

Chapter XXI

Madam Mantalini finds herself in a Situation of some Difficulty, and Miss Nickleby finds herself in no Situation at all

The agitation she had undergone, rendered Kate Nickleby unable to resume her duties at the dressmaker's for three days, at the expiration of which interval she betook herself at the accustomed hour, and with languid steps, to the temple of fashion where Madame Mantalini reigned paramount and supreme.

The ill-will of Miss Knag had lost nothing of its virulence in the interval. The young ladies still scrupulously shrunk from all companionship with their denounced associate; and when that exemplary female arrived a few minutes afterwards, she was at no pains to conceal the displeasure with which she regarded Kate's return.

'Upon my word!' said Miss Knag, as the satellites flocked round, to relieve her of her bonnet and shawl; 'I should have thought some people would have had spirit enough to stop away altogether, when they know what an incumbrance their presence is to right-minded persons. But it's a queer world; oh! it's a queer world!'

Miss Knag, having passed this comment on the world, in the tone in which most people do pass comments on the world when they are out of temper, that is to say, as if they by no means belonged to it, concluded by heaving a sigh, wherewith she seemed meekly to compassionate the wickedness of mankind.

The attendants were not slow to echo the sigh, and Miss Knag was apparently on the eve of favouring them with some further moral reflections, when the voice of Madame Mantalini, conveyed through the speaking-tube, ordered Miss Nickleby upstairs to assist in the arrangement of the show-room; a distinction which caused Miss Knag to toss her head so much, and bite her lips so hard, that her powers of conversation were, for the time, annihilated.

'Well, Miss Nickleby, child,' said Madame Mantalini, when Kate presented herself; 'are you quite well again?'

'A great deal better, thank you,' replied Kate.

'I wish I could say the same,' remarked Madame Mantalini, seating herself with an air of weariness.

'Are you ill?' asked Kate. 'I am very sorry for that.'

'Not exactly ill, but worried, child - worried,' rejoined Madame.

'I am still more sorry to hear that,' said Kate, gently. 'Bodily illness is more easy to bear than mental.'

'Ah! and it's much easier to talk than to bear either,' said Madame, rubbing her nose with much irritability of manner. 'There, get to your work, child, and put the things in order, do.'

While Kate was wondering within herself what these symptoms of unusual vexation portended, Mr Mantalini put the tips of his whiskers, and, by degrees, his head, through the half-opened door, and cried in a soft voice -

'Is my life and soul there?'

'No,' replied his wife.

'How can it say so, when it is blooming in the front room like a little rose in a demnition flower-pot?' urged Mantalini. 'May its poppet come in and talk?'

'Certainly not,' replied Madame: 'you know I never allow you here. Go along!'

The poppet, however, encouraged perhaps by the relenting tone of this reply, ventured to rebel, and, stealing into the room, made towards Madame Mantalini on tiptoe, blowing her a kiss as he came along.

'Why will it vex itself, and twist its little face into bewitching nutcrackers?' said Mantalini, putting his left arm round the waist of his life and soul, and drawing her towards him with his right.

'Oh! I can't bear you,' replied his wife.

'Not - eh, not bear ME!' exclaimed Mantalini. 'Fibs, fibs. It couldn't be. There's not a woman alive, that could tell me such a thing to my face - to my own face.' Mr Mantalini stroked his chin, as he said this, and glanced complacently at an opposite mirror.

'Such destructive extravagance,' reasoned his wife, in a low tone.

'All in its joy at having gained such a lovely creature, such a little Venus, such a demd, enchanting, bewitching, engrossing, captivating little Venus,' said Mantalini.

'See what a situation you have placed me in!' urged Madame.

'No harm will come, no harm shall come, to its own darling,' rejoined Mr Mantalini. 'It is all over; there will be nothing the matter; money shall be got in; and if it don't come in fast enough, old Nickleby shall stump up again, or have his jugular separated if he dares to vex and hurt the little - '

'Hush!' interposed Madame. 'Don't you see?'

Mr Mantalini, who, in his eagerness to make up matters with his wife, had overlooked, or feigned to overlook, Miss Nickleby hitherto, took the hint, and laying his finger on his lip, sunk his voice still lower. There was, then, a great deal of whispering, during which Madame Mantalini appeared to make reference, more than once, to certain debts incurred by Mr Mantalini previous to her coverture; and also to an unexpected outlay of money in payment of the aforesaid debts; and furthermore, to certain agreeable weaknesses on that gentleman's part, such as gaming, wasting, idling, and a tendency to horse-flesh; each of which matters of accusation Mr Mantalini disposed of, by one kiss or more, as its relative importance demanded. The upshot of it all was, that Madame Mantalini was in raptures with him, and that they went upstairs to breakfast.

Kate busied herself in what she had to do, and was silently arranging the various articles of decoration in the best taste she could display, when she started to hear a strange man's voice in the room, and started again, to observe, on looking round, that a white hat, and a red neckerchief, and a broad round face, and a large head, and part of a green coat were in the room too.

'Don't alarm yourself, miss,' said the proprietor of these appearances. 'I say; this here's the mantie-making consarn, an't it?'

'Yes,' rejoined Kate, greatly astonished. 'What did you want?'

The stranger answered not; but, first looking back, as though to beckon to some unseen person outside, came, very deliberately, into the room, and was closely followed by a little man in brown, very much the worse for wear, who brought with him a mingled fumigation of stale tobacco and fresh onions. The clothes of this gentleman were much bespeckled with flue; and his shoes, stockings, and nether garments, from his heels to the waist buttons of his coat inclusive, were profusely embroidered with splashes of mud, caught a fortnight previously - before the setting-in of the fine weather.

Kate's very natural impression was, that these engaging individuals had called with the view of possessing themselves, unlawfully, of any portable articles that chanced to strike their fancy. She did not

attempt to disguise her apprehensions, and made a move towards the door.

'Wait a minnit,' said the man in the green coat, closing it softly, and standing with his back against it. 'This is a unpleasant bisness. Vere's your governor?'

'My what - did you say?' asked Kate, trembling; for she thought 'governor' might be slang for watch or money.

'Mister Muntlehiney,' said the man. 'Wot's come on him? Is he at home?'

'He is above stairs, I believe,' replied Kate, a little reassured by this inquiry. 'Do you want him?'

'No,' replied the visitor. 'I don't ezactly want him, if it's made a favour on. You can jist give him that 'ere card, and tell him if he wants to speak to ME, and save trouble, here I am; that's all.'

With these words, the stranger put a thick square card into Kate's hand, and, turning to his friend, remarked, with an easy air, 'that the rooms was a good high pitch;' to which the friend assented, adding, by way of illustration, 'that there was lots of room for a little boy to grow up a man in either on 'em, without much fear of his ever bringing his head into contract vith the ceiling.'

After ringing the bell which would summon Madame Mantalini, Kate glanced at the card, and saw that it displayed the name of 'Scaley,' together with some other information to which she had not had time to refer, when her attention was attracted by Mr Scaley himself, who, walking up to one of the cheval-glasses, gave it a hard poke in the centre with his stick, as coolly as if it had been made of cast iron.

'Good plate this here, Tix,' said Mr Scaley to his friend.

'Ah!' rejoined Mr Tix, placing the marks of his four fingers, and a duplicate impression of his thumb, on a piece of sky-blue silk; 'and this here article warn't made for nothing, mind you.'

From the silk, Mr Tix transferred his admiration to some elegant articles of wearing apparel, while Mr Scaley adjusted his neckcloth, at leisure, before the glass, and afterwards, aided by its reflection, proceeded to the minute consideration of a pimple on his chin; in which absorbing occupation he was yet engaged, when Madame Mantalini, entering the room, uttered an exclamation of surprise which roused him.

'Oh! Is this the missis?' inquired Scaley.

'It is Madame Mantalini,' said Kate.

'Then,' said Mr Scaley, producing a small document from his pocket and unfolding it very slowly, 'this is a writ of execution, and if it's not convenient to settle we'll go over the house at wunst, please, and take the inventory.'

Poor Madame Mantalini wrung her hands for grief, and rung the bell for her husband; which done, she fell into a chair and a fainting fit, simultaneously. The professional gentlemen, however, were not at all discomposed by this event, for Mr Scaley, leaning upon a stand on which a handsome dress was displayed (so that his shoulders appeared above it, in nearly the same manner as the shoulders of the lady for whom it was designed would have done if she had had it on), pushed his hat on one side and scratched his head with perfect unconcern, while his friend Mr Tix, taking that opportunity for a general survey of the apartment preparatory to entering on business, stood with his inventory-book under his arm and his hat in his hand, mentally occupied in putting a price upon every object within his range of vision.

Such was the posture of affairs when Mr Mantalini hurried in; and as that distinguished specimen had had a pretty extensive intercourse with Mr Scaley's fraternity in his bachelor days, and was, besides, very far from being taken by surprise on the present agitating occasion, he merely shrugged his shoulders, thrust his hands down to the bottom of his pockets, elevated his eyebrows, whistled a bar or two, swore an oath or two, and, sitting astride upon a chair, put the best face upon the matter with great composure and decency.

'What's the demd total?' was the first question he asked.

'Fifteen hundred and twenty-seven pound, four and ninepence ha'penny,' replied Mr Scaley, without moving a limb.

'The halfpenny be demd,' said Mr Mantalini, impatiently.

'By all means if you vish it,' retorted Mr Scaley; 'and the ninepence.'

'It don't matter to us if the fifteen hundred and twenty-seven pound went along with it, that I know on,' observed Mr Tix.

'Not a button,' said Scaley.

'Well,' said the same gentleman, after a pause, 'wot's to be done - anything? Is it only a small crack, or a out-and-out smash? A break-

up of the constitootion is it? - werry good. Then Mr Tom Tix, esk-vire, you must inform your angel wife and lovely family as you won't sleep at home for three nights to come, along of being in possession here. Wot's the good of the lady a fretting herself?' continued Mr Scaley, as Madame Mantalini sobbed. 'A good half of wot's here isn't paid for, I des-say, and wot a consolation oughtn't that to be to her feelings!'

With these remarks, combining great pleasantry with sound moral encouragement under difficulties, Mr Scaley proceeded to take the inventory, in which delicate task he was materially assisted by the uncommon tact and experience of Mr Tix, the broker.

'My cup of happiness's sweetener,' said Mantalini, approaching his wife with a penitent air; 'will you listen to me for two minutes?'

'Oh! don't speak to me,' replied his wife, sobbing. 'You have ruined me, and that's enough.'

Mr Mantalini, who had doubtless well considered his part, no sooner heard these words pronounced in a tone of grief and severity, than he recoiled several paces, assumed an expression of consuming mental agony, rushed headlong from the room, and was, soon afterwards, heard to slam the door of an upstairs dressing-room with great violence.

'Miss Nickleby,' cried Madame Mantalini, when this sound met her ear, 'make haste, for Heaven's sake, he will destroy himself! I spoke unkindly to him, and he cannot bear it from me. Alfred, my darling Alfred.'

With such exclamations, she hurried upstairs, followed by Kate who, although she did not quite participate in the fond wife's apprehensions, was a little flurried, nevertheless. The dressing-room door being hastily flung open, Mr Mantalini was disclosed to view, with his shirt-collar symmetrically thrown back: putting a fine edge to a breakfast knife by means of his razor strop.

'Ah!' cried Mr Mantalini, 'interrupted!' and whisk went the breakfast knife into Mr Mantalini's dressing-gown pocket, while Mr Mantalini's eyes rolled wildly, and his hair floating in wild disorder, mingled with his whiskers.

'Alfred,' cried his wife, flinging her arms about him, 'I didn't mean to say it, I didn't mean to say it!'

'Ruined!' cried Mr Mantalini. 'Have I brought ruin upon the best and purest creature that ever blessed a demnition vagabond! Demmit, let me go.' At this crisis of his ravings Mr Mantalini made a pluck at the

breakfast knife, and being restrained by his wife's grasp, attempted to dash his head against the wall - taking very good care to be at least six feet from it.

'Compose yourself, my own angel,' said Madame. 'It was nobody's fault; it was mine as much as yours, we shall do very well yet. Come, Alfred, come.'

Mr Mantalini did not think proper to come to, all at once; but, after calling several times for poison, and requesting some lady or gentleman to blow his brains out, gentler feelings came upon him, and he wept pathetically. In this softened frame of mind he did not oppose the capture of the knife - which, to tell the truth, he was rather glad to be rid of, as an inconvenient and dangerous article for a skirt pocket - and finally he suffered himself to be led away by his affectionate partner.

After a delay of two or three hours, the young ladies were informed that their services would be dispensed with until further notice, and at the expiration of two days, the name of Mantalini appeared in the list of bankrupts: Miss Nickleby received an intimation per post, on the same morning, that the business would be, in future, carried on under the name of Miss Knag, and that her assistance would no longer be required - a piece of intelligence with which Mrs Nickleby was no sooner made acquainted, than that good lady declared she had expected it all along and cited divers unknown occasions on which she had prophesied to that precise effect.

'And I say again,' remarked Mrs Nickleby (who, it is scarcely necessary to observe, had never said so before), 'I say again, that a milliner's and dressmaker's is the very last description of business, Kate, that you should have thought of attaching yourself to. I don't make it a reproach to you, my love; but still I will say, that if you had consulted your own mother - '

'Well, well, mama,' said Kate, mildly: 'what would you recommend now?'

'Recommend!' cried Mrs Nickleby, 'isn't it obvious, my dear, that of all occupations in this world for a young lady situated as you are, that of companion to some amiable lady is the very thing for which your education, and manners, and personal appearance, and everything else, exactly qualify you? Did you never hear your poor dear papa speak of the young lady who was the daughter of the old lady who boarded in the same house that he boarded in once, when he was a bachelor - what was her name again? I know it began with a B, and ended with g, but whether it was Waters or - no, it couldn't have been that, either; but whatever her name was, don't you know that that

young lady went as companion to a married lady who died soon afterwards, and that she married the husband, and had one of the finest little boys that the medical man had ever seen - all within eighteen months?'

Kate knew, perfectly well, that this torrent of favourable recollection was occasioned by some opening, real or imaginary, which her mother had discovered, in the companionship walk of life. She therefore waited, very patiently, until all reminiscences and anecdotes, bearing or not bearing upon the subject, had been exhausted, and at last ventured to inquire what discovery had been made. The truth then came out. Mrs Nickleby had, that morning, had a yesterday's newspaper of the very first respectability from the public-house where the porter came from; and in this yesterday's newspaper was an advertisement, couched in the purest and most grammatical English, announcing that a married lady was in want of a genteel young person as companion, and that the married lady's name and address were to be known, on application at a certain library at the west end of the town, therein mentioned.

'And I say,' exclaimed Mrs Nickleby, laying the paper down in triumph, 'that if your uncle don't object, it's well worth the trial.'

Kate was too sick at heart, after the rough jostling she had already had with the world, and really cared too little at the moment what fate was reserved for her, to make any objection. Mr Ralph Nickleby offered none, but, on the contrary, highly approved of the suggestion; neither did he express any great surprise at Madame Mantalini's sudden failure, indeed it would have been strange if he had, inasmuch as it had been procured and brought about chiefly by himself. So, the name and address were obtained without loss of time, and Miss Nickleby and her mama went off in quest of Mrs Witterly, of Cadogan Place, Sloane Street, that same forenoon.

Cadogan Place is the one slight bond that joins two great extremes; it is the connecting link between the aristocratic pavements of Belgrave Square, and the barbarism of Chelsea. It is in Sloane Street, but not of it. The people in Cadogan Place look down upon Sloane Street, and think Brompton low. They affect fashion too, and wonder where the New Road is. Not that they claim to be on precisely the same footing as the high folks of Belgrave Square and Grosvenor Place, but that they stand, with reference to them, rather in the light of those illegitimate children of the great who are content to boast of their connections, although their connections disavow them. Wearing as much as they can of the airs and semblances of loftiest rank, the people of Cadogan Place have the realities of middle station. It is the conductor which communicates to the inhabitants of regions beyond its limit, the shock of pride of birth and rank, which it has not within

itself, but derives from a fountain-head beyond; or, like the ligament which unites the Siamese twins, it contains something of the life and essence of two distinct bodies, and yet belongs to neither.

Upon this doubtful ground, lived Mrs Witterly, and at Mrs Witterly's door Kate Nickleby knocked with trembling hand. The door was opened by a big footman with his head floured, or chalked, or painted in some way (it didn't look genuine powder), and the big footman, receiving the card of introduction, gave it to a little page; so little, indeed, that his body would not hold, in ordinary array, the number of small buttons which are indispensable to a page's costume, and they were consequently obliged to be stuck on four abreast. This young gentleman took the card upstairs on a salver, and pending his return, Kate and her mother were shown into a dining-room of rather dirty and shabby aspect, and so comfortably arranged as to be adapted to almost any purpose rather than eating and drinking.

Now, in the ordinary course of things, and according to all authentic descriptions of high life, as set forth in books, Mrs Witterly ought to have been in her BOUDOIR; but whether it was that Mr Witterly was at that moment shaving himself in the BOUDOIR or what not, certain it is that Mrs Witterly gave audience in the drawing-room, where was everything proper and necessary, including curtains and furniture coverings of a roseate hue, to shed a delicate bloom on Mrs Witterly's complexion, and a little dog to snap at strangers' legs for Mrs Witterly's amusement, and the afore-mentioned page, to hand chocolate for Mrs Witterly's refreshment.

The lady had an air of sweet insipidity, and a face of engaging paleness; there was a faded look about her, and about the furniture, and about the house. She was reclining on a sofa in such a very unstudied attitude, that she might have been taken for an actress all ready for the first scene in a ballet, and only waiting for the drop curtain to go up.

'Place chairs.'

The page placed them.

'Leave the room, Alphonse.'

The page left it; but if ever an Alphonse carried plain Bill in his face and figure, that page was the boy.

'I have ventured to call, ma'am,' said Kate, after a few seconds of awkward silence, 'from having seen your advertisement.'

'Yes,' replied Mrs Witterly, 'one of my people put it in the paper - Yes.'

'I thought, perhaps,' said Kate, modestly, 'that if you had not already made a final choice, you would forgive my troubling you with an application.'

'Yes,' drawled Mrs Witterly again.

'If you have already made a selection - '

'Oh dear no,' interrupted the lady, 'I am not so easily suited. I really don't know what to say. You have never been a companion before, have you?'

Mrs Nickleby, who had been eagerly watching her opportunity, came dexterously in, before Kate could reply. 'Not to any stranger, ma'am,' said the good lady; 'but she has been a companion to me for some years. I am her mother, ma'am.'

'Oh!' said Mrs Witterly, 'I apprehend you.'

'I assure you, ma'am,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'that I very little thought, at one time, that it would be necessary for my daughter to go out into the world at all, for her poor dear papa was an independent gentleman, and would have been at this moment if he had but listened in time to my constant entreaties and - '

'Dear mama,' said Kate, in a low voice.

'My dear Kate, if you will allow me to speak,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'I shall take the liberty of explaining to this lady - '

'I think it is almost unnecessary, mama.'

And notwithstanding all the frowns and winks with which Mrs Nickleby intimated that she was going to say something which would clench the business at once, Kate maintained her point by an expressive look, and for once Mrs Nickleby was stopped upon the very brink of an oration.

'What are your accomplishments?' asked Mrs Witterly, with her eyes shut.

Kate blushed as she mentioned her principal acquirements, and Mrs Nickleby checked them all off, one by one, on her fingers; having calculated the number before she came out. Luckily the two calculations agreed, so Mrs Nickleby had no excuse for talking.

'You are a good temper?' asked Mrs Witterly, opening her eyes for an instant, and shutting them again.

'I hope so,' rejoined Kate. 'And have a highly respectable reference for everything, have you?'

Kate replied that she had, and laid her uncle's card upon the table.

'Have the goodness to draw your chair a little nearer, and let me look at you,' said Mrs Witterly; 'I am so very nearsighted that I can't quite discern your features.'

Kate complied, though not without some embarrassment, with this request, and Mrs Witterly took a languid survey of her countenance, which lasted some two or three minutes.

'I like your appearance,' said that lady, ringing a little bell. 'Alphonse, request your master to come here.'

The page disappeared on this errand, and after a short interval, during which not a word was spoken on either side, opened the door for an important gentleman of about eight-and-thirty, of rather plebeian countenance, and with a very light head of hair, who leant over Mrs Witterly for a little time, and conversed with her in whispers.

'Oh!' he said, turning round, 'yes. This is a most important matter. Mrs Witterly is of a very excitable nature; very delicate, very fragile; a hothouse plant, an exotic.'

'Oh! Henry, my dear,' interposed Mrs Witterly.

'You are, my love, you know you are; one breath - ' said Mr W., blowing an imaginary feather away. 'Pho! you're gone!'

The lady sighed.

'Your soul is too large for your body,' said Mr Witterly. 'Your intellect wears you out; all the medical men say so; you know that there is not a physician who is not proud of being called in to you. What is their unanimous declaration? 'My dear doctor,' said I to Sir Tumley Snuffin, in this very room, the very last time he came. 'My dear doctor, what is my wife's complaint? Tell me all. I can bear it. Is it nerves?' 'My dear fellow,' he said, 'be proud of that woman; make much of her; she is an ornament to the fashionable world, and to you. Her complaint is soul. It swells, expands, dilates - the blood fires, the pulse quickens, the excitement increases - Whew!' Here Mr Witterly, who, in the ardour of his description, had flourished his right hand to

within something less than an inch of Mrs Nickleby's bonnet, drew it hastily back again, and blew his nose as fiercely as if it had been done by some violent machinery.

'You make me out worse than I am, Henry,' said Mrs Witterly, with a faint smile.

'I do not, Julia, I do not,' said Mr W. 'The society in which you move - necessarily move, from your station, connection, and endowments - is one vortex and whirlpool of the most frightful excitement. Bless my heart and body, can I ever forget the night you danced with the baronet's nephew at the election ball, at Exeter! It was tremendous.'

'I always suffer for these triumphs afterwards,' said Mrs Witterly.

'And for that very reason,' rejoined her husband, 'you must have a companion, in whom there is great gentleness, great sweetness, excessive sympathy, and perfect repose.'

Here, both Mr and Mrs Witterly, who had talked rather at the Nicklebys than to each other, left off speaking, and looked at their two hearers, with an expression of countenance which seemed to say, 'What do you think of all this?'

'Mrs Witterly,' said her husband, addressing himself to Mrs Nickleby, 'is sought after and courted by glittering crowds and brilliant circles. She is excited by the opera, the drama, the fine arts, the - the - the - '

'The nobility, my love,' interposed Mrs Witterly.

'The nobility, of course,' said Mr Witterly. 'And the military. She forms and expresses an immense variety of opinions on an immense variety of subjects. If some people in public life were acquainted with Mrs Witterly's real opinion of them, they would not hold their heads, perhaps, quite as high as they do.'

'Hush, Henry,' said the lady; 'this is scarcely fair.'

'I mention no names, Julia,' replied Mr Witterly; 'and nobody is injured. I merely mention the circumstance to show that you are no ordinary person, that there is a constant friction perpetually going on between your mind and your body; and that you must be soothed and tended. Now let me hear, dispassionately and calmly, what are this young lady's qualifications for the office.'

In obedience to this request, the qualifications were all gone through again, with the addition of many interruptions and cross-questionings from Mr Witterly. It was finally arranged that inquiries should be

made, and a decisive answer addressed to Miss Nickleby under cover of her uncle, within two days. These conditions agreed upon, the page showed them down as far as the staircase window; and the big footman, relieving guard at that point, piloted them in perfect safety to the street-door.

'They are very distinguished people, evidently,' said Mrs Nickleby, as she took her daughter's arm. 'What a superior person Mrs Witterly is!'

'Do you think so, mama?' was all Kate's reply.

'Why, who can help thinking so, Kate, my love?' rejoined her mother. 'She is pale though, and looks much exhausted. I hope she may not be wearing herself out, but I am very much afraid.'

These considerations led the deep-sighted lady into a calculation of the probable duration of Mrs Witterly's life, and the chances of the disconsolate widower bestowing his hand on her daughter. Before reaching home, she had freed Mrs Witterly's soul from all bodily restraint; married Kate with great splendour at St George's, Hanover Square; and only left undecided the minor question, whether a splendid French-polished mahogany bedstead should be erected for herself in the two-pair back of the house in Cadogan Place, or in the three-pair front: between which apartments she could not quite balance the advantages, and therefore adjusted the question at last, by determining to leave it to the decision of her son-in-law.

The inquiries were made. The answer - not to Kate's very great joy - was favourable; and at the expiration of a week she betook herself, with all her movables and valuables, to Mrs Witterly's mansion, where for the present we will leave her.