

## Chapter XXIX

### Of the Proceedings of Nicholas, and certain Internal Divisions in the Company of Mr Vincent Crummles

The unexpected success and favour with which his experiment at Portsmouth had been received, induced Mr Crummles to prolong his stay in that town for a fortnight beyond the period he had originally assigned for the duration of his visit, during which time Nicholas personated a vast variety of characters with undiminished success, and attracted so many people to the theatre who had never been seen there before, that a benefit was considered by the manager a very promising speculation. Nicholas assenting to the terms proposed, the benefit was had, and by it he realised no less a sum than twenty pounds.

Possessed of this unexpected wealth, his first act was to enclose to honest John Browdie the amount of his friendly loan, which he accompanied with many expressions of gratitude and esteem, and many cordial wishes for his matrimonial happiness. To Newman Noggs he forwarded one half of the sum he had realised, entreating him to take an opportunity of handing it to Kate in secret, and conveying to her the warmest assurances of his love and affection. He made no mention of the way in which he had employed himself; merely informing Newman that a letter addressed to him under his assumed name at the Post Office, Portsmouth, would readily find him, and entreating that worthy friend to write full particulars of the situation of his mother and sister, and an account of all the grand things that Ralph Nickleby had done for them since his departure from London.

'You are out of spirits,' said Smike, on the night after the letter had been dispatched.

'Not I!' rejoined Nicholas, with assumed gaiety, for the confession would have made the boy miserable all night; 'I was thinking about my sister, Smike.'

'Sister!'

'Ay.'

'Is she like you?' inquired Smike.

'Why, so they say,' replied Nicholas, laughing, 'only a great deal handsomer.'

'She must be VERY beautiful,' said Smike, after thinking a little while with his hands folded together, and his eyes bent upon his friend.

'Anybody who didn't know you as well as I do, my dear fellow, would say you were an accomplished courtier,' said Nicholas.

'I don't even know what that is,' replied Smike, shaking his head. 'Shall I ever see your sister?'

'To be sure,' cried Nicholas; 'we shall all be together one of these days - when we are rich, Smike.'

'How is it that you, who are so kind and good to me, have nobody to be kind to you?' asked Smike. 'I cannot make that out.'

'Why, it is a long story,' replied Nicholas, 'and one you would have some difficulty in comprehending, I fear. I have an enemy - you understand what that is?'

'Oh, yes, I understand that,' said Smike.

'Well, it is owing to him,' returned Nicholas. 'He is rich, and not so easily punished as YOUR old enemy, Mr Squeers. He is my uncle, but he is a villain, and has done me wrong.'

'Has he though?' asked Smike, bending eagerly forward. 'What is his name? Tell me his name.'

'Ralph - Ralph Nickleby.' 'Ralph Nickleby,' repeated Smike. 'Ralph. I'll get that name by heart.'

He had muttered it over to himself some twenty times, when a loud knock at the door disturbed him from his occupation. Before he could open it, Mr Folair, the pantomimist, thrust in his head.

Mr Folair's head was usually decorated with a very round hat, unusually high in the crown, and curled up quite tight in the brims. On the present occasion he wore it very much on one side, with the back part forward in consequence of its being the least rusty; round his neck he wore a flaming red worsted comforter, whereof the straggling ends peeped out beneath his threadbare Newmarket coat, which was very tight and buttoned all the way up. He carried in his hand one very dirty glove, and a cheap dress cane with a glass handle; in short, his whole appearance was unusually dashing, and demonstrated a far more scrupulous attention to his toilet than he was in the habit of bestowing upon it.

'Good-evening, sir,' said Mr Folair, taking off the tall hat, and running his fingers through his hair. 'I bring a communication. Hem!'

'From whom and what about?' inquired Nicholas. 'You are unusually mysterious tonight.'

'Cold, perhaps,' returned Mr Folair; 'cold, perhaps. That is the fault of my position - not of myself, Mr Johnson. My position as a mutual friend requires it, sir.' Mr Folair paused with a most impressive look, and diving into the hat before noticed, drew from thence a small piece of whity-brown paper curiously folded, whence he brought forth a note which it had served to keep clean, and handing it over to Nicholas, said -

'Have the goodness to read that, sir.'

Nicholas, in a state of much amazement, took the note and broke the seal, glancing at Mr Folair as he did so, who, knitting his brow and pursing up his mouth with great dignity, was sitting with his eyes steadily fixed upon the ceiling.

It was directed to blank Johnson, Esq., by favour of Augustus Folair, Esq.; and the astonishment of Nicholas was in no degree lessened, when he found it to be couched in the following laconic terms: -

'Mr Lenville presents his kind regards to Mr Johnson, and will feel obliged if he will inform him at what hour tomorrow morning it will be most convenient to him to meet Mr L. at the Theatre, for the purpose of having his nose pulled in the presence of the company.

'Mr Lenville requests Mr Johnson not to neglect making an appointment, as he has invited two or three professional friends to witness the ceremony, and cannot disappoint them upon any account whatever.

'PORTSMOUTH, TUESDAY NIGHT.'

Indignant as he was at this impertinence, there was something so exquisitely absurd in such a cartel of defiance, that Nicholas was obliged to bite his lip and read the note over two or three times before he could muster sufficient gravity and sternness to address the hostile messenger, who had not taken his eyes from the ceiling, nor altered the expression of his face in the slightest degree.

'Do you know the contents of this note, sir?' he asked, at length.

'Yes,' rejoined Mr Folair, looking round for an instant, and immediately carrying his eyes back again to the ceiling.

'And how dare you bring it here, sir?' asked Nicholas, tearing it into very little pieces, and jerking it in a shower towards the messenger. 'Had you no fear of being kicked downstairs, sir?'

Mr Folair turned his head - now ornamented with several fragments of the note - towards Nicholas, and with the same imperturbable dignity, briefly replied 'No.'

'Then,' said Nicholas, taking up the tall hat and tossing it towards the door, 'you had better follow that article of your dress, sir, or you may find yourself very disagreeably deceived, and that within a dozen seconds.'

'I say, Johnson,' remonstrated Mr Folair, suddenly losing all his dignity, 'none of that, you know. No tricks with a gentleman's wardrobe.'

'Leave the room,' returned Nicholas. 'How could you presume to come here on such an errand, you scoundrel?'

'Pooh! pooh!' said Mr Folair, unwinding his comforter, and gradually getting himself out of it. 'There - that's enough.'

'Enough!' cried Nicholas, advancing towards him. 'Take yourself off, sir.'

'Pooh! pooh! I tell you,' returned Mr Folair, waving his hand in deprecation of any further wrath; 'I wasn't in earnest. I only brought it in joke.'

'You had better be careful how you indulge in such jokes again,' said Nicholas, 'or you may find an allusion to pulling noses rather a dangerous reminder for the subject of your facetiousness. Was it written in joke, too, pray?'

'No, no, that's the best of it,' returned the actor; 'right down earnest - honour bright.'

Nicholas could not repress a smile at the odd figure before him, which, at all times more calculated to provoke mirth than anger, was especially so at that moment, when with one knee upon the ground, Mr Folair twirled his old hat round upon his hand, and affected the extremest agony lest any of the nap should have been knocked off - an ornament which it is almost superfluous to say, it had not boasted for many months.

'Come, sir,' said Nicholas, laughing in spite of himself. 'Have the goodness to explain.'

'Why, I'll tell you how it is,' said Mr Folair, sitting himself down in a chair with great coolness. 'Since you came here Lenville has done nothing but second business, and, instead of having a reception every night as he used to have, they have let him come on as if he was nobody.'

'What do you mean by a reception?' asked Nicholas.

'Jupiter!' exclaimed Mr Folair, 'what an unsophisticated shepherd you are, Johnson! Why, applause from the house when you first come on. So he has gone on night after night, never getting a hand, and you getting a couple of rounds at least, and sometimes three, till at length he got quite desperate, and had half a mind last night to play Tybalt with a real sword, and pink you - not dangerously, but just enough to lay you up for a month or two.'

'Very considerate,' remarked Nicholas.

'Yes, I think it was under the circumstances; his professional reputation being at stake,' said Mr Folair, quite seriously. 'But his heart failed him, and he cast about for some other way of annoying you, and making himself popular at the same time - for that's the point. Notoriety, notoriety, is the thing. Bless you, if he had pinked you,' said Mr Folair, stopping to make a calculation in his mind, 'it would have been worth - ah, it would have been worth eight or ten shillings a week to him. All the town would have come to see the actor who nearly killed a man by mistake; I shouldn't wonder if it had got him an engagement in London. However, he was obliged to try some other mode of getting popular, and this one occurred to him. It's clever idea, really. If you had shown the white feather, and let him pull your nose, he'd have got it into the paper; if you had sworn the peace against him, it would have been in the paper too, and he'd have been just as much talked about as you - don't you see?'

'Oh, certainly,' rejoined Nicholas; 'but suppose I were to turn the tables, and pull HIS nose, what then? Would that make his fortune?'

'Why, I don't think it would,' replied Mr Folair, scratching his head, 'because there wouldn't be any romance about it, and he wouldn't be favourably known. To tell you the truth though, he didn't calculate much upon that, for you're always so mild-spoken, and are so popular among the women, that we didn't suspect you of showing fight. If you did, however, he has a way of getting out of it easily, depend upon that.'

'Has he?' rejoined Nicholas. 'We will try, tomorrow morning. In the meantime, you can give whatever account of our interview you like best. Good-night.'

As Mr Folair was pretty well known among his fellow-actors for a man who delighted in mischief, and was by no means scrupulous, Nicholas had not much doubt but that he had secretly prompted the tragedian in the course he had taken, and, moreover, that he would have carried his mission with a very high hand if he had not been disconcerted by the very unexpected demonstrations with which it had been received. It was not worth his while to be serious with him, however, so he dismissed the pantomimist, with a gentle hint that if he offended again it would be under the penalty of a broken head; and Mr Folair, taking the caution in exceedingly good part, walked away to confer with his principal, and give such an account of his proceedings as he might think best calculated to carry on the joke.

He had no doubt reported that Nicholas was in a state of extreme bodily fear; for when that young gentleman walked with much deliberation down to the theatre next morning at the usual hour, he found all the company assembled in evident expectation, and Mr Lenville, with his severest stage face, sitting majestically on a table, whistling defiance.

Now the ladies were on the side of Nicholas, and the gentlemen (being jealous) were on the side of the disappointed tragedian; so that the latter formed a little group about the redoubtable Mr Lenville, and the former looked on at a little distance in some trepidation and anxiety. On Nicholas stopping to salute them, Mr Lenville laughed a scornful laugh, and made some general remark touching the natural history of puppies.

'Oh!' said Nicholas, looking quietly round, 'are you there?'

'Slave!' returned Mr Lenville, flourishing his right arm, and approaching Nicholas with a theatrical stride. But somehow he appeared just at that moment a little startled, as if Nicholas did not look quite so frightened as he had expected, and came all at once to an awkward halt, at which the assembled ladies burst into a shrill laugh.

'Object of my scorn and hatred!' said Mr Lenville, 'I hold ye in contempt.'

Nicholas laughed in very unexpected enjoyment of this performance; and the ladies, by way of encouragement, laughed louder than before; whereat Mr Lenville assumed his bitterest smile, and expressed his opinion that they were 'minions'.

'But they shall not protect ye!' said the tragedian, taking an upward look at Nicholas, beginning at his boots and ending at the crown of his head, and then a downward one, beginning at the crown of his head,

and ending at his boots - which two looks, as everybody knows, express defiance on the stage. 'They shall not protect ye - boy!'

Thus speaking, Mr Lenville folded his arms, and treated Nicholas to that expression of face with which, in melodramatic performances, he was in the habit of regarding the tyrannical kings when they said, 'Away with him to the deepest dungeon beneath the castle moat;' and which, accompanied with a little jingling of fetters, had been known to produce great effects in its time.

Whether it was the absence of the fetters or not, it made no very deep impression on Mr Lenville's adversary, however, but rather seemed to increase the good-humour expressed in his countenance; in which stage of the contest, one or two gentlemen, who had come out expressly to witness the pulling of Nicholas's nose, grew impatient, murmuring that if it were to be done at all it had better be done at once, and that if Mr Lenville didn't mean to do it he had better say so, and not keep them waiting there. Thus urged, the tragedian adjusted the cuff of his right coat sleeve for the performance of the operation, and walked in a very stately manner up to Nicholas, who suffered him to approach to within the requisite distance, and then, without the smallest discomposure, knocked him down.

Before the discomfited tragedian could raise his head from the boards, Mrs Lenville (who, as has been before hinted, was in an interesting state) rushed from the rear rank of ladies, and uttering a piercing scream threw herself upon the body.

'Do you see this, monster? Do you see THIS?' cried Mr Lenville, sitting up, and pointing to his prostrate lady, who was holding him very tight round the waist.

'Come,' said Nicholas, nodding his head, 'apologise for the insolent note you wrote to me last night, and waste no more time in talking.'

'Never!' cried Mr Lenville.

'Yes - yes - yes!' screamed his wife. 'For my sake - for mine, Lenville - forego all idle forms, unless you would see me a blighted corse at your feet.'

'This is affecting!' said Mr Lenville, looking round him, and drawing the back of his hand across his eyes. 'The ties of nature are strong. The weak husband and the father - the father that is yet to be - relents. I apologise.'

'Humbly and submissively?' said Nicholas.

'Humbly and submissively,' returned the tragedian, scowling upwards. 'But only to save her, - for a time will come - '

'Very good,' said Nicholas; 'I hope Mrs Lenville may have a good one; and when it does come, and you are a father, you shall retract it if you have the courage. There. Be careful, sir, to what lengths your jealousy carries you another time; and be careful, also, before you venture too far, to ascertain your rival's temper.' With this parting advice Nicholas picked up Mr Lenville's ash stick which had flown out of his hand, and breaking it in half, threw him the pieces and withdrew, bowing slightly to the spectators as he walked out.

The profoundest deference was paid to Nicholas that night, and the people who had been most anxious to have his nose pulled in the morning, embraced occasions of taking him aside, and telling him with great feeling, how very friendly they took it that he should have treated that Lenville so properly, who was a most unbearable fellow, and on whom they had all, by a remarkable coincidence, at one time or other contemplated the infliction of condign punishment, which they had only been restrained from administering by considerations of mercy; indeed, to judge from the invariable termination of all these stories, there never was such a charitable and kind-hearted set of people as the male members of Mr Crummles's company.

Nicholas bore his triumph, as he had his success in the little world of the theatre, with the utmost moderation and good humour. The crestfallen Mr Lenville made an expiring effort to obtain revenge by sending a boy into the gallery to hiss, but he fell a sacrifice to popular indignation, and was promptly turned out without having his money back.

'Well, Smike,' said Nicholas when the first piece was over, and he had almost finished dressing to go home, 'is there any letter yet?'

'Yes,' replied Smike, 'I got this one from the post-office.'

'From Newman Noggs,' said Nicholas, casting his eye upon the cramped direction; 'it's no easy matter to make his writing out. Let me see - let me see.'

By dint of poring over the letter for half an hour, he contrived to make himself master of the contents, which were certainly not of a nature to set his mind at ease. Newman took upon himself to send back the ten pounds, observing that he had ascertained that neither Mrs Nickleby nor Kate was in actual want of money at the moment, and that a time might shortly come when Nicholas might want it more. He entreated him not to be alarmed at what he was about to say; - there was no bad news - they were in good health - but he thought circumstances

might occur, or were occurring, which would render it absolutely necessary that Kate should have her brother's protection, and if so, Newman said, he would write to him to that effect, either by the next post or the next but one.

Nicholas read this passage very often, and the more he thought of it the more he began to fear some treachery upon the part of Ralph. Once or twice he felt tempted to repair to London at all hazards without an hour's delay, but a little reflection assured him that if such a step were necessary, Newman would have spoken out and told him so at once.

'At all events I should prepare them here for the possibility of my going away suddenly,' said Nicholas; 'I should lose no time in doing that.' As the thought occurred to him, he took up his hat and hurried to the green-room.

'Well, Mr Johnson,' said Mrs Crummles, who was seated there in full regal costume, with the phenomenon as the Maiden in her maternal arms, 'next week for Ryde, then for Winchester, then for - '

'I have some reason to fear,' interrupted Nicholas, 'that before you leave here my career with you will have closed.'

'Closed!' cried Mrs Crummles, raising her hands in astonishment.

'Closed!' cried Miss Snellicci, trembling so much in her tights that she actually laid her hand upon the shoulder of the manageress for support.

'Why he don't mean to say he's going!' exclaimed Mrs Grudden, making her way towards Mrs Crummles. 'Hoity toity! Nonsense.'

The phenomenon, being of an affectionate nature and moreover excitable, raised a loud cry, and Miss Belvawney and Miss Bravassa actually shed tears. Even the male performers stopped in their conversation, and echoed the word 'Going!' although some among them (and they had been the loudest in their congratulations that day) winked at each other as though they would not be sorry to lose such a favoured rival; an opinion, indeed, which the honest Mr Folair, who was ready dressed for the savage, openly stated in so many words to a demon with whom he was sharing a pot of porter.

Nicholas briefly said that he feared it would be so, although he could not yet speak with any degree of certainty; and getting away as soon as he could, went home to con Newman's letter once more, and speculate upon it afresh.

How trifling all that had been occupying his time and thoughts for many weeks seemed to him during that sleepless night, and how constantly and incessantly present to his imagination was the one idea that Kate in the midst of some great trouble and distress might even then be looking - and vainly too - for him!