

Chapter XXVI

Is fraught with some Danger to Miss Nickleby's Peace of Mind

The place was a handsome suite of private apartments in Regent Street; the time was three o'clock in the afternoon to the dull and plodding, and the first hour of morning to the gay and spirited; the persons were Lord Frederick Verisopht, and his friend Sir Mulberry Hawk.

These distinguished gentlemen were reclining listlessly on a couple of sofas, with a table between them, on which were scattered in rich confusion the materials of an untasted breakfast. Newspapers lay strewn about the room, but these, like the meal, were neglected and unnoticed; not, however, because any flow of conversation prevented the attractions of the journals from being called into request, for not a word was exchanged between the two, nor was any sound uttered, save when one, in tossing about to find an easier resting-place for his aching head, uttered an exclamation of impatience, and seemed for a moment to communicate a new restlessness to his companion. These appearances would in themselves have furnished a pretty strong clue to the extent of the debauch of the previous night, even if there had not been other indications of the amusements in which it had been passed. A couple of billiard balls, all mud and dirt, two battered hats, a champagne bottle with a soiled glove twisted round the neck, to allow of its being grasped more surely in its capacity of an offensive weapon; a broken cane; a card-case without the top; an empty purse; a watch-guard snapped asunder; a handful of silver, mingled with fragments of half-smoked cigars, and their stale and crumbled ashes; - these, and many other tokens of riot and disorder, hinted very intelligibly at the nature of last night's gentlemanly frolics.

Lord Frederick Verisopht was the first to speak. Dropping his slippered foot on the ground, and, yawning heavily, he struggled into a sitting posture, and turned his dull languid eyes towards his friend, to whom he called in a drowsy voice.

'Hallo!' replied Sir Mulberry, turning round.

'Are we going to lie here all da-a-y?' said the lord.

'I don't know that we're fit for anything else,' replied Sir Mulberry; 'yet awhile, at least. I haven't a grain of life in me this morning.'

'Life!' cried Lord Verisopht. 'I feel as if there would be nothing so snug and comfortable as to die at once.'

'Then why don't you die?' said Sir Mulberry.

With which inquiry he turned his face away, and seemed to occupy himself in an attempt to fall asleep.

His hopeful fiend and pupil drew a chair to the breakfast-table, and essayed to eat; but, finding that impossible, lounged to the window, then loitered up and down the room with his hand to his fevered head, and finally threw himself again on his sofa, and roused his friend once more.

'What the devil's the matter?' groaned Sir Mulberry, sitting upright on the couch.

Although Sir Mulberry said this with sufficient ill-humour, he did not seem to feel himself quite at liberty to remain silent; for, after stretching himself very often, and declaring with a shiver that it was 'infernal cold,' he made an experiment at the breakfast-table, and proving more successful in it than his less-seasoned friend, remained there.

'Suppose,' said Sir Mulberry, pausing with a morsel on the point of his fork, 'suppose we go back to the subject of little Nickleby, eh?'

'Which little Nickleby; the money-lender or the ga-a-l?' asked Lord Verisopht.

'You take me, I see,' replied Sir Mulberry. 'The girl, of course.'

'You promised me you'd find her out,' said Lord Verisopht.

'So I did,' rejoined his friend; 'but I have thought further of the matter since then. You distrust me in the business - you shall find her out yourself.'

'Na-ay,' remonstrated Lord Verisopht.

'But I say yes,' returned his friend. 'You shall find her out yourself. Don't think that I mean, when you can - I know as well as you that if I did, you could never get sight of her without me. No. I say you shall find her out - SHALL - and I'll put you in the way.'

'Now, curse me, if you ain't a real, deyvlish, downright, thorough-paced friend,' said the young lord, on whom this speech had produced a most reviving effect.

'I'll tell you how,' said Sir Mulberry. 'She was at that dinner as a bait for you.'

'No!' cried the young lord. 'What the dey - '

'As a bait for you,' repeated his friend; 'old Nickleby told me so himself.'

'What a fine old cock it is!' exclaimed Lord Verisopht; 'a noble rascal!'

'Yes,' said Sir Mulberry, 'he knew she was a smart little creature - '

'Smart!' interposed the young lord. 'Upon my soul, Hawk, she's a perfect beauty - a - a picture, a statue, a - a - upon my soul she is!'

'Well,' replied Sir Mulberry, shrugging his shoulders and manifesting an indifference, whether he felt it or not; 'that's a matter of taste; if mine doesn't agree with yours, so much the better.'

'Confound it!' reasoned the lord, 'you were thick enough with her that day, anyhow. I could hardly get in a word.'

'Well enough for once, well enough for once,' replied Sir Mulberry; 'but not worth the trouble of being agreeable to again. If you seriously want to follow up the niece, tell the uncle that you must know where she lives and how she lives, and with whom, or you are no longer a customer of his. He'll tell you fast enough.'

'Why didn't you say this before?' asked Lord Verisopht, 'instead of letting me go on burning, consuming, dragging out a miserable existence for an a-age!'

'I didn't know it, in the first place,' answered Sir Mulberry carelessly; 'and in the second, I didn't believe you were so very much in earnest.'

Now, the truth was, that in the interval which had elapsed since the dinner at Ralph Nickleby's, Sir Mulberry Hawk had been furtively trying by every means in his power to discover whence Kate had so suddenly appeared, and whither she had disappeared. Unassisted by Ralph, however, with whom he had held no communication since their angry parting on that occasion, all his efforts were wholly unavailing, and he had therefore arrived at the determination of communicating to the young lord the substance of the admission he had gleaned from that worthy. To this he was impelled by various considerations; among which the certainty of knowing whatever the weak young man knew was decidedly not the least, as the desire of encountering the usurer's niece again, and using his utmost arts to reduce her pride, and revenge himself for her contempt, was uppermost in his thoughts. It was a politic course of proceeding, and one which could not fail to redound to his advantage in every point of view, since the very circumstance of his having extorted from Ralph Nickleby his real design in introducing his niece to such society, coupled with his extreme disinterestedness in communicating it so freely to his friend,

could not but advance his interests in that quarter, and greatly facilitate the passage of coin (pretty frequent and speedy already) from the pockets of Lord Frederick Verisopht to those of Sir Mulberry Hawk.

Thus reasoned Sir Mulberry, and in pursuance of this reasoning he and his friend soon afterwards repaired to Ralph Nickleby's, there to execute a plan of operations concerted by Sir Mulberry himself, avowedly to promote his friend's object, and really to attain his own.

They found Ralph at home, and alone. As he led them into the drawing-room, the recollection of the scene which had taken place there seemed to occur to him, for he cast a curious look at Sir Mulberry, who bestowed upon it no other acknowledgment than a careless smile.

They had a short conference upon some money matters then in progress, which were scarcely disposed of when the lordly dupe (in pursuance of his friend's instructions) requested with some embarrassment to speak to Ralph alone.

'Alone, eh?' cried Sir Mulberry, affecting surprise. 'Oh, very good. I'll walk into the next room here. Don't keep me long, that's all.'

So saying, Sir Mulberry took up his hat, and humming a fragment of a song disappeared through the door of communication between the two drawing-rooms, and closed it after him.

'Now, my lord,' said Ralph, 'what is it?'

'Nickleby,' said his client, throwing himself along the sofa on which he had been previously seated, so as to bring his lips nearer to the old man's ear, 'what a pretty creature your niece is!'

'Is she, my lord?' replied Ralph. 'Maybe - maybe - I don't trouble my head with such matters.'

'You know she's a deyvlish fine girl,' said the client. 'You must know that, Nickleby. Come, don't deny that.'

'Yes, I believe she is considered so,' replied Ralph. 'Indeed, I know she is. If I did not, you are an authority on such points, and your taste, my lord - on all points, indeed - is undeniable.'

Nobody but the young man to whom these words were addressed could have been deaf to the sneering tone in which they were spoken, or blind to the look of contempt by which they were accompanied. But

Lord Frederick Verisopht was both, and took them to be complimentary.

'Well,' he said, 'p'raps you're a little right, and p'raps you're a little wrong - a little of both, Nickleby. I want to know where this beauty lives, that I may have another peep at her, Nickleby.'

'Really - ' Ralph began in his usual tones.

'Don't talk so loud,' cried the other, achieving the great point of his lesson to a miracle. 'I don't want Hawk to hear.'

'You know he is your rival, do you?' said Ralph, looking sharply at him.

'He always is, d-a-amn him,' replied the client; 'and I want to steal a march upon him. Ha, ha, ha! He'll cut up so rough, Nickleby, at our talking together without him. Where does she live, Nickleby, that's all? Only tell me where she lives, Nickleby.'

'He bites,' thought Ralph. 'He bites.'

'Eh, Nickleby, eh?' pursued the client. 'Where does she live?'

'Really, my lord,' said Ralph, rubbing his hands slowly over each other, 'I must think before I tell you.'

'No, not a bit of it, Nickleby; you mustn't think at all,' replied Verisopht. 'Where is it?'

'No good can come of your knowing,' replied Ralph. 'She has been virtuously and well brought up; to be sure she is handsome, poor, unprotected! Poor girl, poor girl.'

Ralph ran over this brief summary of Kate's condition as if it were merely passing through his own mind, and he had no intention to speak aloud; but the shrewd sly look which he directed at his companion as he delivered it, gave this poor assumption the lie.

'I tell you I only want to see her,' cried his client. 'A ma-an may look at a pretty woman without harm, mayn't he? Now, where DOES she live? You know you're making a fortune out of me, Nickleby, and upon my soul nobody shall ever take me to anybody else, if you only tell me this.'

'As you promise that, my lord,' said Ralph, with feigned reluctance, 'and as I am most anxious to oblige you, and as there's no harm in it - no harm - I'll tell you. But you had better keep it to yourself, my lord;

strictly to yourself.' Ralph pointed to the adjoining room as he spoke, and nodded expressively.

The young lord, feigning to be equally impressed with the necessity of this precaution, Ralph disclosed the present address and occupation of his niece, observing that from what he heard of the family they appeared very ambitious to have distinguished acquaintances, and that a lord could, doubtless, introduce himself with great ease, if he felt disposed.

'Your object being only to see her again,' said Ralph, 'you could effect it at any time you chose by that means.'

Lord Verisopht acknowledged the hint with a great many squeezes of Ralph's hard, horny hand, and whispering that they would now do well to close the conversation, called to Sir Mulberry Hawk that he might come back.

'I thought you had gone to sleep,' said Sir Mulberry, reappearing with an ill-tempered air.

'Sorry to detain you,' replied the gull; 'but Nickleby has been so amazingly funny that I couldn't tear myself away.'

'No, no,' said Ralph; 'it was all his lordship. You know what a witty, humorous, elegant, accomplished man Lord Frederick is. Mind the step, my lord - Sir Mulberry, pray give way.'

With such courtesies as these, and many low bows, and the same cold sneer upon his face all the while, Ralph busied himself in showing his visitors downstairs, and otherwise than by the slightest possible motion about the corners of his mouth, returned no show of answer to the look of admiration with which Sir Mulberry Hawk seemed to compliment him on being such an accomplished and most consummate scoundrel.

There had been a ring at the bell a few minutes before, which was answered by Newman Noggs just as they reached the hall. In the ordinary course of business Newman would have either admitted the new-comer in silence, or have requested him or her to stand aside while the gentlemen passed out. But he no sooner saw who it was, than as if for some private reason of his own, he boldly departed from the established custom of Ralph's mansion in business hours, and looking towards the respectable trio who were approaching, cried in a loud and sonorous voice, 'Mrs Nickleby!'

'Mrs Nickleby!' cried Sir Mulberry Hawk, as his friend looked back, and stared him in the face.

It was, indeed, that well-intentioned lady, who, having received an offer for the empty house in the city directed to the landlord, had brought it post-haste to Mr Nickleby without delay.

'Nobody YOU know,' said Ralph. 'Step into the office, my - my - dear. I'll be with you directly.'

'Nobody I know!' cried Sir Mulberry Hawk, advancing to the astonished lady. 'Is this Mrs Nickleby - the mother of Miss Nickleby - the delightful creature that I had the happiness of meeting in this house the very last time I dined here? But no;' said Sir Mulberry, stopping short. 'No, it can't be. There is the same cast of features, the same indescribable air of - But no; no. This lady is too young for that.'

'I think you can tell the gentleman, brother-in-law, if it concerns him to know,' said Mrs Nickleby, acknowledging the compliment with a graceful bend, 'that Kate Nickleby is my daughter.'

'Her daughter, my lord!' cried Sir Mulberry, turning to his friend. 'This lady's daughter, my lord.'

'My lord!' thought Mrs Nickleby. 'Well, I never did - '

'This, then, my lord,' said Sir Mulberry, 'is the lady to whose obliging marriage we owe so much happiness. This lady is the mother of sweet Miss Nickleby. Do you observe the extraordinary likeness, my lord? Nickleby - introduce us.'

Ralph did so, in a kind of desperation.

'Upon my soul, it's a most delightful thing,' said Lord Frederick, pressing forward. 'How de do?'

Mrs Nickleby was too much flurried by these uncommonly kind salutations, and her regrets at not having on her other bonnet, to make any immediate reply, so she merely continued to bend and smile, and betray great agitation.

'A - and how is Miss Nickleby?' said Lord Frederick. 'Well, I hope?'

'She is quite well, I'm obliged to you, my lord,' returned Mrs Nickleby, recovering. 'Quite well. She wasn't well for some days after that day she dined here, and I can't help thinking, that she caught cold in that hackney coach coming home. Hackney coaches, my lord, are such nasty things, that it's almost better to walk at any time, for although I believe a hackney coachman can be transported for life, if he has a broken window, still they are so reckless, that they nearly all have broken windows. I once had a swelled face for six weeks, my lord,

from riding in a hackney coach - I think it was a hackney coach,' said Mrs Nickleby reflecting, 'though I'm not quite certain whether it wasn't a chariot; at all events I know it was a dark green, with a very long number, beginning with a nought and ending with a nine - no, beginning with a nine, and ending with a nought, that was it, and of course the stamp-office people would know at once whether it was a coach or a chariot if any inquiries were made there - however that was, there it was with a broken window and there was I for six weeks with a swelled face - I think that was the very same hackney coach, that we found out afterwards, had the top open all the time, and we should never even have known it, if they hadn't charged us a shilling an hour extra for having it open, which it seems is the law, or was then, and a most shameful law it appears to be - I don't understand the subject, but I should say the Corn Laws could be nothing to THAT act of Parliament.'

Having pretty well run herself out by this time, Mrs Nickleby stopped as suddenly as she had started off; and repeated that Kate was quite well. 'Indeed,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'I don't think she ever was better, since she had the hooping-cough, scarlet-fever, and measles, all at the same time, and that's the fact.'

'Is that letter for me?' growled Ralph, pointing to the little packet Mrs Nickleby held in her hand.

'For you, brother-in-law,' replied Mrs Nickleby, 'and I walked all the way up here on purpose to give it you.'

'All the way up here!' cried Sir Mulberry, seizing upon the chance of discovering where Mrs Nickleby had come from. 'What a confounded distance! How far do you call it now?'

'How far do I call it?' said Mrs Nickleby. 'Let me see. It's just a mile from our door to the Old Bailey.'

'No, no. Not so much as that,' urged Sir Mulberry.

'Oh! It is indeed,' said Mrs Nickleby. 'I appeal to his lordship.'

'I should decidedly say it was a mile,' remarked Lord Frederick, with a solemn aspect.

'It must be; it can't be a yard less,' said Mrs Nickleby. 'All down Newgate Street, all down Cheapside, all up Lombard Street, down Gracechurch Street, and along Thames Street, as far as Spigwiffin's Wharf. Oh! It's a mile.'

'Yes, on second thoughts I should say it was,' replied Sir Mulberry. 'But you don't surely mean to walk all the way back?'

'Oh, no,' rejoined Mrs Nickleby. 'I shall go back in an omnibus. I didn't travel about in omnibuses, when my poor dear Nicholas was alive, brother-in-law. But as it is, you know - '

'Yes, yes,' replied Ralph impatiently, 'and you had better get back before dark.'

'Thank you, brother-in-law, so I had,' returned Mrs Nickleby. 'I think I had better say goodbye, at once.'

'Not stop and - rest?' said Ralph, who seldom offered refreshments unless something was to be got by it.

'Oh dear me no,' returned Mrs Nickleby, glancing at the dial.

'Lord Frederick,' said Sir Mulberry, 'we are going Mrs Nickleby's way. We'll see her safe to the omnibus?'

'By all means. Ye-es.'

'Oh! I really couldn't think of it!' said Mrs Nickleby.

But Sir Mulberry Hawk and Lord Verisopht were peremptory in their politeness, and leaving Ralph, who seemed to think, not unwisely, that he looked less ridiculous as a mere spectator, than he would have done if he had taken any part in these proceedings, they quitted the house with Mrs Nickleby between them; that good lady in a perfect ecstasy of satisfaction, no less with the attentions shown her by two titled gentlemen, than with the conviction that Kate might now pick and choose, at least between two large fortunes, and most unexceptionable husbands.

As she was carried away for the moment by an irresistible train of thought, all connected with her daughter's future greatness, Sir Mulberry Hawk and his friend exchanged glances over the top of the bonnet which the poor lady so much regretted not having left at home, and proceeded to dilate with great rapture, but much respect on the manifold perfections of Miss Nickleby.

'What a delight, what a comfort, what a happiness, this amiable creature must be to you,' said Sir Mulberry, throwing into his voice an indication of the warmest feeling.

'She is indeed, sir,' replied Mrs Nickleby; 'she is the sweetest-tempered, kindest-hearted creature - and so clever!'

'She looks clayver,' said Lord Verisopht, with the air of a judge of cleverness.

'I assure you she is, my lord,' returned Mrs Nickleby. 'When she was at school in Devonshire, she was universally allowed to be beyond all exception the very cleverest girl there, and there were a great many very clever ones too, and that's the truth - twenty-five young ladies, fifty guineas a year without the et-ceteras, both the Miss Dowdles the most accomplished, elegant, fascinating creatures - Oh dear me!' said Mrs Nickleby, 'I never shall forget what pleasure she used to give me and her poor dear papa, when she was at that school, never - such a delightful letter every half-year, telling us that she was the first pupil in the whole establishment, and had made more progress than anybody else! I can scarcely bear to think of it even now. The girls wrote all the letters themselves,' added Mrs Nickleby, 'and the writing-master touched them up afterwards with a magnifying glass and a silver pen; at least I think they wrote them, though Kate was never quite certain about that, because she didn't know the handwriting of hers again; but anyway, I know it was a circular which they all copied, and of course it was a very gratifying thing - very gratifying.'

With similar recollections Mrs Nickleby beguiled the tediousness of the way, until they reached the omnibus, which the extreme politeness of her new friends would not allow them to leave until it actually started, when they took their hats, as Mrs Nickleby solemnly assured her hearers on many subsequent occasions, 'completely off,' and kissed their straw-coloured kid gloves till they were no longer visible.

Mrs Nickleby leant back in the furthest corner of the conveyance, and, closing her eyes, resigned herself to a host of most pleasing meditations. Kate had never said a word about having met either of these gentlemen; 'that,' she thought, 'argues that she is strongly prepossessed in favour of one of them.' Then the question arose, which one could it be. The lord was the youngest, and his title was certainly the grandest; still Kate was not the girl to be swayed by such considerations as these. 'I will never put any constraint upon her inclinations,' said Mrs Nickleby to herself; 'but upon my word I think there's no comparison between his lordship and Sir Mulberry - Sir Mulberry is such an attentive gentlemanly creature, so much manner, such a fine man, and has so much to say for himself. I hope it's Sir Mulberry - I think it must be Sir Mulberry!' And then her thoughts flew back to her old predictions, and the number of times she had said, that Kate with no fortune would marry better than other people's daughters with thousands; and, as she pictured with the brightness of a mother's fancy all the beauty and grace of the poor girl who had struggled so cheerfully with her new life of hardship and trial, her heart grew too full, and the tears trickled down her face.

Meanwhile, Ralph walked to and fro in his little back-office, troubled in mind by what had just occurred. To say that Ralph loved or cared for - in the most ordinary acceptation of those terms - any one of God's creatures, would be the wildest fiction. Still, there had somehow stolen upon him from time to time a thought of his niece which was tinged with compassion and pity; breaking through the dull cloud of dislike or indifference which darkened men and women in his eyes, there was, in her case, the faintest gleam of light - a most feeble and sickly ray at the best of times - but there it was, and it showed the poor girl in a better and purer aspect than any in which he had looked on human nature yet.

'I wish,' thought Ralph, 'I had never done this. And yet it will keep this boy to me, while there is money to be made. Selling a girl - throwing her in the way of temptation, and insult, and coarse speech. Nearly two thousand pounds profit from him already though. Pshaw! match-making mothers do the same thing every day.'

He sat down, and told the chances, for and against, on his fingers.

'If I had not put them in the right track today,' thought Ralph, 'this foolish woman would have done so. Well. If her daughter is as true to herself as she should be from what I have seen, what harm ensues? A little teasing, a little humbling, a few tears. Yes,' said Ralph, aloud, as he locked his iron safe. 'She must take her chance. She must take her chance.'