Chapter XXIV

Of the Great Bespeak for Miss Snevellicci, and the first Appearance of Nicholas upon any Stage

Nicholas was up betimes in the morning; but he had scarcely begun to dress, notwithstanding, when he heard footsteps ascending the stairs, and was presently saluted by the voices of Mr Folair the pantomimist, and Mr Lenville, the tragedian.

'House, house, house!' cried Mr Folair.

'What, ho! within there,' said Mr Lenville, in a deep voice.

'Confound these fellows!' thought Nicholas; 'they have come to breakfast, I suppose. I'll open the door directly, if you'll wait an instant.'

The gentlemen entreated him not to hurry himself; and, to beguile the interval, had a fencing bout with their walking-sticks on the very small landing-place: to the unspeakable discomposure of all the other lodgers downstairs.

'Here, come in,' said Nicholas, when he had completed his toilet. 'In the name of all that's horrible, don't make that noise outside.'

'An uncommon snug little box this,' said Mr Lenville, stepping into the front room, and taking his hat off, before he could get in at all. 'Pernicious snug.'

'For a man at all particular in such matters, it might be a trifle too snug,' said Nicholas; 'for, although it is, undoubtedly, a great convenience to be able to reach anything you want from the ceiling or the floor, or either side of the room, without having to move from your chair, still these advantages can only be had in an apartment of the most limited size.'

'It isn't a bit too confined for a single man,' returned Mr Lenville. 'That reminds me, - my wife, Mr Johnson, - I hope she'll have some good part in this piece of yours?'

'I glanced at the French copy last night,' said Nicholas. 'It looks very good, I think.'

'What do you mean to do for me, old fellow?' asked Mr Lenville, poking the struggling fire with his walking-stick, and afterwards wiping it on the skirt of his coat. 'Anything in the gruff and grumble way?'

'You turn your wife and child out of doors,' said Nicholas; 'and, in a fit of rage and jealousy, stab your eldest son in the library.'

'Do I though!' exclaimed Mr Lenville. 'That's very good business.'

'After which,' said Nicholas, 'you are troubled with remorse till the last act, and then you make up your mind to destroy yourself. But, just as you are raising the pistol to your head, a clock strikes - ten.'

'I see,' cried Mr Lenville. 'Very good.'

'You pause,' said Nicholas; 'you recollect to have heard a clock strike ten in your infancy. The pistol falls from your hand - you are overcome - you burst into tears, and become a virtuous and exemplary character for ever afterwards.'

'Capital!' said Mr Lenville: 'that's a sure card, a sure card. Get the curtain down with a touch of nature like that, and it'll be a triumphant success.'

'Is there anything good for me?' inquired Mr Folair, anxiously.

'Let me see,' said Nicholas. 'You play the faithful and attached servant; you are turned out of doors with the wife and child.'

'Always coupled with that infernal phenomenon,' sighed Mr Folair; 'and we go into poor lodgings, where I won't take any wages, and talk sentiment, I suppose?'

'Why - yes,' replied Nicholas: 'that is the course of the piece.'

'I must have a dance of some kind, you know,' said Mr Folair. 'You'll have to introduce one for the phenomenon, so you'd better make a PAS DE DEUX, and save time.'

'There's nothing easier than that,' said Mr Lenville, observing the disturbed looks of the young dramatist.

'Upon my word I don't see how it's to be done,' rejoined Nicholas.

'Why, isn't it obvious?' reasoned Mr Lenville. 'Gadzooks, who can help seeing the way to do it? - you astonish me! You get the distressed lady, and the little child, and the attached servant, into the poor lodgings, don't you? - Well, look here. The distressed lady sinks into a chair, and buries her face in her pocket-handkerchief. 'What makes you weep, mama?' says the child. 'Don't weep, mama, or you'll make me weep too!' - 'And me!' says the favourite servant, rubbing his eyes with his arm. 'What can we do to raise your spirits, dear mama?' says

the little child. ‘Ay, what CAN we do?’ says the faithful servant. ‘Oh, Pierre!’ says the distressed lady; ‘would that I could shake off these painful thoughts.’ - ’Try, ma'am, try,’ says the faithful servant; ‘rouse yourself, ma'am; be amused.’ - ’I will,’ says the lady, ‘I will learn to suffer with fortitude. Do you remember that dance, my honest friend, which, in happier days, you practised with this sweet angel? It never failed to calm my spirits then. Oh! let me see it once again before I die!’ - There it is - cue for the band, BEFORE I DIE, - and off they go. That's the regular thing; isn't it, Tommy?'

'That's it,' replied Mr Folair. 'The distressed lady, overpowered by old recollections, faints at the end of the dance, and you close in with a picture.'

Profiting by these and other lessons, which were the result of the personal experience of the two actors, Nicholas willingly gave them the best breakfast he could, and, when he at length got rid of them, applied himself to his task: by no means displeased to find that it was so much easier than he had at first supposed. He worked very hard all day, and did not leave his room until the evening, when he went down to the theatre, whither Smike had repaired before him to go on with another gentleman as a general rebellion.

Here all the people were so much changed, that he scarcely knew them. False hair, false colour, false calves, false muscles - they had become different beings. Mr Lenville was a blooming warrior of most exquisite proportions; Mr Crummles, his large face shaded by a profusion of black hair, a Highland outlaw of most majestic bearing; one of the old gentlemen a jailer, and the other a venerable patriarch; the comic countryman, a fighting-man of great valour, relieved by a touch of humour; each of the Master Crummleses a prince in his own right; and the low-spirited lover, a desponding captive. There was a gorgeous banquet ready spread for the third act, consisting of two pasteboard vases, one plate of biscuits, a black bottle, and a vinegar cruet; and, in short, everything was on a scale of the utmost splendour and preparation.

Nicholas was standing with his back to the curtain, now contemplating the first scene, which was a Gothic archway, about two feet shorter than Mr Crummles, through which that gentleman was to make his first entrance, and now listening to a couple of people who were cracking nuts in the gallery, wondering whether they made the whole audience, when the manager himself walked familiarly up and accosted him.

'Been in front tonight?' said Mr Crummles.

'No,' replied Nicholas, 'not yet. I am going to see the play.'

'We've had a pretty good Let,' said Mr Crummles. 'Four front places in the centre, and the whole of the stage-box.'

'Oh, indeed!' said Nicholas; 'a family, I suppose?'

'Yes,' replied Mr Crummles, 'yes. It's an affecting thing. There are six children, and they never come unless the phenomenon plays.'

It would have been difficult for any party, family, or otherwise, to have visited the theatre on a night when the phenomenon did NOT play, inasmuch as she always sustained one, and not uncommonly two or three, characters, every night; but Nicholas, sympathising with the feelings of a father, refrained from hinting at this trifling circumstance, and Mr Crummles continued to talk, uninterrupted by him.

'Six,' said that gentleman; 'pa and ma eight, aunt nine, governess ten, grandfather and grandmother twelve. Then, there's the footman, who stands outside, with a bag of oranges and a jug of toast-and-water, and sees the play for nothing through the little pane of glass in the box-door - it's cheap at a guinea; they gain by taking a box.'

'I wonder you allow so many,' observed Nicholas.

'There's no help for it,' replied Mr Crummles; 'it's always expected in the country. If there are six children, six people come to hold them in their laps. A family-box carries double always. Ring in the orchestra, Grudden!'

That useful lady did as she was requested, and shortly afterwards the tuning of three fiddles was heard. Which process having been protracted as long as it was supposed that the patience of the audience could possibly bear it, was put a stop to by another jerk of the bell, which, being the signal to begin in earnest, set the orchestra playing a variety of popular airs, with involuntary variations.

If Nicholas had been astonished at the alteration for the better which the gentlemen displayed, the transformation of the ladies was still more extraordinary. When, from a snug corner of the manager's box, he beheld Miss Snevellicci in all the glories of white muslin with a golden hem, and Mrs Crummles in all the dignity of the outlaw's wife, and Miss Bravassa in all the sweetness of Miss Snevellicci's confidential friend, and Miss Belvawney in the white silks of a page doing duty everywhere and swearing to live and die in the service of everybody, he could scarcely contain his admiration, which testified itself in great applause, and the closest possible attention to the business of the scene. The plot was most interesting. It belonged to no particular age, people, or country, and was perhaps the more

delightful on that account, as nobody's previous information could afford the remotest glimmering of what would ever come of it. An outlaw had been very successful in doing something somewhere, and came home, in triumph, to the sound of shouts and fiddles, to greet his wife - a lady of masculine mind, who talked a good deal about her father's bones, which it seemed were unburied, though whether from a peculiar taste on the part of the old gentleman himself, or the reprehensible neglect of his relations, did not appear. This outlaw's wife was, somehow or other, mixed up with a patriarch, living in a castle a long way off, and this patriarch was the father of several of the characters, but he didn't exactly know which, and was uncertain whether he had brought up the right ones in his castle, or the wrong ones; he rather inclined to the latter opinion, and, being uneasy, relieved his mind with a banquet, during which solemnity somebody in a cloak said 'Beware!' which somebody was known by nobody (except the audience) to be the outlaw himself, who had come there, for reasons unexplained, but possibly with an eye to the spoons. There was an agreeable little surprise in the way of certain love passages between the desponding captive and Miss Snevellicci, and the comic fighting-man and Miss Bravassa; besides which, Mr Lenville had several very tragic scenes in the dark, while on throat-cutting expeditions, which were all baffled by the skill and bravery of the comic fighting-man (who overheard whatever was said all through the piece) and the intrepidity of Miss Snevellicci, who adopted tights, and therein repaired to the prison of her captive lover, with a small basket of refreshments and a dark lantern. At last, it came out that the patriarch was the man who had treated the bones of the outlaw's father-in-law with so much disrespect, for which cause and reason the outlaw's wife repaired to his castle to kill him, and so got into a dark room, where, after a good deal of groping in the dark, everybody got hold of everybody else, and took them for somebody besides, which occasioned a vast quantity of confusion, with some pistolling, loss of life, and torchlight; after which, the patriarch came forward, and observing, with a knowing look, that he knew all about his children now, and would tell them when they got inside, said that there could not be a more appropriate occasion for marrying the young people than that; and therefore he joined their hands, with the full consent of the indefatigable page, who (being the only other person surviving) pointed with his cap into the clouds, and his right hand to the ground; thereby invoking a blessing and giving the cue for the curtain to come down, which it did, amidst general applause.

'What did you think of that?' asked Mr Crummles, when Nicholas went round to the stage again. Mr Crummles was very red and hot, for your outlaws are desperate fellows to shout.

'I think it was very capital indeed,' replied Nicholas; 'Miss Snevellicci in particular was uncommonly good.'

'She's a genius,' said Mr Crummles; 'quite a genius, that girl. By-the-bye, I've been thinking of bringing out that piece of yours on her bespeak night.'

'When?' asked Nicholas.

'The night of her bespeak. Her benefit night, when her friends and patrons bespeak the play,' said Mr Crummles.

'Oh! I understand,' replied Nicholas.

'You see,' said Mr Crummles, 'it's sure to go, on such an occasion, and even if it should not work up quite as well as we expect, why it will be her risk, you know, and not ours.'

'Yours, you mean,' said Nicholas.

'I said mine, didn't I?' returned Mr Crummles. 'Next Monday week. What do you say? You'll have done it, and are sure to be up in the lover's part, long before that time.'

'I don't know about 'long before,'' replied Nicholas; 'but BY that time I think I can undertake to be ready.'

'Very good,' pursued Mr Crummles, 'then we'll call that settled. Now, I want to ask you something else. There's a little - what shall I call it? - a little canvassing takes place on these occasions.'

'Among the patrons, I suppose?' said Nicholas.

'Among the patrons; and the fact is, that Snevellicci has had so many bespeaks in this place, that she wants an attraction. She had a bespeak when her mother-in-law died, and a bespeak when her uncle died; and Mrs Crummles and myself have had bespeaks on the anniversary of the phenomenon's birthday, and our wedding-day, and occasions of that description, so that, in fact, there's some difficulty in getting a good one. Now, won't you help this poor girl, Mr Johnson?' said Crummles, sitting himself down on a drum, and taking a great pinch of snuff, as he looked him steadily in the face.

'How do you mean?' rejoined Nicholas.

'Don't you think you could spare half an hour tomorrow morning, to call with her at the houses of one or two of the principal people?' murmured the manager in a persuasive tone.

'Oh dear me,' said Nicholas, with an air of very strong objection, 'I shouldn't like to do that.'

'The infant will accompany her,' said Mr Crummles. 'The moment it was suggested to me, I gave permission for the infant to go. There will not be the smallest impropriety - Miss Snevellicci, sir, is the very soul of honour. It would be of material service - the gentleman from London - author of the new piece - actor in the new piece - first appearance on any boards - it would lead to a great bespeak, Mr Johnson.'

'I am very sorry to throw a damp upon the prospects of anybody, and more especially a lady,' replied Nicholas; 'but really I must decidedly object to making one of the canvassing party.'

'What does Mr Johnson say, Vincent?' inquired a voice close to his ear; and, looking round, he found Mrs Crummles and Miss Snevellicci herself standing behind him.

'He has some objection, my dear,' replied Mr Crummles, looking at Nicholas.

'Objection!' exclaimed Mrs Crummles. 'Can it be possible?'

'Oh, I hope not!' cried Miss Snevellicci. 'You surely are not so cruel - oh, dear me! - Well, I - to think of that now, after all one's looking forward to it!'

'Mr Johnson will not persist, my dear,' said Mrs Crummles. 'Think better of him than to suppose it. Gallantry, humanity, all the best feelings of his nature, must be enlisted in this interesting cause.'

'Which moves even a manager,' said Mr Crummles, smiling.

'And a manager's wife,' added Mrs Crummles, in her accustomed tragedy tones. 'Come, come, you will relent, I know you will.'

'It is not in my nature,' said Nicholas, moved by these appeals, 'to resist any entreaty, unless it is to do something positively wrong; and, beyond a feeling of pride, I know nothing which should prevent my doing this. I know nobody here, and nobody knows me. So be it then. I yield.'

Miss Snevellicci was at once overwhelmed with blushes and expressions of gratitude, of which latter commodity neither Mr nor Mrs Crummles was by any means sparing. It was arranged that Nicholas should call upon her, at her lodgings, at eleven next morning, and soon after they parted: he to return home to his authorship: Miss Snevellicci to dress for the after-piece: and the disinterested manager and his wife to discuss the probable gains of

the forthcoming bespeak, of which they were to have two-thirds of the profits by solemn treaty of agreement.

At the stipulated hour next morning, Nicholas repaired to the lodgings of Miss Snevellicci, which were in a place called Lombard Street, at the house of a tailor. A strong smell of ironing pervaded the little passage; and the tailor's daughter, who opened the door, appeared in that flutter of spirits which is so often attendant upon the periodical getting up of a family's linen.

'Miss Snevellicci lives here, I believe?' said Nicholas, when the door was opened.

The tailor's daughter replied in the affirmative.

'Will you have the goodness to let her know that Mr Johnson is here?' said Nicholas.

'Oh, if you please, you're to come upstairs,' replied the tailor's daughter, with a smile.

Nicholas followed the young lady, and was shown into a small apartment on the first floor, communicating with a back-room; in which, as he judged from a certain half-subdued clinking sound, as of cups and saucers, Miss Snevellicci was then taking her breakfast in bed.

'You're to wait, if you please,' said the tailor's daughter, after a short period of absence, during which the clinking in the back-room had ceased, and been succeeded by whispering - 'She won't be long.'

As she spoke, she pulled up the window-blind, and having by this means (as she thought) diverted Mr Johnson's attention from the room to the street, caught up some articles which were airing on the fender, and had very much the appearance of stockings, and darted off.

As there were not many objects of interest outside the window, Nicholas looked about the room with more curiosity than he might otherwise have bestowed upon it. On the sofa lay an old guitar, several thumbed pieces of music, and a scattered litter of curl-papers; together with a confused heap of play-bills, and a pair of soiled white satin shoes with large blue rosettes. Hanging over the back of a chair was a half-finished muslin apron with little pockets ornamented with red ribbons, such as waiting-women wear on the stage, and (by consequence) are never seen with anywhere else. In one corner stood the diminutive pair of top-boots in which Miss Snevellicci was accustomed to enact the little jockey, and, folded on a chair hard by,

was a small parcel, which bore a very suspicious resemblance to the companion smalls.

But the most interesting object of all was, perhaps, the open scrapbook, displayed in the midst of some theatrical duodecimos that were strewn upon the table; and pasted into which scrapbook were various critical notices of Miss Snevellicci's acting, extracted from different provincial journals, together with one poetic address in her honour, commencing -

Sing, God of Love, and tell me in what dearth Thrice-gifted SNEVELLICCI came on earth, To thrill us with her smile, her tear, her eye, Sing, God of Love, and tell me quickly why.

Besides this effusion, there were innumerable complimentary allusions, also extracted from newspapers, such as - 'We observe from an advertisement in another part of our paper of today, that the charming and highly-talented Miss Snevellicci takes her benefit on Wednesday, for which occasion she has put forth a bill of fare that might kindle exhilaration in the breast of a misanthrope. In the confidence that our fellow-townsmen have not lost that high appreciation of public utility and private worth, for which they have long been so pre-eminently distinguished, we predict that this charming actress will be greeted with a bumper.' 'To Correspondents. - J.S. is misinformed when he supposes that the highly-gifted and beautiful Miss Snevellicci, nightly captivating all hearts at our pretty and commodious little theatre, is NOT the same lady to whom the young gentleman of immense fortune, residing within a hundred miles of the good city of York, lately made honourable proposals. We have reason to know that Miss Snevellicci IS the lady who was implicated in that mysterious and romantic affair, and whose conduct on that occasion did no less honour to her head and heart, than do her histrionic triumphs to her brilliant genius.' A copious assortment of such paragraphs as these, with long bills of benefits all ending with 'Come Early', in large capitals, formed the principal contents of Miss Snevellicci's scrapbook.

Nicholas had read a great many of these scraps, and was absorbed in a circumstantial and melancholy account of the train of events which had led to Miss Snevellicci's spraining her ankle by slipping on a piece of orange-peel flung by a monster in human form, (so the paper said,) upon the stage at Winchester, - when that young lady herself, attired in the coal-scuttle bonnet and walking-dress complete, tripped into the room, with a thousand apologies for having detained him so long after the appointed time.

'But really,' said Miss Snevellicci, 'my darling Led, who lives with me here, was taken so very ill in the night that I thought she would have expired in my arms.'

'Such a fate is almost to be envied,' returned Nicholas, 'but I am very sorry to hear it nevertheless.'

'What a creature you are to flatter!' said Miss Snevellicci, buttoning her glove in much confusion.

'If it be flattery to admire your charms and accomplishments,' rejoined Nicholas, laying his hand upon the scrapbook, 'you have better specimens of it here.'

'Oh you cruel creature, to read such things as those! I'm almost ashamed to look you in the face afterwards, positively I am,' said Miss Snevellicci, seizing the book and putting it away in a closet. 'How careless of Led! How could she be so naughty!'

'I thought you had kindly left it here, on purpose for me to read,' said Nicholas. And really it did seem possible.

'I wouldn't have had you see it for the world!' rejoined Miss Snevellicci. 'I never was so vexed - never! But she is such a careless thing, there's no trusting her.'

The conversation was here interrupted by the entrance of the phenomenon, who had discreetly remained in the bedroom up to this moment, and now presented herself, with much grace and lightness, bearing in her hand a very little green parasol with a broad fringe border, and no handle. After a few words of course, they sallied into the street.

The phenomenon was rather a troublesome companion, for first the right sandal came down, and then the left, and these mischances being repaired, one leg of the little white trousers was discovered to be longer than the other; besides these accidents, the green parasol was dropped down an iron grating, and only fished up again with great difficulty and by dint of much exertion. However, it was impossible to scold her, as she was the manager's daughter, so Nicholas took it all in perfect good humour, and walked on, with Miss Snevellicci, arm-in-arm on one side, and the offending infant on the other.

The first house to which they bent their steps, was situated in a terrace of respectable appearance. Miss Snevellicci's modest double-knock was answered by a foot-boy, who, in reply to her inquiry whether Mrs Curdle was at home, opened his eyes very wide, grinned very much, and said he didn't know, but he'd inquire. With this he

showed them into a parlour where he kept them waiting, until the two women-servants had repaired thither, under false pretences, to see the play-actors; and having compared notes with them in the passage, and joined in a vast quantity of whispering and giggling, he at length went upstairs with Miss Snevellicci's name.

Now, Mrs Curdle was supposed, by those who were best informed on such points, to possess quite the London taste in matters relating to literature and the drama; and as to Mr Curdle, he had written a pamphlet of sixty-four pages, post octavo, on the character of the Nurse's deceased husband in Romeo and Juliet, with an inquiry whether he really had been a 'merry man' in his lifetime, or whether it was merely his widow's affectionate partiality that induced her so to report him. He had likewise proved, that by altering the received mode of punctuation, any one of Shakespeare's plays could be made quite different, and the sense completely changed; it is needless to say, therefore, that he was a great critic, and a very profound and most original thinker.

'Well, Miss Snevellicci,' said Mrs Curdle, entering the parlour, 'and how do YOU do?'

Miss Snevellicci made a graceful obeisance, and hoped Mrs Curdle was well, as also Mr Curdle, who at the same time appeared. Mrs Curdle was dressed in a morning wrapper, with a little cap stuck upon the top of her head. Mr Curdle wore a loose robe on his back, and his right forefinger on his forehead after the portraits of Sterne, to whom somebody or other had once said he bore a striking resemblance.

'I venture to call, for the purpose of asking whether you would put your name to my bespeak, ma'am,' said Miss Snevellicci, producing documents.

'Oh! I really don't know what to say,' replied Mrs Curdle. 'It's not as if the theatre was in its high and palmy days - you needn't stand, Miss Snevellicci - the drama is gone, perfectly gone.'

'As an exquisite embodiment of the poet's visions, and a realisation of human intellectuality, gilding with refulgent light our dreamy moments, and laying open a new and magic world before the mental eye, the drama is gone, perfectly gone,' said Mr Curdle.

'What man is there, now living, who can present before us all those changing and prismatic colours with which the character of Hamlet is invested?' exclaimed Mrs Curdle.

'What man indeed - upon the stage,' said Mr Curdle, with a small reservation in favour of himself. 'Hamlet! Pooh! ridiculous! Hamlet is gone, perfectly gone.'

Quite overcome by these dismal reflections, Mr and Mrs Curdle sighed, and sat for some short time without speaking. At length, the lady, turning to Miss Snevellicci, inquired what play she proposed to have.

'Quite a new one,' said Miss Snevellicci, 'of which this gentleman is the author, and in which he plays; being his first appearance on any stage. Mr Johnson is the gentleman's name.'

'I hope you have preserved the unities, sir?' said Mr Curdle.

'The original piece is a French one,' said Nicholas. 'There is abundance of incident, sprightly dialogue, strongly-marked characters - '

' - All unavailing without a strict observance of the unities, sir,' returned Mr Curdle. 'The unities of the drama, before everything.'

'Might I ask you,' said Nicholas, hesitating between the respect he ought to assume, and his love of the whimsical, 'might I ask you what the unities are?'

Mr Curdle coughed and considered. 'The unities, sir,' he said, 'are a completeness - a kind of universal dovetailedness with regard to place and time - a sort of a general oneness, if I may be allowed to use so strong an expression. I take those to be the dramatic unities, so far as I have been enabled to bestow attention upon them, and I have read much upon the subject, and thought much. I find, running through the performances of this child,' said Mr Curdle, turning to the phenomenon, 'a unity of feeling, a breadth, a light and shade, a warmth of colouring, a tone, a harmony, a glow, an artistical development of original conceptions, which I look for, in vain, among older performers - I don't know whether I make myself understood?'

'Perfectly,' replied Nicholas.

'Just so,' said Mr Curdle, pulling up his neckcloth. 'That is my definition of the unities of the drama.'

Mrs Curdle had sat listening to this lucid explanation with great complacency. It being finished, she inquired what Mr Curdle thought, about putting down their names.

'I don't know, my dear; upon my word I don't know,' said Mr Curdle. 'If we do, it must be distinctly understood that we do not pledge

ourselves to the quality of the performances. Let it go forth to the world, that we do not give THEM the sanction of our names, but that we confer the distinction merely upon Miss Snevellicci. That being clearly stated, I take it to be, as it were, a duty, that we should extend our patronage to a degraded stage, even for the sake of the associations with which it is entwined. Have you got two-and-sixpence for half-a-crown, Miss Snevellicci?' said Mr Curdle, turning over four of those pieces of money.

Miss Snevellicci felt in all the corners of the pink reticule, but there was nothing in any of them. Nicholas murmured a jest about his being an author, and thought it best not to go through the form of feeling in his own pockets at all.

'Let me see,' said Mr Curdle; 'twice four's eight - four shillings a-piece to the boxes, Miss Snevellicci, is exceedingly dear in the present state of the drama - three half-crowns is seven-and-six; we shall not differ about sixpence, I suppose? Sixpence will not part us, Miss Snevellicci?'

Poor Miss Snevellicci took the three half-crowns, with many smiles and bends, and Mrs Curdle, adding several supplementary directions relative to keeping the places for them, and dusting the seat, and sending two clean bills as soon as they came out, rang the bell, as a signal for breaking up the conference.

'Odd people those,' said Nicholas, when they got clear of the house.

'I assure you,' said Miss Snevellicci, taking his arm, 'that I think myself very lucky they did not owe all the money instead of being sixpence short. Now, if you were to succeed, they would give people to understand that they had always patronised you; and if you were to fail, they would have been quite certain of that from the very beginning.'

At the next house they visited, they were in great glory; for, there, resided the six children who were so enraptured with the public actions of the phenomenon, and who, being called down from the nursery to be treated with a private view of that young lady, proceeded to poke their fingers into her eyes, and tread upon her toes, and show her many other little attentions peculiar to their time of life.

'I shall certainly persuade Mr Borum to take a private box,' said the lady of the house, after a most gracious reception. 'I shall only take two of the children, and will make up the rest of the party, of gentlemen - your admirers, Miss Snevellicci. Augustus, you naughty boy, leave the little girl alone.'

This was addressed to a young gentleman who was pinching the phenomenon behind, apparently with a view of ascertaining whether she was real.

'I am sure you must be very tired,' said the mama, turning to Miss Snevellicci. 'I cannot think of allowing you to go, without first taking a glass of wine. Fie, Charlotte, I am ashamed of you! Miss Lane, my dear, pray see to the children.'

Miss Lane was the governess, and this entreaty was rendered necessary by the abrupt behaviour of the youngest Miss Borum, who, having filched the phenomenon's little green parasol, was now carrying it bodily off, while the distracted infant looked helplessly on.

'I am sure, where you ever learnt to act as you do,' said good-natured Mrs Borum, turning again to Miss Snevellicci, 'I cannot understand (Emma, don't stare so); laughing in one piece, and crying in the next, and so natural in all - oh, dear!'

'I am very happy to hear you express so favourable an opinion,' said Miss Snevellicci. 'It's quite delightful to think you like it.'

'Like it!' cried Mrs Borum. 'Who can help liking it? I would go to the play, twice a week if I could: I dote upon it - only you're too affecting sometimes. You do put me in such a state - into such fits of crying! Goodness gracious me, Miss Lane, how can you let them torment that poor child so!'

The phenomenon was really in a fair way of being torn limb from limb; for two strong little boys, one holding on by each of her hands, were dragging her in different directions as a trial of strength. However, Miss Lane (who had herself been too much occupied in contemplating the grown-up actors, to pay the necessary attention to these proceedings) rescued the unhappy infant at this juncture, who, being recruited with a glass of wine, was shortly afterwards taken away by her friends, after sustaining no more serious damage than a flattening of the pink gauze bonnet, and a rather extensive creasing of the white frock and trousers.

It was a trying morning; for there were a great many calls to make, and everybody wanted a different thing. Some wanted tragedies, and others comedies; some objected to dancing; some wanted scarcely anything else. Some thought the comic singer decidedly low, and others hoped he would have more to do than he usually had. Some people wouldn't promise to go, because other people wouldn't promise to go; and other people wouldn't go at all, because other people went. At length, and by little and little, omitting something in this place, and adding something in that, Miss Snevellicci pledged herself to a bill of

fare which was comprehensive enough, if it had no other merit (it included among other trifles, four pieces, divers songs, a few combats, and several dances); and they returned home, pretty well exhausted with the business of the day.

Nicholas worked away at the piece, which was speedily put into rehearsal, and then worked away at his own part, which he studied with great perseverance and acted - as the whole company said - to perfection. And at length the great day arrived. The crier was sent round, in the morning, to proclaim the entertainments with the sound of bell in all the thoroughfares; and extra bills of three feet long by nine inches wide, were dispersed in all directions, flung down all the areas, thrust under all the knockers, and developed in all the shops. They were placarded on all the walls too, though not with complete success, for an illiterate person having undertaken this office during the indisposition of the regular bill-sticker, a part were posted sideways, and the remainder upside down.

At half-past five, there was a rush of four people to the gallery-door; at a quarter before six, there were at least a dozen; at six o'clock the kicks were terrific; and when the elder Master Crummles opened the door, he was obliged to run behind it for his life. Fifteen shillings were taken by Mrs Grudden in the first ten minutes.

Behind the scenes, the same unwonted excitement prevailed. Miss Snevellicci was in such a perspiration that the paint would scarcely stay on her face. Mrs Crummles was so nervous that she could hardly remember her part. Miss Bravassa's ringlets came out of curl with the heat and anxiety; even Mr Crummles himself kept peeping through the hole in the curtain, and running back, every now and then, to announce that another man had come into the pit.

At last, the orchestra left off, and the curtain rose upon the new piece. The first scene, in which there was nobody particular, passed off calmly enough, but when Miss Snevellicci went on in the second, accompanied by the phenomenon as child, what a roar of applause broke out! The people in the Borum box rose as one man, waving their hats and handkerchiefs, and uttering shouts of 'Bravo!' Mrs Borum and the governess cast wreaths upon the stage, of which, some fluttered into the lamps, and one crowned the temples of a fat gentleman in the pit, who, looking eagerly towards the scene, remained unconscious of the honour; the tailor and his family kicked at the panels of the upper boxes till they threatened to come out altogether; the very ginger-beer boy remained transfixed in the centre of the house; a young officer, supposed to entertain a passion for Miss Snevellicci, stuck his glass in his eye as though to hide a tear. Again and again Miss Snevellicci curtseyed lower and lower, and again and again the applause came down, louder and louder. At length, when

the phenomenon picked up one of the smoking wreaths and put it on, sideways, over Miss Snevellicci's eye, it reached its climax, and the play proceeded.

But when Nicholas came on for his crack scene with Mrs Crummles, what a clapping of hands there was! When Mrs Crummles (who was his unworthy mother), sneered, and called him 'presumptuous boy,' and he defied her, what a tumult of applause came on! When he quarrelled with the other gentleman about the young lady, and producing a case of pistols, said, that if he WAS a gentleman, he would fight him in that drawing-room, until the furniture was sprinkled with the blood of one, if not of two - how boxes, pit, and gallery, joined in one most vigorous cheer! When he called his mother names, because she wouldn't give up the young lady's property, and she relenting, caused him to relent likewise, and fall down on one knee and ask her blessing, how the ladies in the audience sobbed! When he was hid behind the curtain in the dark, and the wicked relation poked a sharp sword in every direction, save where his legs were plainly visible, what a thrill of anxious fear ran through the house! His air, his figure, his walk, his look, everything he said or did, was the subject of commendation. There was a round of applause every time he spoke. And when, at last, in the pump-and-tub scene, Mrs Grudden lighted the blue fire, and all the unemployed members of the company came in, and tumbled down in various directions - not because that had anything to do with the plot, but in order to finish off with a tableau - the audience (who had by this time increased considerably) gave vent to such a shout of enthusiasm as had not been heard in those walls for many and many a day.

In short, the success both of new piece and new actor was complete, and when Miss Snevellicci was called for at the end of the play, Nicholas led her on, and divided the applause.