

Chapter XXII

Nicholas, accompanied by Smike, sallies forth to seek his Fortune. He encounters Mr Vincent Crummles; and who he was, is herein made manifest

The whole capital which Nicholas found himself entitled to, either in possession, reversion, remainder, or expectancy, after paying his rent and settling with the broker from whom he had hired his poor furniture, did not exceed, by more than a few halfpence, the sum of twenty shillings. And yet he hailed the morning on which he had resolved to quit London, with a light heart, and sprang from his bed with an elasticity of spirit which is happily the lot of young persons, or the world would never be stocked with old ones.

It was a cold, dry, foggy morning in early spring. A few meagre shadows flitted to and fro in the misty streets, and occasionally there loomed through the dull vapour, the heavy outline of some hackney coach wending homewards, which, drawing slowly nearer, rolled jangling by, scattering the thin crust of frost from its whitened roof, and soon was lost again in the cloud. At intervals were heard the tread of slipshod feet, and the chilly cry of the poor sweep as he crept, shivering, to his early toil; the heavy footfall of the official watcher of the night, pacing slowly up and down and cursing the tardy hours that still intervened between him and sleep; the rambling of ponderous carts and waggons; the roll of the lighter vehicles which carried buyers and sellers to the different markets; the sound of ineffectual knocking at the doors of heavy sleepers - all these noises fell upon the ear from time to time, but all seemed muffled by the fog, and to be rendered almost as indistinct to the ear as was every object to the sight. The sluggish darkness thickened as the day came on; and those who had the courage to rise and peep at the gloomy street from their curtained windows, crept back to bed again, and coiled themselves up to sleep.

Before even these indications of approaching morning were rife in busy London, Nicholas had made his way alone to the city, and stood beneath the windows of his mother's house. It was dull and bare to see, but it had light and life for him; for there was at least one heart within its old walls to which insult or dishonour would bring the same blood rushing, that flowed in his own veins.

He crossed the road, and raised his eyes to the window of the room where he knew his sister slept. It was closed and dark. 'Poor girl,' thought Nicholas, 'she little thinks who lingers here!'

He looked again, and felt, for the moment, almost vexed that Kate was not there to exchange one word at parting. 'Good God!' he thought, suddenly correcting himself, 'what a boy I am!'

'It is better as it is,' said Nicholas, after he had lounged on, a few paces, and returned to the same spot. 'When I left them before, and could have said goodbye a thousand times if I had chosen, I spared them the pain of leave-taking, and why not now?' As he spoke, some fancied motion of the curtain almost persuaded him, for the instant, that Kate was at the window, and by one of those strange contradictions of feeling which are common to us all, he shrunk involuntarily into a doorway, that she might not see him. He smiled at his own weakness; said 'God bless them!' and walked away with a lighter step.

Smike was anxiously expecting him when he reached his old lodgings, and so was Newman, who had expended a day's income in a can of rum and milk to prepare them for the journey. They had tied up the luggage, Smike shouldered it, and away they went, with Newman Noggs in company; for he had insisted on walking as far as he could with them, overnight.

'Which way?' asked Newman, wistfully.

'To Kingston first,' replied Nicholas.

'And where afterwards?' asked Newman. 'Why won't you tell me?'

'Because I scarcely know myself, good friend,' rejoined Nicholas, laying his hand upon his shoulder; 'and if I did, I have neither plan nor prospect yet, and might shift my quarters a hundred times before you could possibly communicate with me.'

'I am afraid you have some deep scheme in your head,' said Newman, doubtfully.

'So deep,' replied his young friend, 'that even I can't fathom it. Whatever I resolve upon, depend upon it I will write you soon.'

'You won't forget?' said Newman.

'I am not very likely to,' rejoined Nicholas. 'I have not so many friends that I shall grow confused among the number, and forget my best one.'

Occupied in such discourse, they walked on for a couple of hours, as they might have done for a couple of days if Nicholas had not sat himself down on a stone by the wayside, and resolutely declared his

intention of not moving another step until Newman Noggs turned back. Having pleaded ineffectually first for another half-mile, and afterwards for another quarter, Newman was fain to comply, and to shape his course towards Golden Square, after interchanging many hearty and affectionate farewells, and many times turning back to wave his hat to the two wayfarers when they had become mere specks in the distance.

'Now listen to me, Smike,' said Nicholas, as they trudged with stout hearts onwards. 'We are bound for Portsmouth.'

Smike nodded his head and smiled, but expressed no other emotion; for whether they had been bound for Portsmouth or Port Royal would have been alike to him, so they had been bound together.

'I don't know much of these matters,' resumed Nicholas; 'but Portsmouth is a seaport town, and if no other employment is to be obtained, I should think we might get on board some ship. I am young and active, and could be useful in many ways. So could you.'

'I hope so,' replied Smike. 'When I was at that - you know where I mean?'

'Yes, I know,' said Nicholas. 'You needn't name the place.'

'Well, when I was there,' resumed Smike; his eyes sparkling at the prospect of displaying his abilities; 'I could milk a cow, and groom a horse, with anybody.'

'Ha!' said Nicholas, gravely. 'I am afraid they don't keep many animals of either kind on board ship, Smike, and even when they have horses, that they are not very particular about rubbing them down; still you can learn to do something else, you know. Where there's a will, there's a way.'

'And I am very willing,' said Smike, brightening up again.

'God knows you are,' rejoined Nicholas; 'and if you fail, it shall go hard but I'll do enough for us both.'

'Do we go all the way today?' asked Smike, after a short silence.

'That would be too severe a trial, even for your willing legs,' said Nicholas, with a good-humoured smile. 'No. Godalming is some thirty and odd miles from London - as I found from a map I borrowed - and I purpose to rest there. We must push on again tomorrow, for we are not rich enough to loiter. Let me relieve you of that bundle! Come!'

'No, no,' rejoined Smike, falling back a few steps. 'Don't ask me to give it up to you.'

'Why not?' asked Nicholas.

'Let me do something for you, at least,' said Smike. 'You will never let me serve you as I ought. You will never know how I think, day and night, of ways to please you.'

'You are a foolish fellow to say it, for I know it well, and see it, or I should be a blind and senseless beast,' rejoined Nicholas. 'Let me ask you a question while I think of it, and there is no one by,' he added, looking him steadily in the face. 'Have you a good memory?'

'I don't know,' said Smike, shaking his head sorrowfully. 'I think I had once; but it's all gone now - all gone.'

'Why do you think you had once?' asked Nicholas, turning quickly upon him as though the answer in some way helped out the purport of his question.

'Because I could remember, when I was a child,' said Smike, 'but that is very, very long ago, or at least it seems so. I was always confused and giddy at that place you took me from; and could never remember, and sometimes couldn't even understand, what they said to me. I - let me see - let me see!'

'You are wandering now,' said Nicholas, touching him on the arm.

'No,' replied his companion, with a vacant look 'I was only thinking how - ' He shivered involuntarily as he spoke.

'Think no more of that place, for it is all over,' retorted Nicholas, fixing his eyes full upon that of his companion, which was fast settling into an unmeaning stupefied gaze, once habitual to him, and common even then. 'What of the first day you went to Yorkshire?'

'Eh!' cried the lad.

'That was before you began to lose your recollection, you know,' said Nicholas quietly. 'Was the weather hot or cold?'

'Wet,' replied the boy. 'Very wet. I have always said, when it has rained hard, that it was like the night I came: and they used to crowd round and laugh to see me cry when the rain fell heavily. It was like a child, they said, and that made me think of it more. I turned cold all over sometimes, for I could see myself as I was then, coming in at the very same door.'

'As you were then,' repeated Nicholas, with assumed carelessness; 'how was that?'

'Such a little creature,' said Smike, 'that they might have had pity and mercy upon me, only to remember it.'

'You didn't find your way there, alone!' remarked Nicholas.

'No,' rejoined Smike, 'oh no.'

'Who was with you?'

'A man - a dark, withered man. I have heard them say so, at the school, and I remembered that before. I was glad to leave him, I was afraid of him; but they made me more afraid of them, and used me harder too.'

'Look at me,' said Nicholas, wishing to attract his full attention. 'There; don't turn away. Do you remember no woman, no kind woman, who hung over you once, and kissed your lips, and called you her child?'

'No,' said the poor creature, shaking his head, 'no, never.'

'Nor any house but that house in Yorkshire?'

'No,' rejoined the youth, with a melancholy look; 'a room - I remember I slept in a room, a large lonesome room at the top of a house, where there was a trap-door in the ceiling. I have covered my head with the clothes often, not to see it, for it frightened me: a young child with no one near at night: and I used to wonder what was on the other side. There was a clock too, an old clock, in one corner. I remember that. I have never forgotten that room; for when I have terrible dreams, it comes back, just as it was. I see things and people in it that I had never seen then, but there is the room just as it used to be; THAT never changes.'

'Will you let me take the bundle now?' asked Nicholas, abruptly changing the theme.

'No,' said Smike, 'no. Come, let us walk on.'

He quickened his pace as he said this, apparently under the impression that they had been standing still during the whole of the previous dialogue. Nicholas marked him closely, and every word of this conversation remained upon his memory.

It was, by this time, within an hour of noon, and although a dense vapour still enveloped the city they had left, as if the very breath of its busy people hung over their schemes of gain and profit, and found greater attraction there than in the quiet region above, in the open country it was clear and fair. Occasionally, in some low spots they came upon patches of mist which the sun had not yet driven from their strongholds; but these were soon passed, and as they laboured up the hills beyond, it was pleasant to look down, and see how the sluggish mass rolled heavily off, before the cheering influence of day. A broad, fine, honest sun lighted up the green pastures and dimpled water with the semblance of summer, while it left the travellers all the invigorating freshness of that early time of year. The ground seemed elastic under their feet; the sheep-bells were music to their ears; and exhilarated by exercise, and stimulated by hope, they pushed onward with the strength of lions.

The day wore on, and all these bright colours subsided, and assumed a quieter tint, like young hopes softened down by time, or youthful features by degrees resolving into the calm and serenity of age. But they were scarcely less beautiful in their slow decline, than they had been in their prime; for nature gives to every time and season some beauties of its own; and from morning to night, as from the cradle to the grave, is but a succession of changes so gentle and easy, that we can scarcely mark their progress.

To Godalming they came at last, and here they bargained for two humble beds, and slept soundly. In the morning they were astir: though not quite so early as the sun: and again afoot; if not with all the freshness of yesterday, still, with enough of hope and spirit to bear them cheerily on.

It was a harder day's journey than yesterday's, for there were long and weary hills to climb; and in journeys, as in life, it is a great deal easier to go down hill than up. However, they kept on, with unabated perseverance, and the hill has not yet lifted its face to heaven that perseverance will not gain the summit of at last.

They walked upon the rim of the Devil's Punch Bowl; and Smike listened with greedy interest as Nicholas read the inscription upon the stone which, reared upon that wild spot, tells of a murder committed there by night. The grass on which they stood, had once been dyed with gore; and the blood of the murdered man had run down, drop by drop, into the hollow which gives the place its name. 'The Devil's Bowl,' thought Nicholas, as he looked into the void, 'never held fitter liquor than that!'

Onward they kept, with steady purpose, and entered at length upon a wide and spacious tract of downs, with every variety of little hill and

plain to change their verdant surface. Here, there shot up, almost perpendicularly, into the sky, a height so steep, as to be hardly accessible to any but the sheep and goats that fed upon its sides, and there, stood a mound of green, sloping and tapering off so delicately, and merging so gently into the level ground, that you could scarce define its limits. Hills swelling above each other; and undulations shapely and uncouth, smooth and rugged, graceful and grotesque, thrown negligently side by side, bounded the view in each direction; while frequently, with unexpected noise, there uprose from the ground a flight of crows, who, cawing and wheeling round the nearest hills, as if uncertain of their course, suddenly poised themselves upon the wing and skimmed down the long vista of some opening valley, with the speed of light itself.

By degrees, the prospect receded more and more on either hand, and as they had been shut out from rich and extensive scenery, so they emerged once again upon the open country. The knowledge that they were drawing near their place of destination, gave them fresh courage to proceed; but the way had been difficult, and they had loitered on the road, and Smike was tired. Thus, twilight had already closed in, when they turned off the path to the door of a roadside inn, yet twelve miles short of Portsmouth.

'Twelve miles,' said Nicholas, leaning with both hands on his stick, and looking doubtfully at Smike.

'Twelve long miles,' repeated the landlord.

'Is it a good road?' inquired Nicholas.

'Very bad,' said the landlord. As of course, being a landlord, he would say.

'I want to get on,' observed Nicholas, hesitating. 'I scarcely know what to do.'

'Don't let me influence you,' rejoined the landlord. 'I wouldn't go on if it was me.'

'Wouldn't you?' asked Nicholas, with the same uncertainty.

'Not if I knew when I was well off,' said the landlord. And having said it he pulled up his apron, put his hands into his pockets, and, taking a step or two outside the door, looked down the dark road with an assumption of great indifference.

A glance at the toil-worn face of Smike determined Nicholas, so without any further consideration he made up his mind to stay where he was.

The landlord led them into the kitchen, and as there was a good fire he remarked that it was very cold. If there had happened to be a bad one he would have observed that it was very warm.

'What can you give us for supper?' was Nicholas's natural question.

'Why - what would you like?' was the landlord's no less natural answer.

Nicholas suggested cold meat, but there was no cold meat - poached eggs, but there were no eggs - mutton chops, but there wasn't a mutton chop within three miles, though there had been more last week than they knew what to do with, and would be an extraordinary supply the day after tomorrow.

'Then,' said Nicholas, 'I must leave it entirely to you, as I would have done, at first, if you had allowed me.'

'Why, then I'll tell you what,' rejoined the landlord. 'There's a gentleman in the parlour that's ordered a hot beef-steak pudding and potatoes, at nine. There's more of it than he can manage, and I have very little doubt that if I ask leave, you can sup with him. I'll do that, in a minute.'

'No, no,' said Nicholas, detaining him. 'I would rather not. I - at least - pshaw! why cannot I speak out? Here; you see that I am travelling in a very humble manner, and have made my way hither on foot. It is more than probable, I think, that the gentleman may not relish my company; and although I am the dusty figure you see, I am too proud to thrust myself into his.'

'Lord love you,' said the landlord, 'it's only Mr Crummles; HE isn't particular.'

'Is he not?' asked Nicholas, on whose mind, to tell the truth, the prospect of the savoury pudding was making some impression.

'Not he,' replied the landlord. 'He'll like your way of talking, I know. But we'll soon see all about that. Just wait a minute.'

The landlord hurried into the parlour, without staying for further permission, nor did Nicholas strive to prevent him: wisely considering that supper, under the circumstances, was too serious a matter to be

trifled with. It was not long before the host returned, in a condition of much excitement.

'All right,' he said in a low voice. 'I knew he would. You'll see something rather worth seeing, in there. Ecod, how they are a-going of it!'

There was no time to inquire to what this exclamation, which was delivered in a very rapturous tone, referred; for he had already thrown open the door of the room; into which Nicholas, followed by SMIKE with the bundle on his shoulder (he carried it about with him as vigilantly as if it had been a sack of gold), straightway repaired.

Nicholas was prepared for something odd, but not for something quite so odd as the sight he encountered. At the upper end of the room, were a couple of boys, one of them very tall and the other very short, both dressed as sailors - or at least as theatrical sailors, with belts, buckles, pigtails, and pistols complete - fighting what is called in play-bills a terrific combat, with two of those short broad-swords with basket hilts which are commonly used at our minor theatres. The short boy had gained a great advantage over the tall boy, who was reduced to mortal strait, and both were overlooked by a large heavy man, perched against the corner of a table, who emphatically adjured them to strike a little more fire out of the swords, and they couldn't fail to bring the house down, on the very first night.

'Mr Vincent Crummles,' said the landlord with an air of great deference. 'This is the young gentleman.'

Mr Vincent Crummles received Nicholas with an inclination of the head, something between the courtesy of a Roman emperor and the nod of a pot companion; and bade the landlord shut the door and begone.

'There's a picture,' said Mr Crummles, motioning Nicholas not to advance and spoil it. 'The little 'un has him; if the big 'un doesn't knock under, in three seconds, he's a dead man. Do that again, boys.'

The two combatants went to work afresh, and chopped away until the swords emitted a shower of sparks: to the great satisfaction of Mr Crummles, who appeared to consider this a very great point indeed. The engagement commenced with about two hundred chops administered by the short sailor and the tall sailor alternately, without producing any particular result, until the short sailor was chopped down on one knee; but this was nothing to him, for he worked himself about on the one knee with the assistance of his left hand, and fought most desperately until the tall sailor chopped his sword out of his grasp. Now, the inference was, that the short sailor, reduced to this

extremity, would give in at once and cry quarter, but, instead of that, he all of a sudden drew a large pistol from his belt and presented it at the face of the tall sailor, who was so overcome at this (not expecting it) that he let the short sailor pick up his sword and begin again. Then, the chopping recommenced, and a variety of fancy chops were administered on both sides; such as chops dealt with the left hand, and under the leg, and over the right shoulder, and over the left; and when the short sailor made a vigorous cut at the tall sailor's legs, which would have shaved them clean off if it had taken effect, the tall sailor jumped over the short sailor's sword, wherefore to balance the matter, and make it all fair, the tall sailor administered the same cut, and the short sailor jumped over HIS sword. After this, there was a good deal of dodging about, and hitching up of the inexpressibles in the absence of braces, and then the short sailor (who was the moral character evidently, for he always had the best of it) made a violent demonstration and closed with the tall sailor, who, after a few unavailing struggles, went down, and expired in great torture as the short sailor put his foot upon his breast, and bored a hole in him through and through.

'That'll be a double ENCORE if you take care, boys,' said Mr Crummles. 'You had better get your wind now and change your clothes.'

Having addressed these words to the combatants, he saluted Nicholas, who then observed that the face of Mr Crummles was quite proportionate in size to his body; that he had a very full under-lip, a hoarse voice, as though he were in the habit of shouting very much, and very short black hair, shaved off nearly to the crown of his head - to admit (as he afterwards learnt) of his more easily wearing character wigs of any shape or pattern.

'What did you think of that, sir?' inquired Mr Crummles.

'Very good, indeed - capital,' answered Nicholas.

'You won't see such boys as those very often, I think,' said Mr Crummles.

Nicholas assented - observing that if they were a little better match -

'Match!' cried Mr Crummles.

'I mean if they were a little more of a size,' said Nicholas, explaining himself.

'Size!' repeated Mr Crummles; 'why, it's the essence of the combat that there should be a foot or two between them. How are you to get up the

sympathies of the audience in a legitimate manner, if there isn't a little man contending against a big one? - unless there's at least five to one, and we haven't hands enough for that business in our company.'

'I see,' replied Nicholas. 'I beg your pardon. That didn't occur to me, I confess.'

'It's the main point,' said Mr Crummles. 'I open at Portsmouth the day after tomorrow. If you're going there, look into the theatre, and see how that'll tell.'

Nicholas promised to do so, if he could, and drawing a chair near the fire, fell into conversation with the manager at once. He was very talkative and communicative, stimulated perhaps, not only by his natural disposition, but by the spirits and water he sipped very plentifully, or the snuff he took in large quantities from a piece of whitey-brown paper in his waistcoat pocket. He laid open his affairs without the smallest reserve, and descanted at some length upon the merits of his company, and the acquirements of his family; of both of which, the two broad-sword boys formed an honourable portion. There was to be a gathering, it seemed, of the different ladies and gentlemen at Portsmouth on the morrow, whither the father and sons were proceeding (not for the regular season, but in the course of a wandering speculation), after fulfilling an engagement at Guildford with the greatest applause.

'You are going that way?' asked the manager.

'Ye-yes,' said Nicholas. 'Yes, I am.'

'Do you know the town at all?' inquired the manager, who seemed to consider himself entitled to the same degree of confidence as he had himself exhibited.

'No,' replied Nicholas.

'Never there?'

'Never.'

Mr Vincent Crummles gave a short dry cough, as much as to say, 'If you won't be communicative, you won't;' and took so many pinches of snuff from the piece of paper, one after another, that Nicholas quite wondered where it all went to.

While he was thus engaged, Mr Crummles looked, from time to time, with great interest at Smike, with whom he had appeared considerably

struck from the first. He had now fallen asleep, and was nodding in his chair.

'Excuse my saying so,' said the manager, leaning over to Nicholas, and sinking his voice, 'but what a capital countenance your friend has got!'

'Poor fellow!' said Nicholas, with a half-smile, 'I wish it were a little more plump, and less haggard.'

'Plump!' exclaimed the manager, quite horrified, 'you'd spoil it for ever.'

'Do you think so?' 'Think so, sir! Why, as he is now,' said the manager, striking his knee emphatically; 'without a pad upon his body, and hardly a touch of paint upon his face, he'd make such an actor for the starved business as was never seen in this country. Only let him be tolerably well up in the Apothecary in Romeo and Juliet, with the slightest possible dab of red on the tip of his nose, and he'd be certain of three rounds the moment he put his head out of the practicable door in the front grooves O.P.'

'You view him with a professional eye,' said Nicholas, laughing.

'And well I may,' rejoined the manager. 'I never saw a young fellow so regularly cut out for that line, since I've been in the profession. And I played the heavy children when I was eighteen months old.'

The appearance of the beef-steak pudding, which came in simultaneously with the junior Vincent Crummleses, turned the conversation to other matters, and indeed, for a time, stopped it altogether. These two young gentlemen wielded their knives and forks with scarcely less address than their broad-swords, and as the whole party were quite as sharp set as either class of weapons, there was no time for talking until the supper had been disposed of.

The Master Crummleses had no sooner swallowed the last procurable morsel of food, than they evinced, by various half-suppressed yawns and stretchings of their limbs, an obvious inclination to retire for the night, which Smike had betrayed still more strongly: he having, in the course of the meal, fallen asleep several times while in the very act of eating. Nicholas therefore proposed that they should break up at once, but the manager would by no means hear of it; vowing that he had promised himself the pleasure of inviting his new acquaintance to share a bowl of punch, and that if he declined, he should deem it very unhandsome behaviour.

'Let them go,' said Mr Vincent Crummles, 'and we'll have it snugly and cosily together by the fire.'

Nicholas was not much disposed to sleep - being in truth too anxious - so, after a little demur, he accepted the offer, and having exchanged a shake of the hand with the young Crummles, and the manager having on his part bestowed a most affectionate benediction on Smike, he sat himself down opposite to that gentleman by the fireside to assist in emptying the bowl, which soon afterwards appeared, steaming in a manner which was quite exhilarating to behold, and sending forth a most grateful and inviting fragrance.

But, despite the punch and the manager, who told a variety of stories, and smoked tobacco from a pipe, and inhaled it in the shape of snuff, with a most astonishing power, Nicholas was absent and dispirited. His thoughts were in his old home, and when they reverted to his present condition, the uncertainty of the morrow cast a gloom upon him, which his utmost efforts were unable to dispel. His attention wandered; although he heard the manager's voice, he was deaf to what he said; and when Mr Vincent Crummles concluded the history of some long adventure with a loud laugh, and an inquiry what Nicholas would have done under the same circumstances, he was obliged to make the best apology in his power, and to confess his entire ignorance of all he had been talking about.

'Why, so I saw,' observed Mr Crummles. 'You're uneasy in your mind. What's the matter?'

Nicholas could not refrain from smiling at the abruptness of the question; but, thinking it scarcely worth while to parry it, owned that he was under some apprehensions lest he might not succeed in the object which had brought him to that part of the country.

'And what's that?' asked the manager.

'Getting something to do which will keep me and my poor fellow-traveller in the common necessaries of life,' said Nicholas. 'That's the truth. You guessed it long ago, I dare say, so I may as well have the credit of telling it you with a good grace.'

'What's to be got to do at Portsmouth more than anywhere else?' asked Mr Vincent Crummles, melting the sealing-wax on the stem of his pipe in the candle, and rolling it out afresh with his little finger.

'There are many vessels leaving the port, I suppose,' replied Nicholas. 'I shall try for a berth in some ship or other. There is meat and drink there at all events.'

'Salt meat and new rum; pease-pudding and chaff-biscuits,' said the manager, taking a whiff at his pipe to keep it alight, and returning to his work of embellishment.

'One may do worse than that,' said Nicholas. 'I can rough it, I believe, as well as most young men of my age and previous habits.'

'You need be able to,' said the manager, 'if you go on board ship; but you won't.'

'Why not?'

'Because there's not a skipper or mate that would think you worth your salt, when he could get a practised hand,' replied the manager; 'and they as plentiful there, as the oysters in the streets.'

'What do you mean?' asked Nicholas, alarmed by this prediction, and the confident tone in which it had been uttered. 'Men are not born able seamen. They must be reared, I suppose?'

Mr Vincent Crummles nodded his head. 'They must; but not at your age, or from young gentlemen like you.'

There was a pause. The countenance of Nicholas fell, and he gazed ruefully at the fire.

'Does no other profession occur to you, which a young man of your figure and address could take up easily, and see the world to advantage in?' asked the manager.

'No,' said Nicholas, shaking his head.

'Why, then, I'll tell you one,' said Mr Crummles, throwing his pipe into the fire, and raising his voice. 'The stage.'

'The stage!' cried Nicholas, in a voice almost as loud.

'The theatrical profession,' said Mr Vincent Crummles. 'I am in the theatrical profession myself, my wife is in the theatrical profession, my children are in the theatrical profession. I had a dog that lived and died in it from a puppy; and my chaise-pony goes on, in Timour the Tartar. I'll bring you out, and your friend too. Say the word. I want a novelty.'

'I don't know anything about it,' rejoined Nicholas, whose breath had been almost taken away by this sudden proposal. 'I never acted a part in my life, except at school.'

'There's genteel comedy in your walk and manner, juvenile tragedy in your eye, and touch-and-go farce in your laugh,' said Mr Vincent Crummles. 'You'll do as well as if you had thought of nothing else but the lamps, from your birth downwards.'

Nicholas thought of the small amount of small change that would remain in his pocket after paying the tavern bill; and he hesitated.

'You can be useful to us in a hundred ways,' said Mr Crummles. 'Think what capital bills a man of your education could write for the shop-windows.'

'Well, I think I could manage that department,' said Nicholas.

'To be sure you could,' replied Mr Crummles. 'For further particulars see small hand-bills' - we might have half a volume in every one of 'em. Pieces too; why, you could write us a piece to bring out the whole strength of the company, whenever we wanted one.'

'I am not quite so confident about that,' replied Nicholas. 'But I dare say I could scribble something now and then, that would suit you.'

'We'll have a new show-piece out directly,' said the manager. 'Let me see - peculiar resources of this establishment - new and splendid scenery - you must manage to introduce a real pump and two washing-tubs.'

'Into the piece?' said Nicholas.

'Yes,' replied the manager. 'I bought 'em cheap, at a sale the other day, and they'll come in admirably. That's the London plan. They look up some dresses, and properties, and have a piece written to fit 'em. Most of the theatres keep an author on purpose.'

'Indeed!' cried Nicholas.

'Oh, yes,' said the manager; 'a common thing. It'll look very well in the bills in separate lines - Real pump! - Splendid tubs! - Great attraction! You don't happen to be anything of an artist, do you?'

'That is not one of my accomplishments,' rejoined Nicholas.

'Ah! Then it can't be helped,' said the manager. 'If you had been, we might have had a large woodcut of the last scene for the posters, showing the whole depth of the stage, with the pump and tubs in the middle; but, however, if you're not, it can't be helped.'

'What should I get for all this?' inquired Nicholas, after a few moments' reflection. 'Could I live by it?'

'Live by it!' said the manager. 'Like a prince! With your own salary, and your friend's, and your writings, you'd make - ah! you'd make a pound a week!'

'You don't say so!'

'I do indeed, and if we had a run of good houses, nearly double the money.'

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders; but sheer destitution was before him; and if he could summon fortitude to undergo the extremes of want and hardship, for what had he rescued his helpless charge if it were only to bear as hard a fate as that from which he had wrested him? It was easy to think of seventy miles as nothing, when he was in the same town with the man who had treated him so ill and roused his bitterest thoughts; but now, it seemed far enough. What if he went abroad, and his mother or Kate were to die the while?

Without more deliberation, he hastily declared that it was a bargain, and gave Mr Vincent Crummles his hand upon it.