is all up!' They will hate each other demnebly, and wish you dead and buried. Ha! ha! Demmit.'

Madame Mantalini's prudence, if she had any, was not proof against these triumphal pictures; after a little jingling of keys, she observed that she would see what her desk contained, and rising for that purpose, opened the folding-door, and walked into the room where Kate was seated.

'Dear me, child!' exclaimed Madame Mantalini, recoiling in surprise. 'How came you here?'

'Child!' cried Mantalini, hurrying in. 'How came - eh! - oh - demmit, how d'ye do?'

'I have been waiting, here some time, ma'am,' said Kate, addressing Madame Mantalini. 'The servant must have forgotten to let you know that I was here, I think.'

'You really must see to that man,' said Madame, turning to her husband. 'He forgets everything.'

'I will twist his demd nose off his countenance for leaving such a very pretty creature all alone by herself,' said her husband.

'Mantalini,' cried Madame, 'you forget yourself.'

'I don't forget you, my soul, and never shall, and never can,' said Mantalini, kissing his wife's hand, and grimacing aside, to Miss Nickleby, who turned away.

Appeased by this compliment, the lady of the business took some papers from her desk which she handed over to Mr Mantalini, who received them with great delight. She then requested Kate to follow her, and after several feints on the part of Mr Mantalini to attract the young lady's attention, they went away: leaving that gentleman extended at full length on the sofa, with his heels in the air and a newspaper in his hand.

Madame Mantalini led the way down a flight of stairs, and through a passage, to a large room at the back of the premises where were a number of young women employed in sewing, cutting out, making up, altering, and various other processes known only to those who are cunning in the arts of millinery and dressmaking. It was a close room with a skylight, and as dull and quiet as a room need be.

On Madame Mantalini calling aloud for Miss Knag, a short, bustling, over-dressed female, full of importance, presented herself, and all the young ladies suspending their operations for the moment, whispered to each other sundry criticisms upon the make and texture of Miss Nickleby's dress, her complexion, cast of features, and personal appearance, with as much good breeding as could have been displayed by the very best society in a crowded ball-room.

'Oh, Miss Knag,' said Madame Mantalini, 'this is the young person I spoke to you about.'

Miss Knag bestowed a reverential smile upon Madame Mantalini, which she dexterously transformed into a gracious one for Kate, and said that certainly, although it was a great deal of trouble to have young people who were wholly unused to the business, still, she was sure the young person would try to do her best - impressed with which conviction she (Miss Knag) felt an interest in her, already.

'I think that, for the present at all events, it will be better for Miss Nickleby to come into the show-room with you, and try things on for people,' said Madame Mantalini. 'She will not be able for the present to be of much use in any other way; and her appearance will - '

'Suit very well with mine, Madame Mantalini,' interrupted Miss Knag. 'So it will; and to be sure I might have known that you would not be long in finding that out; for you have so much taste in all those matters, that really, as I often say to the young ladies, I do not know how, when, or where, you possibly could have acquired all you know - hem - Miss Nickleby and I are quite a pair, Madame Mantalini, only I

am a little darker than Miss Nickleby, and - hem - I think my foot may be a little smaller. Miss Nickleby, I am sure, will not be offended at my saying that, when she hears that our family always have been celebrated for small feet ever since - hem - ever since our family had any feet at all, indeed, I think. I had an uncle once, Madame Mantalini, who lived in Cheltenham, and had a most excellent business as a tobacconist - hem - who had such small feet, that they were no bigger than those which are usually joined to wooden legs - the most symmetrical feet, Madame Mantalini, that even you can imagine.'

'They must have had something of the appearance of club feet, Miss Knag,' said Madame.

'Well now, that is so like you,' returned Miss Knag, 'Ha! ha! ha! Of club feet! Oh very good! As I often remark to the young ladies, 'Well I must say, and I do not care who knows it, of all the ready humour - hem - I ever heard anywhere' - and I have heard a good deal; for when my dear brother was alive (I kept house for him, Miss Nickleby), we had to supper once a week two or three young men, highly celebrated in those days for their humour, Madame Mantalini - 'Of all the ready humour,' I say to the young ladies, 'I ever heard, Madame Mantalini's is the most remarkable - hem. It is so gentle, so sarcastic, and yet so good-natured (as I was observing to Miss Simmonds only this morning), that how, or when, or by what means she acquired it, is to me a mystery indeed.'

Here Miss Knag paused to take breath, and while she pauses it may be observed - not that she was marvellously loquacious and marvellously deferential to Madame Mantalini, since these are facts which require no comment; but that every now and then, she was accustomed, in the torrent of her discourse, to introduce a loud, shrill, clear 'hem!' the import and meaning of which, was variously interpreted by her acquaintance; some holding that Miss Knag dealt in exaggeration, and introduced the monosyllable when any fresh invention was in course of coinage in her brain; others, that when she wanted a word, she threw it in to gain time, and prevent anybody else from striking into the conversation. It may be further remarked, that Miss Knag still aimed at youth, although she had shot beyond it, years ago; and that she was weak and vain, and one of those people who are best described by the axiom, that you may trust them as far as you can see them, and no farther.

'You'll take care that Miss Nickleby understands her hours, and so forth,' said Madame Mantalini; 'and so I'll leave her with you. You'll not forget my directions, Miss Knag?'

Miss Knag of course replied, that to forget anything Madame Mantalini had directed, was a moral impossibility; and that lady, dispensing a general good-morning among her assistants, sailed away.

'Charming creature, isn't she, Miss Nickleby?' said Miss Knag, rubbing her hands together.

'I have seen very little of her,' said Kate. 'I hardly know yet.'

'Have you seen Mr Mantalini?' inquired Miss Knag.

'Yes; I have seen him twice.'

'Isn't HE a charming creature?'

'Indeed he does not strike me as being so, by any means,' replied Kate.

'No, my dear!' cried Miss Knag, elevating her hands. 'Why, goodness gracious mercy, where's your taste? Such a fine tall, full-whiskered dashing gentlemanly man, with such teeth and hair, and - hem - well now, you DO astonish me.'

'I dare say I am very foolish,' replied Kate, laying aside her bonnet; 'but as my opinion is of very little importance to him or anyone else, I do not regret having formed it, and shall be slow to change it, I think.'

'He is a very fine man, don't you think so?' asked one of the young ladies.

'Indeed he may be, for anything I could say to the contrary,' replied Kate.

'And drives very beautiful horses, doesn't he?' inquired another.

'I dare say he may, but I never saw them,' answered Kate.

'Never saw them!' interposed Miss Knag. 'Oh, well! There it is at once you know; how can you possibly pronounce an opinion about a gentleman - hem - if you don't see him as he turns out altogether?'

There was so much of the world - even of the little world of the country girl - in this idea of the old milliner, that Kate, who was anxious, for every reason, to change the subject, made no further remark, and left Miss Knag in possession of the field.

After a short silence, during which most of the young people made a closer inspection of Kate's appearance, and compared notes respecting it, one of them offered to help her off with her shawl, and the offer

being accepted, inquired whether she did not find black very uncomfortable wear.

'I do indeed,' replied Kate, with a bitter sigh.

'So dusty and hot,' observed the same speaker, adjusting her dress for her.

Kate might have said, that mourning is sometimes the coldest wear which mortals can assume; that it not only chills the breasts of those it clothes, but extending its influence to summer friends, freezes up their sources of good-will and kindness, and withering all the buds of promise they once so liberally put forth, leaves nothing but bared and rotten hearts exposed. There are few who have lost a friend or relative constituting in life their sole dependence, who have not keenly felt this chilling influence of their sable garb. She had felt it acutely, and feeling it at the moment, could not quite restrain her tears.

'I am very sorry to have wounded you by my thoughtless speech,' said her companion. 'I did not think of it. You are in mourning for some near relation?'

'For my father,' answered Kate.

'For what relation, Miss Simmonds?' asked Miss Knag, in an audible voice.

'Her father,' replied the other softly.

'Her father, eh?' said Miss Knag, without the slightest depression of her voice. 'Ah! A long illness, Miss Simmonds?'

'Hush,' replied the girl; 'I don't know.'

'Our misfortune was very sudden,' said Kate, turning away, 'or I might perhaps, at a time like this, be enabled to support it better.'

There had existed not a little desire in the room, according to invariable custom, when any new 'young person' came, to know who Kate was, and what she was, and all about her; but, although it might have been very naturally increased by her appearance and emotion, the knowledge that it pained her to be questioned, was sufficient to repress even this curiosity; and Miss Knag, finding it hopeless to attempt extracting any further particulars just then, reluctantly commanded silence, and bade the work proceed.

In silence, then, the tasks were plied until half-past one, when a baked leg of mutton, with potatoes to correspond, were served in the

kitchen. The meal over, and the young ladies having enjoyed the additional relaxation of washing their hands, the work began again, and was again performed in silence, until the noise of carriages rattling through the streets, and of loud double knocks at doors, gave token that the day's work of the more fortunate members of society was proceeding in its turn.

One of these double knocks at Madame Mantalini's door, announced the equipage of some great lady - or rather rich one, for there is occasionally a distinction between riches and greatness - who had come with her daughter to approve of some court-dresses which had been a long time preparing, and upon whom Kate was deputed to wait, accompanied by Miss Knag, and officered of course by Madame Mantalini.

Kate's part in the pageant was humble enough, her duties being limited to holding articles of costume until Miss Knag was ready to try them on, and now and then tying a string, or fastening a hook-and-eye. She might, not unreasonably, have supposed herself beneath the reach of any arrogance, or bad humour; but it happened that the lady and daughter were both out of temper that day, and the poor girl came in for her share of their revilings. She was awkward - her hands were cold - dirty - coarse - she could do nothing right; they wondered how Madame Mantalini could have such people about her; requested they might see some other young woman the next time they came; and so forth.

So common an occurrence would be hardly deserving of mention, but for its effect. Kate shed many bitter tears when these people were gone, and felt, for the first time, humbled by her occupation. She had, it is true, quailed at the prospect of drudgery and hard service; but she had felt no degradation in working for her bread, until she found herself exposed to insolence and pride. Philosophy would have taught her that the degradation was on the side of those who had sunk so low as to display such passions habitually, and without cause: but she was too young for such consolation, and her honest feeling was hurt. May not the complaint, that common people are above their station, often take its rise in the fact of uncommon people being below theirs?

In such scenes and occupations the time wore on until nine o'clock, when Kate, jaded and dispirited with the occurrences of the day, hastened from the confinement of the workroom, to join her mother at the street corner, and walk home: - the more sadly, from having to disguise her real feelings, and feign to participate in all the sanguine visions of her companion.

'Bless my soul, Kate,' said Mrs Nickleby; 'I've been thinking all day what a delightful thing it would be for Madame Mantalini to take you into partnership - such a likely thing too, you know! Why, your poor dear papa's cousin's sister-in-law - a Miss Browndock - was taken into partnership by a lady that kept a school at Hammersmith, and made her fortune in no time at all. I forget, by-the-bye, whether that Miss Browndock was the same lady that got the ten thousand pounds prize in the lottery, but I think she was; indeed, now I come to think of it, I am sure she was. 'Mantalini and Nickleby', how well it would sound! - and if Nicholas has any good fortune, you might have Doctor Nickleby, the head-master of Westminster School, living in the same street.'

'Dear Nicholas!' cried Kate, taking from her reticule her brother's letter from Dotheboys Hall. 'In all our misfortunes, how happy it makes me, mama, to hear he is doing well, and to find him writing in such good spirits! It consoles me for all we may undergo, to think that he is comfortable and happy.'

Poor Kate! she little thought how weak her consolation was, and how soon she would be undeceived.