

Chapter XXX

Festivities are held in honour of Nicholas, who suddenly withdraws himself from the Society of Mr Vincent Crummles and his Theatrical Companions

Mr Vincent Crummles was no sooner acquainted with the public announcement which Nicholas had made relative to the probability of his shortly ceasing to be a member of the company, than he evinced many tokens of grief and consternation; and, in the extremity of his despair, even held out certain vague promises of a speedy improvement not only in the amount of his regular salary, but also in the contingent emoluments appertaining to his authorship. Finding Nicholas bent upon quitting the society - for he had now determined that, even if no further tidings came from Newman, he would, at all hazards, ease his mind by repairing to London and ascertaining the exact position of his sister - Mr Crummles was fain to content himself by calculating the chances of his coming back again, and taking prompt and energetic measures to make the most of him before he went away.

'Let me see,' said Mr Crummles, taking off his outlaw's wig, the better to arrive at a cool-headed view of the whole case. 'Let me see. This is Wednesday night. We'll have posters out the first thing in the morning, announcing positively your last appearance for tomorrow.'

'But perhaps it may not be my last appearance, you know,' said Nicholas. 'Unless I am summoned away, I should be sorry to inconvenience you by leaving before the end of the week.'

'So much the better,' returned Mr Crummles. 'We can have positively your last appearance, on Thursday - re-engagement for one night more, on Friday - and, yielding to the wishes of numerous influential patrons, who were disappointed in obtaining seats, on Saturday. That ought to bring three very decent houses.'

'Then I am to make three last appearances, am I?' inquired Nicholas, smiling.

'Yes,' rejoined the manager, scratching his head with an air of some vexation; 'three is not enough, and it's very bungling and irregular not to have more, but if we can't help it we can't, so there's no use in talking. A novelty would be very desirable. You couldn't sing a comic song on the pony's back, could you?'

'No,' replied Nicholas, 'I couldn't indeed.'

'It has drawn money before now,' said Mr Crummles, with a look of disappointment. 'What do you think of a brilliant display of fireworks?'

'That it would be rather expensive,' replied Nicholas, drily.

'Eighteen-pence would do it,' said Mr Crummles. 'You on the top of a pair of steps with the phenomenon in an attitude; 'Farewell!' on a transparency behind; and nine people at the wings with a squib in each hand - all the dozen and a half going off at once - it would be very grand - awful from the front, quite awful.'

As Nicholas appeared by no means impressed with the solemnity of the proposed effect, but, on the contrary, received the proposition in a most irreverent manner, and laughed at it very heartily, Mr Crummles abandoned the project in its birth, and gloomily observed that they must make up the best bill they could with combats and hornpipes, and so stick to the legitimate drama.

For the purpose of carrying this object into instant execution, the manager at once repaired to a small dressing-room, adjacent, where Mrs Crummles was then occupied in exchanging the habiliments of a melodramatic empress for the ordinary attire of matrons in the nineteenth century. And with the assistance of this lady, and the accomplished Mrs Grudden (who had quite a genius for making out bills, being a great hand at throwing in the notes of admiration, and knowing from long experience exactly where the largest capitals ought to go), he seriously applied himself to the composition of the poster.

'Heigho!' sighed Nicholas, as he threw himself back in the prompter's chair, after telegraphing the needful directions to Smike, who had been playing a meagre tailor in the interlude, with one skirt to his coat, and a little pocket-handkerchief with a large hole in it, and a woollen nightcap, and a red nose, and other distinctive marks peculiar to tailors on the stage. 'Heigho! I wish all this were over.'

'Over, Mr Johnson!' repeated a female voice behind him, in a kind of plaintive surprise.

'It was an ungallant speech, certainly,' said Nicholas, looking up to see who the speaker was, and recognising Miss Snevellicci. 'I would not have made it if I had known you had been within hearing.'

'What a dear that Mr Digby is!' said Miss Snevellicci, as the tailor went off on the opposite side, at the end of the piece, with great applause. (Smike's theatrical name was Digby.)

'I'll tell him presently, for his gratification, that you said so,' returned Nicholas.

'Oh you naughty thing!' rejoined Miss Snevellicci. 'I don't know though, that I should much mind HIS knowing my opinion of him; with some other people, indeed, it might be - ' Here Miss Snevellicci stopped, as though waiting to be questioned, but no questioning came, for Nicholas was thinking about more serious matters.

'How kind it is of you,' resumed Miss Snevellicci, after a short silence, 'to sit waiting here for him night after night, night after night, no matter how tired you are; and taking so much pains with him, and doing it all with as much delight and readiness as if you were coining gold by it!' 'He well deserves all the kindness I can show him, and a great deal more,' said Nicholas. 'He is the most grateful, single-hearted, affectionate creature that ever breathed.'

'So odd, too,' remarked Miss Snevellicci, 'isn't he?'

'God help him, and those who have made him so; he is indeed,' rejoined Nicholas, shaking his head.

'He is such a devilish close chap,' said Mr Folair, who had come up a little before, and now joined in the conversation. 'Nobody can ever get anything out of him.'

'What SHOULD they get out of him?' asked Nicholas, turning round with some abruptness.

'Zooks! what a fire-eater you are, Johnson!' returned Mr Folair, pulling up the heel of his dancing shoe. 'I'm only talking of the natural curiosity of the people here, to know what he has been about all his life.'

'Poor fellow! it is pretty plain, I should think, that he has not the intellect to have been about anything of much importance to them or anybody else,' said Nicholas.

'Ay,' rejoined the actor, contemplating the effect of his face in a lamp reflector, 'but that involves the whole question, you know.'

'What question?' asked Nicholas.

'Why, the who he is and what he is, and how you two, who are so different, came to be such close companions,' replied Mr Folair, delighted with the opportunity of saying something disagreeable. 'That's in everybody's mouth.'

'The 'everybody' of the theatre, I suppose?' said Nicholas, contemptuously.

'In it and out of it too,' replied the actor. 'Why, you know, Lenville says -'

'I thought I had silenced him effectually,' interrupted Nicholas, reddening.

'Perhaps you have,' rejoined the immovable Mr Folair; 'if you have, he said this before he was silenced: Lenville says that you're a regular stick of an actor, and that it's only the mystery about you that has caused you to go down with the people here, and that Crummles keeps it up for his own sake; though Lenville says he don't believe there's anything at all in it, except your having got into a scrape and run away from somewhere, for doing something or other.'

'Oh!' said Nicholas, forcing a smile.

'That's a part of what he says,' added Mr Folair. 'I mention it as the friend of both parties, and in strict confidence. I don't agree with him, you know. He says he takes Digby to be more knave than fool; and old Fluggers, who does the heavy business you know, HE says that when he delivered messages at Covent Garden the season before last, there used to be a pickpocket hovering about the coach-stand who had exactly the face of Digby; though, as he very properly says, Digby may not be the same, but only his brother, or some near relation.'

'Oh!' cried Nicholas again.

'Yes,' said Mr Folair, with undisturbed calmness, 'that's what they say. I thought I'd tell you, because really you ought to know. Oh! here's this blessed phenomenon at last. Ugh, you little imposition, I should like to - quite ready, my darling, - humbug - Ring up, Mrs G., and let the favourite wake 'em.'

Uttering in a loud voice such of the latter allusions as were complimentary to the unconscious phenomenon, and giving the rest in a confidential 'aside' to Nicholas, Mr Folair followed the ascent of the curtain with his eyes, regarded with a sneer the reception of Miss Crummles as the Maiden, and, falling back a step or two to advance with the better effect, uttered a preliminary howl, and 'went on' chattering his teeth and brandishing his tin tomahawk as the Indian Savage.

'So these are some of the stories they invent about us, and bandy from mouth to mouth!' thought Nicholas. 'If a man would commit an inexpressible offence against any society, large or small, let him be successful. They will forgive him any crime but that.'

'You surely don't mind what that malicious creature says, Mr Johnson?' observed Miss Snevellicci in her most winning tones.

'Not I,' replied Nicholas. 'If I were going to remain here, I might think it worth my while to embroil myself. As it is, let them talk till they are hoarse. But here,' added Nicholas, as Smike approached, 'here comes the subject of a portion of their good-nature, so let he and I say good night together.'

'No, I will not let either of you say anything of the kind,' returned Miss Snevellicci. 'You must come home and see mama, who only came to Portsmouth today, and is dying to behold you. Led, my dear, persuade Mr Johnson.'

'Oh, I'm sure,' returned Miss Ledrook, with considerable vivacity, 'if YOU can't persuade him - ' Miss Ledrook said no more, but intimated, by a dexterous playfulness, that if Miss Snevellicci couldn't persuade him, nobody could.

'Mr and Mrs Lillyvick have taken lodgings in our house, and share our sitting-room for the present,' said Miss Snevellicci. 'Won't that induce you?'

'Surely,' returned Nicholas, 'I can require no possible inducement beyond your invitation.'

'Oh no! I dare say,' rejoined Miss Snevellicci. And Miss Ledrook said, 'Upon my word!' Upon which Miss Snevellicci said that Miss Ledrook was a giddy thing; and Miss Ledrook said that Miss Snevellicci needn't colour up quite so much; and Miss Snevellicci beat Miss Ledrook, and Miss Ledrook beat Miss Snevellicci.

'Come,' said Miss Ledrook, 'it's high time we were there, or we shall have poor Mrs Snevellicci thinking that you have run away with her daughter, Mr Johnson; and then we should have a pretty to-do.'

'My dear Led,' remonstrated Miss Snevellicci, 'how you do talk!'

Miss Ledrook made no answer, but taking Smike's arm in hers, left her friend and Nicholas to follow at their pleasure; which it pleased them, or rather pleased Nicholas, who had no great fancy for a TETE-A-TETE under the circumstances, to do at once.

There were not wanting matters of conversation when they reached the street, for it turned out that Miss Snevellicci had a small basket to carry home, and Miss Ledrook a small bandbox, both containing such minor articles of theatrical costume as the lady performers usually carried to and fro every evening. Nicholas would insist upon carrying

the basket, and Miss Snevellicci would insist upon carrying it herself, which gave rise to a struggle, in which Nicholas captured the basket and the bandbox likewise. Then Nicholas said, that he wondered what could possibly be inside the basket, and attempted to peep in, whereat Miss Snevellicci screamed, and declared that if she thought he had seen, she was sure she should faint away. This declaration was followed by a similar attempt on the bandbox, and similar demonstrations on the part of Miss Ledrook, and then both ladies vowed that they wouldn't move a step further until Nicholas had promised that he wouldn't offer to peep again. At last Nicholas pledged himself to betray no further curiosity, and they walked on: both ladies giggling very much, and declaring that they never had seen such a wicked creature in all their born days - never.

Lightening the way with such pleasantry as this, they arrived at the tailor's house in no time; and here they made quite a little party, there being present besides Mr Lillyvick and Mrs Lillyvick, not only Miss Snevellicci's mama, but her papa also. And an uncommonly fine man Miss Snevellicci's papa was, with a hook nose, and a white forehead, and curly black hair, and high cheek bones, and altogether quite a handsome face, only a little pimply as though with drinking. He had a very broad chest had Miss Snevellicci's papa, and he wore a threadbare blue dress-coat buttoned with gilt buttons tight across it; and he no sooner saw Nicholas come into the room, than he whipped the two forefingers of his right hand in between the two centre buttons, and sticking his other arm gracefully a-kimbo seemed to say, 'Now, here I am, my buck, and what have you got to say to me?'

Such was, and in such an attitude sat Miss Snevellicci's papa, who had been in the profession ever since he had first played the ten-year-old imps in the Christmas pantomimes; who could sing a little, dance a little, fence a little, act a little, and do everything a little, but not much; who had been sometimes in the ballet, and sometimes in the chorus, at every theatre in London; who was always selected in virtue of his figure to play the military visitors and the speechless noblemen; who always wore a smart dress, and came on arm-in-arm with a smart lady in short petticoats, - and always did it too with such an air that people in the pit had been several times known to cry out 'Bravo!' under the impression that he was somebody. Such was Miss Snevellicci's papa, upon whom some envious persons cast the imputation that he occasionally beat Miss Snevellicci's mama, who was still a dancer, with a neat little figure and some remains of good looks; and who now sat, as she danced, - being rather too old for the full glare of the foot-lights, - in the background.

To these good people Nicholas was presented with much formality. The introduction being completed, Miss Snevellicci's papa (who was scented with rum-and-water) said that he was delighted to make the

acquaintance of a gentleman so highly talented; and furthermore remarked, that there hadn't been such a hit made - no, not since the first appearance of his friend Mr Glavormelly, at the Coburg.

'You have seen him, sir?' said Miss Snellicci's papa.

'No, really I never did,' replied Nicholas.

'You never saw my friend Glavormelly, sir!' said Miss Snellicci's papa. 'Then you have never seen acting yet. If he had lived - '

'Oh, he is dead, is he?' interrupted Nicholas.

'He is,' said Mr Snellicci, 'but he isn't in Westminster Abbey, more's the shame. He was a - . Well, no matter. He is gone to that bourne from whence no traveller returns. I hope he is appreciated THERE.'

So saying Miss Snellicci's papa rubbed the tip of his nose with a very yellow silk handkerchief, and gave the company to understand that these recollections overcame him.

'Well, Mr Lillyvick,' said Nicholas, 'and how are you?'

'Quite well, sir,' replied the collector. 'There is nothing like the married state, sir, depend upon it.'

'Indeed!' said Nicholas, laughing.

'Ah! nothing like it, sir,' replied Mr Lillyvick solemnly. 'How do you think,' whispered the collector, drawing him aside, 'how do you think she looks tonight?'

'As handsome as ever,' replied Nicholas, glancing at the late Miss Petowker.

'Why, there's air about her, sir,' whispered the collector, 'that I never saw in anybody. Look at her, now she moves to put the kettle on. There! Isn't it fascination, sir?'

'You're a lucky man,' said Nicholas.

'Ha, ha, ha!' rejoined the collector. 'No. Do you think I am though, eh? Perhaps I may be, perhaps I may be. I say, I couldn't have done much better if I had been a young man, could I? You couldn't have done much better yourself, could you - eh - could you?' With such inquires, and many more such, Mr Lillyvick jerked his elbow into Nicholas's side, and chuckled till his face became quite purple in the attempt to keep down his satisfaction.

By this time the cloth had been laid under the joint superintendence of all the ladies, upon two tables put together, one being high and narrow, and the other low and broad. There were oysters at the top, sausages at the bottom, a pair of snuffers in the centre, and baked potatoes wherever it was most convenient to put them. Two additional chairs were brought in from the bedroom: Miss Snevellicci sat at the head of the table, and Mr Lillyvick at the foot; and Nicholas had not only the honour of sitting next Miss Snevellicci, but of having Miss Snevellicci's mama on his right hand, and Miss Snevellicci's papa over the way. In short, he was the hero of the feast; and when the table was cleared and something warm introduced, Miss Snevellicci's papa got up and proposed his health in a speech containing such affecting allusions to his coming departure, that Miss Snevellicci wept, and was compelled to retire into the bedroom.

'Hush! Don't take any notice of it,' said Miss Ledrook, peeping in from the bedroom. 'Say, when she comes back, that she exerts herself too much.'

Miss Ledrook eked out this speech with so many mysterious nods and frowns before she shut the door again, that a profound silence came upon all the company, during which Miss Snevellicci's papa looked very big indeed - several sizes larger than life - at everybody in turn, but particularly at Nicholas, and kept on perpetually emptying his tumbler and filling it again, until the ladies returned in a cluster, with Miss Snevellicci among them.

'You needn't alarm yourself a bit, Mr Snevellicci,' said Mrs Lillyvick. 'She is only a little weak and nervous; she has been so ever since the morning.'

'Oh,' said Mr Snevellicci, 'that's all, is it?'

'Oh yes, that's all. Don't make a fuss about it,' cried all the ladies together.

Now this was not exactly the kind of reply suited to Mr Snevellicci's importance as a man and a father, so he picked out the unfortunate Mrs Snevellicci, and asked her what the devil she meant by talking to him in that way.

'Dear me, my dear!' said Mrs Snevellicci.

'Don't call me your dear, ma'am,' said Mr Snevellicci, 'if you please.'

'Pray, pa, don't,' interposed Miss Snevellicci.

'Don't what, my child?'

'Talk in that way.'

'Why not?' said Mr Snevellicci. 'I hope you don't suppose there's anybody here who is to prevent my talking as I like?'

'Nobody wants to, pa,' rejoined his daughter.

'Nobody would if they did want to,' said Mr Snevellicci. 'I am not ashamed of myself, Snevellicci is my name; I'm to be found in Broad Court, Bow Street, when I'm in town. If I'm not at home, let any man ask for me at the stage-door. Damme, they know me at the stage-door I suppose. Most men have seen my portrait at the cigar shop round the corner. I've been mentioned in the newspapers before now, haven't I? Talk! I'll tell you what; if I found out that any man had been tampering with the affections of my daughter, I wouldn't talk. I'd astonish him without talking; that's my way.'

So saying, Mr Snevellicci struck the palm of his left hand three smart blows with his clenched fist; pulled a phantom nose with his right thumb and forefinger, and swallowed another glassful at a draught. 'That's my way,' repeated Mr Snevellicci.

Most public characters have their failings; and the truth is that Mr Snevellicci was a little addicted to drinking; or, if the whole truth must be told, that he was scarcely ever sober. He knew in his cups three distinct stages of intoxication, - the dignified - the quarrelsome - the amorous. When professionally engaged he never got beyond the dignified; in private circles he went through all three, passing from one to another with a rapidity of transition often rather perplexing to those who had not the honour of his acquaintance.

Thus Mr Snevellicci had no sooner swallowed another glassful than he smiled upon all present in happy forgetfulness of having exhibited symptoms of pugnacity, and proposed 'The ladies! Bless their hearts!' in a most vivacious manner.

'I love 'em,' said Mr Snevellicci, looking round the table, 'I love 'em, every one.'

'Not every one,' reasoned Mr Lillyvick, mildly.

'Yes, every one,' repeated Mr Snevellicci.

'That would include the married ladies, you know,' said Mr Lillyvick.

'I love them too, sir,' said Mr Snevellicci.

The collector looked into the surrounding faces with an aspect of grave astonishment, seeming to say, 'This is a nice man!' and appeared a little surprised that Mrs Lillyvick's manner yielded no evidences of horror and indignation.

'One good turn deserves another,' said Mr Snevellicci. 'I love them and they love me.' And as if this avowal were not made in sufficient disregard and defiance of all moral obligations, what did Mr Snevellicci do? He winked - winked openly and undisguisedly; winked with his right eye - upon Henrietta Lillyvick!

The collector fell back in his chair in the intensity of his astonishment. If anybody had winked at her as Henrietta Petowker, it would have been indecorous in the last degree; but as Mrs Lillyvick! While he thought of it in a cold perspiration, and wondered whether it was possible that he could be dreaming, Mr Snevellicci repeated the wink, and drinking to Mrs Lillyvick in dumb show, actually blew her a kiss! Mr Lillyvick left his chair, walked straight up to the other end of the table, and fell upon him - literally fell upon him - instantaneously. Mr Lillyvick was no light weight, and consequently when he fell upon Mr Snevellicci, Mr Snevellicci fell under the table. Mr Lillyvick followed him, and the ladies screamed.

'What is the matter with the men! Are they mad?' cried Nicholas, diving under the table, dragging up the collector by main force, and thrusting him, all doubled up, into a chair, as if he had been a stuffed figure. 'What do you mean to do? What do you want to do? What is the matter with you?'

While Nicholas raised up the collector, Smike had performed the same office for Mr Snevellicci, who now regarded his late adversary in tipsy amazement.

'Look here, sir,' replied Mr Lillyvick, pointing to his astonished wife, 'here is purity and elegance combined, whose feelings have been outraged - violated, sir!'

'Lor, what nonsense he talks!' exclaimed Mrs Lillyvick in answer to the inquiring look of Nicholas. 'Nobody has said anything to me.'

'Said, Henrietta!' cried the collector. 'Didn't I see him - ' Mr Lillyvick couldn't bring himself to utter the word, but he counterfeited the motion of the eye.

'Well!' cried Mrs Lillyvick. 'Do you suppose nobody is ever to look at me? A pretty thing to be married indeed, if that was law!'

'You didn't mind it?' cried the collector.

'Mind it!' repeated Mrs Lillyvick contemptuously. 'You ought to go down on your knees and beg everybody's pardon, that you ought.'

'Pardon, my dear?' said the dismayed collector.

'Yes, and mine first,' replied Mrs Lillyvick. 'Do you suppose I ain't the best judge of what's proper and what's improper?'

'To be sure,' cried all the ladies. 'Do you suppose WE shouldn't be the first to speak, if there was anything that ought to be taken notice of?'

'Do you suppose THEY don't know, sir?' said Miss Snevellicci's papa, pulling up his collar, and muttering something about a punching of heads, and being only withheld by considerations of age. With which Miss Snevellicci's papa looked steadily and sternly at Mr Lillyvick for some seconds, and then rising deliberately from his chair, kissed the ladies all round, beginning with Mrs Lillyvick.

The unhappy collector looked piteously at his wife, as if to see whether there was any one trait of Miss Petowker left in Mrs Lillyvick, and finding too surely that there was not, begged pardon of all the company with great humility, and sat down such a crest-fallen, dispirited, disenchanted man, that despite all his selfishness and dotage, he was quite an object of compassion.

Miss Snevellicci's papa being greatly exalted by this triumph, and incontestable proof of his popularity with the fair sex, quickly grew convivial, not to say uproarious; volunteering more than one song of no inconsiderable length, and regaling the social circle between-whiles with recollections of divers splendid women who had been supposed to entertain a passion for himself, several of whom he toasted by name, taking occasion to remark at the same time that if he had been a little more alive to his own interest, he might have been rolling at that moment in his chariot-and-four. These reminiscences appeared to awaken no very torturing pangs in the breast of Mrs Snevellicci, who was sufficiently occupied in descanting to Nicholas upon the manifold accomplishments and merits of her daughter. Nor was the young lady herself at all behind-hand in displaying her choicest allurements; but these, heightened as they were by the artifices of Miss Ledrook, had no effect whatever in increasing the attentions of Nicholas, who, with the precedent of Miss Squeers still fresh in his memory, steadily resisted every fascination, and placed so strict a guard upon his behaviour that when he had taken his leave the ladies were unanimous in pronouncing him quite a monster of insensibility.

Next day the posters appeared in due course, and the public were informed, in all the colours of the rainbow, and in letters afflicted with every possible variation of spinal deformity, how that Mr Johnson

would have the honour of making his last appearance that evening, and how that an early application for places was requested, in consequence of the extraordinary overflow attendant on his performances, - it being a remarkable fact in theatrical history, but one long since established beyond dispute, that it is a hopeless endeavour to attract people to a theatre unless they can be first brought to believe that they will never get into it.

Nicholas was somewhat at a loss, on entering the theatre at night, to account for the unusual perturbation and excitement visible in the countenances of all the company, but he was not long in doubt as to the cause, for before he could make any inquiry respecting it Mr Crummles approached, and in an agitated tone of voice, informed him that there was a London manager in the boxes.

'It's the phenomenon, depend upon it, sir,' said Crummles, dragging Nicholas to the little hole in the curtain that he might look through at the London manager. 'I have not the smallest doubt it's the fame of the phenomenon - that's the man; him in the great-coat and no shirt-collar. She shall have ten pound a week, Johnson; she shall not appear on the London boards for a farthing less. They shan't engage her either, unless they engage Mrs Crummles too - twenty pound a week for the pair; or I'll tell you what, I'll throw in myself and the two boys, and they shall have the family for thirty. I can't say fairer than that. They must take us all, if none of us will go without the others. That's the way some of the London people do, and it always answers. Thirty pound a week - it's too cheap, Johnson. It's dirt cheap.'

Nicholas replied, that it certainly was; and Mr Vincent Crummles taking several huge pinches of snuff to compose his feelings, hurried away to tell Mrs Crummles that he had quite settled the only terms that could be accepted, and had resolved not to abate one single farthing.

When everybody was dressed and the curtain went up, the excitement occasioned by the presence of the London manager increased a thousand-fold. Everybody happened to know that the London manager had come down specially to witness his or her own performance, and all were in a flutter of anxiety and expectation. Some of those who were not on in the first scene, hurried to the wings, and there stretched their necks to have a peep at him; others stole up into the two little private boxes over the stage-doors, and from that position reconnoitred the London manager. Once the London manager was seen to smile - he smiled at the comic countryman's pretending to catch a blue-bottle, while Mrs Crummles was making her greatest effect. 'Very good, my fine fellow,' said Mr Crummles, shaking his fist at the comic countryman when he came off, 'you leave this company next Saturday night.'

In the same way, everybody who was on the stage beheld no audience but one individual; everybody played to the London manager. When Mr Lenville in a sudden burst of passion called the emperor a miscreant, and then biting his glove, said, 'But I must dissemble,' instead of looking gloomily at the boards and so waiting for his cue, as is proper in such cases, he kept his eye fixed upon the London manager. When Miss Bravassa sang her song at her lover, who according to custom stood ready to shake hands with her between the verses, they looked, not at each other, but at the London manager. Mr Crummles died point blank at him; and when the two guards came in to take the body off after a very hard death, it was seen to open its eyes and glance at the London manager. At length the London manager was discovered to be asleep, and shortly after that he woke up and went away, whereupon all the company fell foul of the unhappy comic countryman, declaring that his buffoonery was the sole cause; and Mr Crummles said, that he had put up with it a long time, but that he really couldn't stand it any longer, and therefore would feel obliged by his looking out for another engagement.

All this was the occasion of much amusement to Nicholas, whose only feeling upon the subject was one of sincere satisfaction that the great man went away before he appeared. He went through his part in the two last pieces as briskly as he could, and having been received with unbounded favour and unprecedented applause - so said the bills for next day, which had been printed an hour or two before - he took Smike's arm and walked home to bed.

With the post next morning came a letter from Newman Noggs, very inky, very short, very dirty, very small, and very mysterious, urging Nicholas to return to London instantly; not to lose an instant; to be there that night if possible.

'I will,' said Nicholas. 'Heaven knows I have remained here for the best, and sorely against my own will; but even now I may have dallied too long. What can have happened? Smike, my good fellow, here - take my purse. Put our things together, and pay what little debts we owe - quick, and we shall be in time for the morning coach. I will only tell them that we are going, and will return to you immediately.'

So saying, he took his hat, and hurrying away to the lodgings of Mr Crummles, applied his hand to the knocker with such hearty goodwill, that he awakened that gentleman, who was still in bed, and caused Mr Bulph the pilot to take his morning's pipe very nearly out of his mouth in the extremity of his surprise.

The door being opened, Nicholas ran upstairs without any ceremony, and bursting into the darkened sitting-room on the one-pair front, found that the two Master Crummleses had sprung out of the sofa-

bedstead and were putting on their clothes with great rapidity, under the impression that it was the middle of the night, and the next house was on fire.

Before he could undeceive them, Mr Crummles came down in a flannel gown and nightcap; and to him Nicholas briefly explained that circumstances had occurred which rendered it necessary for him to repair to London immediately.

'So goodbye,' said Nicholas; 'goodbye, goodbye.'

He was half-way downstairs before Mr Crummles had sufficiently recovered his surprise to gasp out something about the posters.

'I can't help it,' replied Nicholas. 'Set whatever I may have earned this week against them, or if that will not repay you, say at once what will. Quick, quick.'

'We'll cry quits about that,' returned Crummles. 'But can't we have one last night more?'

'Not an hour - not a minute,' replied Nicholas, impatiently.

'Won't you stop to say something to Mrs Crummles?' asked the manager, following him down to the door.

'I couldn't stop if it were to prolong my life a score of years,' rejoined Nicholas. 'Here, take my hand, and with it my hearty thanks. - Oh! that I should have been fooling here!'

Accompanying these words with an impatient stamp upon the ground, he tore himself from the manager's detaining grasp, and darting rapidly down the street was out of sight in an instant.

'Dear me, dear me,' said Mr Crummles, looking wistfully towards the point at which he had just disappeared; 'if he only acted like that, what a deal of money he'd draw! He should have kept upon this circuit; he'd have been very useful to me. But he don't know what's good for him. He is an impetuous youth. Young men are rash, very rash.'

Mr Crummles being in a moralising mood, might possibly have moralised for some minutes longer if he had not mechanically put his hand towards his waistcoat pocket, where he was accustomed to keep his snuff. The absence of any pocket at all in the usual direction, suddenly recalled to his recollection the fact that he had no waistcoat on; and this leading him to a contemplation of the extreme scantiness

of his attire, he shut the door abruptly, and retired upstairs with great precipitation.

Smike had made good speed while Nicholas was absent, and with his help everything was soon ready for their departure. They scarcely stopped to take a morsel of breakfast, and in less than half an hour arrived at the coach-office: quite out of breath with the haste they had made to reach it in time. There were yet a few minutes to spare, so, having secured the places, Nicholas hurried into a slopseller's hard by, and bought Smike a great-coat. It would have been rather large for a substantial yeoman, but the shopman averring (and with considerable truth) that it was a most uncommon fit, Nicholas would have purchased it in his impatience if it had been twice the size.

As they hurried up to the coach, which was now in the open street and all ready for starting, Nicholas was not a little astonished to find himself suddenly clutched in a close and violent embrace, which nearly took him off his legs; nor was his amazement at all lessened by hearing the voice of Mr Crummles exclaim, 'It is he - my friend, my friend!'

'Bless my heart,' cried Nicholas, struggling in the manager's arms, 'what are you about?'

The manager made no reply, but strained him to his breast again, exclaiming as he did so, 'Farewell, my noble, my lion-hearted boy!'

In fact, Mr Crummles, who could never lose any opportunity for professional display, had turned out for the express purpose of taking a public farewell of Nicholas; and to render it the more imposing, he was now, to that young gentleman's most profound annoyance, inflicting upon him a rapid succession of stage embraces, which, as everybody knows, are performed by the embracer's laying his or her chin on the shoulder of the object of affection, and looking over it. This Mr Crummles did in the highest style of melodrama, pouring forth at the same time all the most dismal forms of farewell he could think of, out of the stock pieces. Nor was this all, for the elder Master Crummles was going through a similar ceremony with Smike; while Master Percy Crummles, with a very little second-hand camlet cloak, worn theatrically over his left shoulder, stood by, in the attitude of an attendant officer, waiting to convey the two victims to the scaffold.

The lookers-on laughed very heartily, and as it was as well to put a good face upon the matter, Nicholas laughed too when he had succeeded in disengaging himself; and rescuing the astonished Smike, climbed up to the coach roof after him, and kissed his hand in honour of the absent Mrs Crummles as they rolled away.