

## Chapter XIX

### **Descriptive of a Dinner at Mr Ralph Nickleby's, and of the Manner in which the Company entertained themselves, before Dinner, at Dinner, and after Dinner.**

The bile and rancour of the worthy Miss Knag undergoing no diminution during the remainder of the week, but rather augmenting with every successive hour; and the honest ire of all the young ladies rising, or seeming to rise, in exact proportion to the good spinster's indignation, and both waxing very hot every time Miss Nickleby was called upstairs; it will be readily imagined that that young lady's daily life was none of the most cheerful or enviable kind. She hailed the arrival of Saturday night, as a prisoner would a few delicious hours' respite from slow and wearing torture, and felt that the poor pittance for her first week's labour would have been dearly and hardly earned, had its amount been trebled.

When she joined her mother, as usual, at the street corner, she was not a little surprised to find her in conversation with Mr Ralph Nickleby; but her surprise was soon redoubled, no less by the matter of their conversation, than by the smoothed and altered manner of Mr Nickleby himself.

'Ah! my dear!' said Ralph; 'we were at that moment talking about you.'

'Indeed!' replied Kate, shrinking, though she scarce knew why, from her uncle's cold glistening eye.

'That instant,' said Ralph. 'I was coming to call for you, making sure to catch you before you left; but your mother and I have been talking over family affairs, and the time has slipped away so rapidly - '

'Well, now, hasn't it?' interposed Mrs Nickleby, quite insensible to the sarcastic tone of Ralph's last remark. 'Upon my word, I couldn't have believed it possible, that such a - Kate, my dear, you're to dine with your uncle at half-past six o'clock tomorrow.'

Triumphing in having been the first to communicate this extraordinary intelligence, Mrs Nickleby nodded and smiled a great many times, to impress its full magnificence on Kate's wondering mind, and then flew off, at an acute angle, to a committee of ways and means.

'Let me see,' said the good lady. 'Your black silk frock will be quite dress enough, my dear, with that pretty little scarf, and a plain band in your hair, and a pair of black silk stock - Dear, dear,' cried Mrs Nickleby, flying off at another angle, 'if I had but those unfortunate

amethysts of mine - you recollect them, Kate, my love - how they used to sparkle, you know - but your papa, your poor dear papa - ah! there never was anything so cruelly sacrificed as those jewels were, never! Overpowered by this agonising thought, Mrs Nickleby shook her head, in a melancholy manner, and applied her handkerchief to her eyes.

I don't want them, mama, indeed,' said Kate. 'Forget that you ever had them.'

'Lord, Kate, my dear,' rejoined Mrs Nickleby, pettishly, 'how like a child you talk! Four-and-twenty silver tea-spoons, brother-in-law, two gravies, four salts, all the amethysts - necklace, brooch, and ear-rings - all made away with, at the same time, and I saying, almost on my bended knees, to that poor good soul, 'Why don't you do something, Nicholas? Why don't you make some arrangement?' I am sure that anybody who was about us at that time, will do me the justice to own, that if I said that once, I said it fifty times a day. Didn't I, Kate, my dear? Did I ever lose an opportunity of impressing it on your poor papa?'

'No, no, mama, never,' replied Kate. And to do Mrs Nickleby justice, she never had lost - and to do married ladies as a body justice, they seldom do lose - any occasion of inculcating similar golden precepts, whose only blemish is, the slight degree of vagueness and uncertainty in which they are usually enveloped.

'Ah!' said Mrs Nickleby, with great fervour, 'if my advice had been taken at the beginning - Well, I have always done MY duty, and that's some comfort.'

When she had arrived at this reflection, Mrs Nickleby sighed, rubbed her hands, cast up her eyes, and finally assumed a look of meek composure; thus importing that she was a persecuted saint, but that she wouldn't trouble her hearers by mentioning a circumstance which must be so obvious to everybody.

'Now,' said Ralph, with a smile, which, in common with all other tokens of emotion, seemed to skulk under his face, rather than play boldly over it - 'to return to the point from which we have strayed. I have a little party of - of - gentlemen with whom I am connected in business just now, at my house tomorrow; and your mother has promised that you shall keep house for me. I am not much used to parties; but this is one of business, and such fooleries are an important part of it sometimes. You don't mind obliging me?'

'Mind!' cried Mrs Nickleby. 'My dear Kate, why - '

'Pray,' interrupted Ralph, motioning her to be silent. 'I spoke to my niece.'

'I shall be very glad, of course, uncle,' replied Kate; 'but I am afraid you will find me awkward and embarrassed.'

'Oh no,' said Ralph; 'come when you like, in a hackney coach - I'll pay for it. Good-night - a - a - God bless you.'

The blessing seemed to stick in Mr Ralph Nickleby's throat, as if it were not used to the thoroughfare, and didn't know the way out. But it got out somehow, though awkwardly enough; and having disposed of it, he shook hands with his two relatives, and abruptly left them.

'What a very strongly marked countenance your uncle has!' said Mrs Nickleby, quite struck with his parting look. 'I don't see the slightest resemblance to his poor brother.'

'Mama!' said Kate reprovingly. 'To think of such a thing!'

'No,' said Mrs Nickleby, musing. 'There certainly is none. But it's a very honest face.'

The worthy matron made this remark with great emphasis and elocution, as if it comprised no small quantity of ingenuity and research; and, in truth, it was not unworthy of being classed among the extraordinary discoveries of the age. Kate looked up hastily, and as hastily looked down again.

'What has come over you, my dear, in the name of goodness?' asked Mrs Nickleby, when they had walked on, for some time, in silence.

'I was only thinking, mama,' answered Kate.

'Thinking!' repeated Mrs Nickleby. 'Ay, and indeed plenty to think about, too. Your uncle has taken a strong fancy to you, that's quite clear; and if some extraordinary good fortune doesn't come to you, after this, I shall be a little surprised, that's all.'

With this she launched out into sundry anecdotes of young ladies, who had had thousand-pound notes given them in reticules, by eccentric uncles; and of young ladies who had accidentally met amiable gentlemen of enormous wealth at their uncles' houses, and married them, after short but ardent courtships; and Kate, listening first in apathy, and afterwards in amusement, felt, as they walked home, something of her mother's sanguine complexion gradually awakening in her own bosom, and began to think that her prospects might be brightening, and that better days might be dawning upon

them. Such is hope, Heaven's own gift to struggling mortals; pervading, like some subtle essence from the skies, all things, both good and bad; as universal as death, and more infectious than disease!

The feeble winter's sun - and winter's suns in the city are very feeble indeed - might have brightened up, as he shone through the dim windows of the large old house, on witnessing the unusual sight which one half-furnished room displayed. In a gloomy corner, where, for years, had stood a silent dusty pile of merchandise, sheltering its colony of mice, and frowning, a dull and lifeless mass, upon the panelled room, save when, responding to the roll of heavy waggons in the street without, it quaked with sturdy tremblings and caused the bright eyes of its tiny citizens to grow brighter still with fear, and struck them motionless, with attentive ear and palpitating heart, until the alarm had passed away - in this dark corner, was arranged, with scrupulous care, all Kate's little finery for the day; each article of dress partaking of that indescribable air of jauntiness and individuality which empty garments - whether by association, or that they become moulded, as it were, to the owner's form - will take, in eyes accustomed to, or picturing, the wearer's smartness. In place of a bale of musty goods, there lay the black silk dress: the neatest possible figure in itself. The small shoes, with toes delicately turned out, stood upon the very pressure of some old iron weight; and a pile of harsh discoloured leather had unconsciously given place to the very same little pair of black silk stockings, which had been the objects of Mrs Nickleby's peculiar care. Rats and mice, and such small gear, had long ago been starved, or had emigrated to better quarters: and, in their stead, appeared gloves, bands, scarfs, hair-pins, and many other little devices, almost as ingenious in their way as rats and mice themselves, for the tantalisation of mankind. About and among them all, moved Kate herself, not the least beautiful or unwonted relief to the stern, old, gloomy building.

In good time, or in bad time, as the reader likes to take it - for Mrs Nickleby's impatience went a great deal faster than the clocks at that end of the town, and Kate was dressed to the very last hair-pin a full hour and a half before it was at all necessary to begin to think about it - in good time, or in bad time, the toilet was completed; and it being at length the hour agreed upon for starting, the milkman fetched a coach from the nearest stand, and Kate, with many adieux to her mother, and many kind messages to Miss La Creevy, who was to come to tea, seated herself in it, and went away in state, if ever anybody went away in state in a hackney coach yet. And the coach, and the coachman, and the horses, rattled, and jangled, and whipped, and cursed, and swore, and tumbled on together, until they came to Golden Square.

The coachman gave a tremendous double knock at the door, which was opened long before he had done, as quickly as if there had been a man behind it, with his hand tied to the latch. Kate, who had expected no more uncommon appearance than Newman Noggs in a clean shirt, was not a little astonished to see that the opener was a man in handsome livery, and that there were two or three others in the hall. There was no doubt about its being the right house, however, for there was the name upon the door; so she accepted the laced coat-sleeve which was tendered her, and entering the house, was ushered upstairs, into a back drawing-room, where she was left alone.

If she had been surprised at the apparition of the footman, she was perfectly absorbed in amazement at the richness and splendour of the furniture. The softest and most elegant carpets, the most exquisite pictures, the costliest mirrors; articles of richest ornament, quite dazzling from their beauty and perplexing from the prodigality with which they were scattered around; encountered her on every side. The very staircase nearly down to the hall-door, was crammed with beautiful and luxurious things, as though the house were brimful of riches, which, with a very trifling addition, would fairly run over into the street.

Presently, she heard a series of loud double knocks at the street-door, and after every knock some new voice in the next room; the tones of Mr Ralph Nickleby were easily distinguishable at first, but by degrees they merged into the general buzz of conversation, and all she could ascertain was, that there were several gentlemen with no very musical voices, who talked very loud, laughed very heartily, and swore more than she would have thought quite necessary. But this was a question of taste.

At length, the door opened, and Ralph himself, divested of his boots, and ceremoniously embellished with black silks and shoes, presented his crafty face.

'I couldn't see you before, my dear,' he said, in a low tone, and pointing, as he spoke, to the next room. 'I was engaged in receiving them. Now - shall I take you in?'

'Pray, uncle,' said Kate, a little flurried, as people much more conversant with society often are, when they are about to enter a room full of strangers, and have had time to think of it previously, 'are there any ladies here?'

'No,' said Ralph, shortly, 'I don't know any.'

'Must I go in immediately?' asked Kate, drawing back a little.

'As you please,' said Ralph, shrugging his shoulders. 'They are all come, and dinner will be announced directly afterwards - that's all.'

Kate would have entreated a few minutes' respite, but reflecting that her uncle might consider the payment of the hackney-coach fare a sort of bargain for her punctuality, she suffered him to draw her arm through his, and to lead her away.

Seven or eight gentlemen were standing round the fire when they went in, and, as they were talking very loud, were not aware of their entrance until Mr Ralph Nickleby, touching one on the coat-sleeve, said in a harsh emphatic voice, as if to attract general attention -

'Lord Frederick Verisopht, my niece, Miss Nickleby.'

The group dispersed, as if in great surprise, and the gentleman addressed, turning round, exhibited a suit of clothes of the most superlative cut, a pair of whiskers of similar quality, a moustache, a head of hair, and a young face.

'Eh!' said the gentleman. 'What - the - deyvle!'

With which broken ejaculations, he fixed his glass in his eye, and stared at Miss Nickleby in great surprise.

'My niece, my lord,' said Ralph.

'Then my ears did not deceive me, and it's not wa-a-x work,' said his lordship. 'How de do? I'm very happy.' And then his lordship turned to another superlative gentleman, something older, something stouter, something redder in the face, and something longer upon town, and said in a loud whisper that the girl was 'deyvlissh pittty.'

'Introduce me, Nickleby,' said this second gentleman, who was lounging with his back to the fire, and both elbows on the chimneypiece.

'Sir Mulberry Hawk,' said Ralph.

'Otherwise the most knowing card in the pa-ack, Miss Nickleby,' said Lord Frederick Verisopht.

'Don't leave me out, Nickleby,' cried a sharp-faced gentleman, who was sitting on a low chair with a high back, reading the paper.

'Mr Pyke,' said Ralph.

'Nor me, Nickleby,' cried a gentleman with a flushed face and a flash air, from the elbow of Sir Mulberry Hawk.

'Mr Pluck,' said Ralph. Then wheeling about again, towards a gentleman with the neck of a stork and the legs of no animal in particular, Ralph introduced him as the Honourable Mr Snobb; and a white-headed person at the table as Colonel Chowser. The colonel was in conversation with somebody, who appeared to be a make-weight, and was not introduced at all.

There were two circumstances which, in this early stage of the party, struck home to Kate's bosom, and brought the blood tingling to her face. One was the flippant contempt with which the guests evidently regarded her uncle, and the other, the easy insolence of their manner towards herself. That the first symptom was very likely to lead to the aggravation of the second, it needed no great penetration to foresee. And here Mr Ralph Nickleby had reckoned without his host; for however fresh from the country a young lady (by nature) may be, and however unacquainted with conventional behaviour, the chances are, that she will have quite as strong an innate sense of the decencies and proprieties of life as if she had run the gauntlet of a dozen London seasons - possibly a stronger one, for such senses have been known to blunt in this improving process.

When Ralph had completed the ceremonial of introduction, he led his blushing niece to a seat. As he did so, he glanced warily round as though to assure himself of the impression which her unlooked-for appearance had created.

'An unexpected playsure, Nickleby,' said Lord Frederick Verisopht, taking his glass out of his right eye, where it had, until now, done duty on Kate, and fixing it in his left, to bring it to bear on Ralph.

'Designed to surprise you, Lord Frederick,' said Mr Pluck.

'Not a bad idea,' said his lordship, 'and one that would almost warrant the addition of an extra two and a half per cent.'

'Nickleby,' said Sir Mulberry Hawk, in a thick coarse voice, 'take the hint, and tack it on the other five-and-twenty, or whatever it is, and give me half for the advice.'

Sir Mulberry garnished this speech with a hoarse laugh, and terminated it with a pleasant oath regarding Mr Nickleby's limbs, whereat Messrs Pyke and Pluck laughed consumedly.

These gentlemen had not yet quite recovered the jest, when dinner was announced, and then they were thrown into fresh ecstasies by a

similar cause; for Sir Mulberry Hawk, in an excess of humour, shot dexterously past Lord Frederick Verisopht who was about to lead Kate downstairs, and drew her arm through his up to the elbow.

'No, damn it, Verisopht,' said Sir Mulberry, 'fair play's a jewel, and Miss Nickleby and I settled the matter with our eyes ten minutes ago.'

'Ha, ha, ha!' laughed the honourable Mr Snobb, 'very good, very good.'

Rendered additionally witty by this applause, Sir Mulberry Hawk leered upon his friends most facetiously, and led Kate downstairs with an air of familiarity, which roused in her gentle breast such burning indignation, as she felt it almost impossible to repress. Nor was the intensity of these feelings at all diminished, when she found herself placed at the top of the table, with Sir Mulberry Hawk and Lord Frederick Verisopht on either side.

'Oh, you've found your way into our neighbourhood, have you?' said Sir Mulberry as his lordship sat down.

'Of course,' replied Lord Frederick, fixing his eyes on Miss Nickleby, 'how can you a-ask me?'

'Well, you attend to your dinner,' said Sir Mulberry, 'and don't mind Miss Nickleby and me, for we shall prove very indifferent company, I dare say.'

'I wish you'd interfere here, Nickleby,' said Lord Frederick.

'What is the matter, my lord?' demanded Ralph from the bottom of the table, where he was supported by Messrs Pyke and Pluck.

'This fellow, Hawk, is monopolising your niece,' said Lord Frederick.

'He has a tolerable share of everything that you lay claim to, my lord,' said Ralph with a sneer.

'Gad, so he has,' replied the young man; 'deyvle take me if I know which is master in my house, he or I.'

'I know,' muttered Ralph.

'I think I shall cut him off with a shilling,' said the young nobleman, jocosely.

'No, no, curse it,' said Sir Mulberry. 'When you come to the shilling - the last shilling - I'll cut you fast enough; but till then, I'll never leave you - you may take your oath of it.'



This sally (which was strictly founded on fact) was received with a general roar, above which, was plainly distinguishable the laughter of Mr Pyke and Mr Pluck, who were, evidently, Sir Mulberry's toads in ordinary. Indeed, it was not difficult to see, that the majority of the company preyed upon the unfortunate young lord, who, weak and silly as he was, appeared by far the least vicious of the party. Sir Mulberry Hawk was remarkable for his tact in ruining, by himself and his creatures, young gentlemen of fortune - a genteel and elegant profession, of which he had undoubtedly gained the head. With all the boldness of an original genius, he had struck out an entirely new course of treatment quite opposed to the usual method; his custom being, when he had gained the ascendancy over those he took in hand, rather to keep them down than to give them their own way; and to exercise his vivacity upon them openly, and without reserve. Thus, he made them butts, in a double sense, and while he emptied them with great address, caused them to ring with sundry well-administered taps, for the diversion of society.

The dinner was as remarkable for the splendour and completeness of its appointments as the mansion itself, and the company were remarkable for doing it ample justice, in which respect Messrs Pyke and Pluck particularly signalised themselves; these two gentlemen eating of every dish, and drinking of every bottle, with a capacity and perseverance truly astonishing. They were remarkably fresh, too, notwithstanding their great exertions: for, on the appearance of the dessert, they broke out again, as if nothing serious had taken place since breakfast.

'Well,' said Lord Frederick, sipping his first glass of port, 'if this is a discounting dinner, all I have to say is, deyvle take me, if it wouldn't be a good pla-an to get discount every day.'

'You'll have plenty of it, in your time,' returned Sir Mulberry Hawk; 'Nickleby will tell you that.'

'What do you say, Nickleby?' inquired the young man; 'am I to be a good customer?'

'It depends entirely on circumstances, my lord,' replied Ralph.

'On your lordship's circumstances,' interposed Colonel Chowser of the Militia - and the race-courses.

The gallant colonel glanced at Messrs Pyke and Pluck as if he thought they ought to laugh at his joke; but those gentlemen, being only engaged to laugh for Sir Mulberry Hawk, were, to his signal discomfiture, as grave as a pair of undertakers. To add to his defeat, Sir Mulberry, considering any such efforts an invasion of his peculiar

privilege, eyed the offender steadily, through his glass, as if astonished at his presumption, and audibly stated his impression that it was an 'infernal liberty,' which being a hint to Lord Frederick, he put up HIS glass, and surveyed the object of censure as if he were some extraordinary wild animal then exhibiting for the first time. As a matter of course, Messrs Pyke and Pluck stared at the individual whom Sir Mulberry Hawk stared at; so, the poor colonel, to hide his confusion, was reduced to the necessity of holding his port before his right eye and affecting to scrutinise its colour with the most lively interest.

All this while, Kate had sat as silently as she could, scarcely daring to raise her eyes, lest they should encounter the admiring gaze of Lord Frederick Verisopht, or, what was still more embarrassing, the bold looks of his friend Sir Mulberry. The latter gentleman was obliging enough to direct general attention towards her.

'Here is Miss Nickleby,' observed Sir Mulberry, 'wondering why the deuce somebody doesn't make love to her.'

'No, indeed,' said Kate, looking hastily up, 'I - ' and then she stopped, feeling it would have been better to have said nothing at all.

'I'll hold any man fifty pounds,' said Sir Mulberry, 'that Miss Nickleby can't look in my face, and tell me she wasn't thinking so.'

'Done!' cried the noble gull. 'Within ten minutes.'

'Done!' responded Sir Mulberry. The money was produced on both sides, and the Honourable Mr Snobb was elected to the double office of stake-holder and time-keeper.

'Pray,' said Kate, in great confusion, while these preliminaries were in course of completion. 'Pray do not make me the subject of any bets. Uncle, I cannot really - '

'Why not, my dear?' replied Ralph, in whose grating voice, however, there was an unusual huskiness, as though he spoke unwillingly, and would rather that the proposition had not been broached. 'It is done in a moment; there is nothing in it. If the gentlemen insist on it - '

'I don't insist on it,' said Sir Mulberry, with a loud laugh. 'That is, I by no means insist upon Miss Nickleby's making the denial, for if she does, I lose; but I shall be glad to see her bright eyes, especially as she favours the mahogany so much.'

'So she does, and it's too ba-a-d of you, Miss Nickleby,' said the noble youth.

'Quite cruel,' said Mr Pyke.

'Horrid cruel,' said Mr Pluck.

'I don't care if I do lose,' said Sir Mulberry; 'for one tolerable look at Miss Nickleby's eyes is worth double the money.'

'More,' said Mr Pyke.

'Far more,' said Mr Pluck.

'How goes the enemy, Snobb?' asked Sir Mulberry Hawk.

'Four minutes gone.'

'Bravo!'

'Won't you ma-ake one effort for me, Miss Nickleby?' asked Lord Frederick, after a short interval.

'You needn't trouble yourself to inquire, my buck,' said Sir Mulberry; 'Miss Nickleby and I understand each other; she declares on my side, and shows her taste. You haven't a chance, old fellow. Time, Snobb?'

'Eight minutes gone.'

'Get the money ready,' said Sir Mulberry; 'you'll soon hand over.'

'Ha, ha, ha!' laughed Mr Pyke.

Mr Pluck, who always came second, and topped his companion if he could, screamed outright.

The poor girl, who was so overwhelmed with confusion that she scarcely knew what she did, had determined to remain perfectly quiet; but fearing that by so doing she might seem to countenance Sir Mulberry's boast, which had been uttered with great coarseness and vulgarity of manner, raised her eyes, and looked him in the face. There was something so odious, so insolent, so repulsive in the look which met her, that, without the power to stammer forth a syllable, she rose and hurried from the room. She restrained her tears by a great effort until she was alone upstairs, and then gave them vent.

'Capital!' said Sir Mulberry Hawk, putting the stakes in his pocket.

'That's a girl of spirit, and we'll drink her health.'

It is needless to say, that Pyke and Co. responded, with great warmth of manner, to this proposal, or that the toast was drunk with many little insinuations from the firm, relative to the completeness of Sir Mulberry's conquest. Ralph, who, while the attention of the other guests was attracted to the principals in the preceding scene, had eyed them like a wolf, appeared to breathe more freely now his niece was gone; the decanters passing quickly round, he leaned back in his chair, and turned his eyes from speaker to speaker, as they warmed with wine, with looks that seemed to search their hearts, and lay bare, for his distempered sport, every idle thought within them.

Meanwhile Kate, left wholly to herself, had, in some degree, recovered her composure. She had learnt from a female attendant, that her uncle wished to see her before she left, and had also gleaned the satisfactory intelligence, that the gentlemen would take coffee at table. The prospect of seeing them no more, contributed greatly to calm her agitation, and, taking up a book, she composed herself to read.

She started sometimes, when the sudden opening of the dining-room door let loose a wild shout of noisy revelry, and more than once rose in great alarm, as a fancied footstep on the staircase impressed her with the fear that some stray member of the party was returning alone. Nothing occurring, however, to realise her apprehensions, she endeavoured to fix her attention more closely on her book, in which by degrees she became so much interested, that she had read on through several chapters without heed of time or place, when she was terrified by suddenly hearing her name pronounced by a man's voice close at her ear.

The book fell from her hand. Lounging on an ottoman close beside her, was Sir Mulberry Hawk, evidently the worse - if a man be a ruffian at heart, he is never the better - for wine.

'What a delightful studiousness!' said this accomplished gentleman. 'Was it real, now, or only to display the eyelashes?'

Kate, looking anxiously towards the door, made no reply.

'I have looked at 'em for five minutes,' said Sir Mulberry. 'Upon my soul, they're perfect. Why did I speak, and destroy such a pretty little picture?'

'Do me the favour to be silent now, sir,' replied Kate.

'No, don't,' said Sir Mulberry, folding his crushed hat to lay his elbow on, and bringing himself still closer to the young lady; 'upon my life, you oughtn't to. Such a devoted slave of yours, Miss Nickleby - it's an infernal thing to treat him so harshly, upon my soul it is.'

'I wish you to understand, sir,' said Kate, trembling in spite of herself, but speaking with great indignation, 'that your behaviour offends and disgusts me. If you have a spark of gentlemanly feeling remaining, you will leave me.'

'Now why,' said Sir Mulberry, 'why will you keep up this appearance of excessive rigour, my sweet creature? Now, be more natural - my dear Miss Nickleby, be more natural - do.'

Kate hastily rose; but as she rose, Sir Mulberry caught her dress, and forcibly detained her.

'Let me go, sir,' she cried, her heart swelling with anger. 'Do you hear? Instantly - this moment.'

'Sit down, sit down,' said Sir Mulberry; 'I want to talk to you.'

'Unhand me, sir, this instant,' cried Kate.

'Not for the world,' rejoined Sir Mulberry. Thus speaking, he leaned over, as if to replace her in her chair; but the young lady, making a violent effort to disengage herself, he lost his balance, and measured his length upon the ground. As Kate sprung forward to leave the room, Mr Ralph Nickleby appeared in the doorway, and confronted her.

'What is this?' said Ralph.

'It is this, sir,' replied Kate, violently agitated: 'that beneath the roof where I, a helpless girl, your dead brother's child, should most have found protection, I have been exposed to insult which should make you shrink to look upon me. Let me pass you.'

Ralph DID shrink, as the indignant girl fixed her kindling eye upon him; but he did not comply with her injunction, nevertheless: for he led her to a distant seat, and returning, and approaching Sir Mulberry Hawk, who had by this time risen, motioned towards the door.

'Your way lies there, sir,' said Ralph, in a suppressed voice, that some devil might have owned with pride.

'What do you mean by that?' demanded his friend, fiercely.

The swollen veins stood out like sinews on Ralph's wrinkled forehead, and the nerves about his mouth worked as though some unendurable emotion wrung them; but he smiled disdainfully, and again pointed to the door.

'Do you know me, you old madman?' asked Sir Mulberry.

'Well,' said Ralph. The fashionable vagabond for the moment quite quailed under the steady look of the older sinner, and walked towards the door, muttering as he went.

'You wanted the lord, did you?' he said, stopping short when he reached the door, as if a new light had broken in upon him, and confronting Ralph again. 'Damme, I was in the way, was I?'

Ralph smiled again, but made no answer.

'Who brought him to you first?' pursued Sir Mulberry; 'and how, without me, could you ever have wound him in your net as you have?'

'The net is a large one, and rather full,' said Ralph. 'Take care that it chokes nobody in the meshes.'

'You would sell your flesh and blood for money; yourself, if you have not already made a bargain with the devil,' retorted the other. 'Do you mean to tell me that your pretty niece was not brought here as a decoy for the drunken boy downstairs?'

Although this hurried dialogue was carried on in a suppressed tone on both sides, Ralph looked involuntarily round to ascertain that Kate had not moved her position so as to be within hearing. His adversary saw the advantage he had gained, and followed it up.

'Do you mean to tell me,' he asked again, 'that it is not so? Do you mean to say that if he had found his way up here instead of me, you wouldn't have been a little more blind, and a little more deaf, and a little less flourishing, than you have been? Come, Nickleby, answer me that.'

'I tell you this,' replied Ralph, 'that if I brought her here, as a matter of business - '

'Ay, that's the word,' interposed Sir Mulberry, with a laugh. 'You're coming to yourself again now.'

' - As a matter of business,' pursued Ralph, speaking slowly and firmly, as a man who has made up his mind to say no more, 'because I thought she might make some impression on the silly youth you have taken in hand and are lending good help to ruin, I knew - knowing him - that it would be long before he outraged her girl's feelings, and that unless he offended by mere puppyism and emptiness, he would, with a little management, respect the sex and conduct even of his usurer's niece. But if I thought to draw him on

more gently by this device, I did not think of subjecting the girl to the licentiousness and brutality of so old a hand as you. And now we understand each other.'

'Especially as there was nothing to be got by it - eh?' sneered Sir Mulberry.

'Exactly so,' said Ralph. He had turned away, and looked over his shoulder to make this last reply. The eyes of the two worthies met, with an expression as if each rascal felt that there was no disguising himself from the other; and Sir Mulberry Hawk shrugged his shoulders and walked slowly out.

His friend closed the door, and looked restlessly towards the spot where his niece still remained in the attitude in which he had left her. She had flung herself heavily upon the couch, and with her head drooping over the cushion, and her face hidden in her hands, seemed to be still weeping in an agony of shame and grief.

Ralph would have walked into any poverty-stricken debtor's house, and pointed him out to a bailiff, though in attendance upon a young child's death-bed, without the smallest concern, because it would have been a matter quite in the ordinary course of business, and the man would have been an offender against his only code of morality. But, here was a young girl, who had done no wrong save that of coming into the world alive; who had patiently yielded to all his wishes; who had tried hard to please him - above all, who didn't owe him money - and he felt awkward and nervous.

Ralph took a chair at some distance; then, another chair a little nearer; then, moved a little nearer still; then, nearer again, and finally sat himself on the same sofa, and laid his hand on Kate's arm.

'Hush, my dear!' he said, as she drew it back, and her sobs burst out afresh. 'Hush, hush! Don't mind it, now; don't think of it.'

'Oh, for pity's sake, let me go home,' cried Kate. 'Let me leave this house, and go home.'

'Yes, yes,' said Ralph. 'You shall. But you must dry your eyes first, and compose yourself. Let me raise your head. There - there.'

'Oh, uncle!' exclaimed Kate, clasping her hands. 'What have I done - what have I done - that you should subject me to this? If I had wronged you in thought, or word, or deed, it would have been most cruel to me, and the memory of one you must have loved in some old time; but - '

'Only listen to me for a moment,' interrupted Ralph, seriously alarmed by the violence of her emotions. 'I didn't know it would be so; it was impossible for me to foresee it. I did all I could. - Come, let us walk about. You are faint with the closeness of the room, and the heat of these lamps. You will be better now, if you make the slightest effort.'

'I will do anything,' replied Kate, 'if you will only send me home.'

'Well, well, I will,' said Ralph; 'but you must get back your own looks; for those you have, will frighten them, and nobody must know of this but you and I. Now let us walk the other way. There. You look better even now.'

With such encouragements as these, Ralph Nickleby walked to and fro, with his niece leaning on his arm; actually trembling beneath her touch.

In the same manner, when he judged it prudent to allow her to depart, he supported her downstairs, after adjusting her shawl and performing such little offices, most probably for the first time in his life. Across the hall, and down the steps, Ralph led her too; nor did he withdraw his hand until she was seated in the coach.

As the door of the vehicle was roughly closed, a comb fell from Kate's hair, close at her uncle's feet; and as he picked it up, and returned it into her hand, the light from a neighbouring lamp shone upon her face. The lock of hair that had escaped and curled loosely over her brow, the traces of tears yet scarcely dry, the flushed cheek, the look of sorrow, all fired some dormant train of recollection in the old man's breast; and the face of his dead brother seemed present before him, with the very look it bore on some occasion of boyish grief, of which every minutest circumstance flashed upon his mind, with the distinctness of a scene of yesterday.

Ralph Nickleby, who was proof against all appeals of blood and kindred - who was steeled against every tale of sorrow and distress - staggered while he looked, and went back into his house, as a man who had seen a spirit from some world beyond the grave.