

Chapter XXXI

Of Ralph Nickleby and Newman Noggs, and some wise Precautions, the success or failure of which will appear in the Sequel

In blissful unconsciousness that his nephew was hastening at the utmost speed of four good horses towards his sphere of action, and that every passing minute diminished the distance between them, Ralph Nickleby sat that morning occupied in his customary avocations, and yet unable to prevent his thoughts wandering from time to time back to the interview which had taken place between himself and his niece on the previous day. At such intervals, after a few moments of abstraction, Ralph would mutter some peevish interjection, and apply himself with renewed steadiness of purpose to the ledger before him, but again and again the same train of thought came back despite all his efforts to prevent it, confusing him in his calculations, and utterly distracting his attention from the figures over which he bent. At length Ralph laid down his pen, and threw himself back in his chair as though he had made up his mind to allow the obtrusive current of reflection to take its own course, and, by giving it full scope, to rid himself of it effectually.

'I am not a man to be moved by a pretty face,' muttered Ralph sternly. 'There is a grinning skull beneath it, and men like me who look and work below the surface see that, and not its delicate covering. And yet I almost like the girl, or should if she had been less proudly and squeamishly brought up. If the boy were drowned or hanged, and the mother dead, this house should be her home. I wish they were, with all my soul.'

Notwithstanding the deadly hatred which Ralph felt towards Nicholas, and the bitter contempt with which he sneered at poor Mrs Nickleby - notwithstanding the baseness with which he had behaved, and was then behaving, and would behave again if his interest prompted him, towards Kate herself - still there was, strange though it may seem, something humanising and even gentle in his thoughts at that moment. He thought of what his home might be if Kate were there; he placed her in the empty chair, looked upon her, heard her speak; he felt again upon his arm the gentle pressure of the trembling hand; he strewed his costly rooms with the hundred silent tokens of feminine presence and occupation; he came back again to the cold fireside and the silent dreary splendour; and in that one glimpse of a better nature, born as it was in selfish thoughts, the rich man felt himself friendless, childless, and alone. Gold, for the instant, lost its lustre in his eyes, for there were countless treasures of the heart which it could never purchase.

A very slight circumstance was sufficient to banish such reflections from the mind of such a man. As Ralph looked vacantly out across the yard towards the window of the other office, he became suddenly aware of the earnest observation of Newman Noggs, who, with his red nose almost touching the glass, feigned to be mending a pen with a rusty fragment of a knife, but was in reality staring at his employer with a countenance of the closest and most eager scrutiny.

Ralph exchanged his dreamy posture for his accustomed business attitude: the face of Newman disappeared, and the train of thought took to flight, all simultaneously, and in an instant.

After a few minutes, Ralph rang his bell. Newman answered the summons, and Ralph raised his eyes stealthily to his face, as if he almost feared to read there, a knowledge of his recent thoughts.

There was not the smallest speculation, however, in the countenance of Newman Noggs. If it be possible to imagine a man, with two eyes in his head, and both wide open, looking in no direction whatever, and seeing nothing, Newman appeared to be that man while Ralph Nickleby regarded him.

'How now?' growled Ralph.

'Oh!' said Newman, throwing some intelligence into his eyes all at once, and dropping them on his master, 'I thought you rang.' With which laconic remark Newman turned round and hobbled away.

'Stop!' said Ralph.

Newman stopped; not at all disconcerted.

'I did ring.'

'I knew you did.'

'Then why do you offer to go if you know that?'

'I thought you rang to say you didn't ring,' replied Newman. 'You often do.'

'How dare you pry, and peer, and stare at me, sirrah?' demanded Ralph.

'Stare!' cried Newman, 'at YOU! Ha, ha!' which was all the explanation Newman deigned to offer.

'Be careful, sir,' said Ralph, looking steadily at him. 'Let me have no drunken fooling here. Do you see this parcel?'

'It's big enough,' rejoined Newman.

'Carry it into the city; to Cross, in Broad Street, and leave it there - quick. Do you hear?'

Newman gave a dogged kind of nod to express an affirmative reply, and, leaving the room for a few seconds, returned with his hat. Having made various ineffective attempts to fit the parcel (which was some two feet square) into the crown thereof, Newman took it under his arm, and after putting on his fingerless gloves with great precision and nicety, keeping his eyes fixed upon Mr Ralph Nickleby all the time, he adjusted his hat upon his head with as much care, real or pretended, as if it were a brand-new one of the most expensive quality, and at last departed on his errand.

He executed his commission with great promptitude and dispatch, only calling at one public-house for half a minute, and even that might be said to be in his way, for he went in at one door and came out at the other; but as he returned and had got so far homewards as the Strand, Newman began to loiter with the uncertain air of a man who has not quite made up his mind whether to halt or go straight forwards. After a very short consideration, the former inclination prevailed, and making towards the point he had had in his mind, Newman knocked a modest double knock, or rather a nervous single one, at Miss La Creevy's door.

It was opened by a strange servant, on whom the odd figure of the visitor did not appear to make the most favourable impression possible, inasmuch as she no sooner saw him than she very nearly closed it, and placing herself in the narrow gap, inquired what he wanted. But Newman merely uttering the monosyllable 'Noggs,' as if it were some cabalistic word, at sound of which bolts would fly back and doors open, pushed briskly past and gained the door of Miss La Creevy's sitting-room, before the astonished servant could offer any opposition.

'Walk in if you please,' said Miss La Creevy in reply to the sound of Newman's knuckles; and in he walked accordingly.

'Bless us!' cried Miss La Creevy, starting as Newman bolted in; 'what did you want, sir?'

'You have forgotten me,' said Newman, with an inclination of the head. 'I wonder at that. That nobody should remember me who knew me in other days, is natural enough; but there are few people who, seeing

me once, forget me NOW.' He glanced, as he spoke, at his shabby clothes and paralytic limb, and slightly shook his head.

'I did forget you, I declare,' said Miss La Creevy, rising to receive Newman, who met her half-way, 'and I am ashamed of myself for doing so; for you are a kind, good creature, Mr Noggs. Sit down and tell me all about Miss Nickleby. Poor dear thing! I haven't seen her for this many a week.'

'How's that?' asked Newman.

'Why, the truth is, Mr Noggs,' said Miss La Creevy, 'that I have been out on a visit - the first visit I have made for fifteen years.'

'That is a long time,' said Newman, sadly.

'So it is a very long time to look back upon in years, though, somehow or other, thank Heaven, the solitary days roll away peacefully and happily enough,' replied the miniature painter. 'I have a brother, Mr Noggs - the only relation I have - and all that time I never saw him once. Not that we ever quarrelled, but he was apprenticed down in the country, and he got married there; and new ties and affections springing up about him, he forgot a poor little woman like me, as it was very reasonable he should, you know. Don't suppose that I complain about that, because I always said to myself, 'It is very natural; poor dear John is making his way in the world, and has a wife to tell his cares and troubles to, and children now to play about him, so God bless him and them, and send we may all meet together one day where we shall part no more.' But what do you think, Mr Noggs,' said the miniature painter, brightening up and clapping her hands, 'of that very same brother coming up to London at last, and never resting till he found me out; what do you think of his coming here and sitting down in that very chair, and crying like a child because he was so glad to see me - what do you think of his insisting on taking me down all the way into the country to his own house (quite a sumptuous place, Mr Noggs, with a large garden and I don't know how many fields, and a man in livery waiting at table, and cows and horses and pigs and I don't know what besides), and making me stay a whole month, and pressing me to stop there all my life - yes, all my life - and so did his wife, and so did the children - and there were four of them, and one, the eldest girl of all, they - they had named her after me eight good years before, they had indeed. I never was so happy; in all my life I never was!' The worthy soul hid her face in her handkerchief, and sobbed aloud; for it was the first opportunity she had had of unburdening her heart, and it would have its way.

'But bless my life,' said Miss La Creevy, wiping her eyes after a short pause, and cramming her handkerchief into her pocket with great

bustle and dispatch; 'what a foolish creature I must seem to you, Mr Noggs! I shouldn't have said anything about it, only I wanted to explain to you how it was I hadn't seen Miss Nickleby.'

'Have you seen the old lady?' asked Newman.

'You mean Mrs Nickleby?' said Miss La Creevy. 'Then I tell you what, Mr Noggs, if you want to keep in the good books in that quarter, you had better not call her the old lady any more, for I suspect she wouldn't be best pleased to hear you. Yes, I went there the night before last, but she was quite on the high ropes about something, and was so grand and mysterious, that I couldn't make anything of her: so, to tell you the truth, I took it into my head to be grand too, and came away in state. I thought she would have come round again before this, but she hasn't been here.'

'About Miss Nickleby - ' said Newman.

'Why, she was here twice while I was away,' returned Miss La Creevy. 'I was afraid she mightn't like to have me calling on her among those great folks in what's-its-name Place, so I thought I'd wait a day or two, and if I didn't see her, write.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Newman, cracking his fingers.

'However, I want to hear all the news about them from you,' said Miss La Creevy. 'How is the old rough and tough monster of Golden Square? Well, of course; such people always are. I don't mean how is he in health, but how is he going on: how is he behaving himself?'

'Damn him!' cried Newman, dashing his cherished hat on the floor; 'like a false hound.'

'Gracious, Mr Noggs, you quite terrify me!' exclaimed Miss La Creevy, turning pale.

'I should have spoilt his features yesterday afternoon if I could have afforded it,' said Newman, moving restlessly about, and shaking his fist at a portrait of Mr Canning over the mantelpiece. 'I was very near it. I was obliged to put my hands in my pockets, and keep 'em there very tight. I shall do it some day in that little back-parlour, I know I shall. I should have done it before now, if I hadn't been afraid of making bad worse. I shall double-lock myself in with him and have it out before I die, I'm quite certain of it.'

'I shall scream if you don't compose yourself, Mr Noggs,' said Miss La Creevy; 'I'm sure I shan't be able to help it.'

'Never mind,' rejoined Newman, darting violently to and fro. 'He's coming up tonight: I wrote to tell him. He little thinks I know; he little thinks I care. Cunning scoundrel! he don't think that. Not he, not he. Never mind, I'll thwart him - I, Newman Noggs. Ho, ho, the rascal!'

Lashing himself up to an extravagant pitch of fury, Newman Noggs jerked himself about the room with the most eccentric motion ever beheld in a human being: now sparring at the little miniatures on the wall, and now giving himself violent thumps on the head, as if to heighten the delusion, until he sank down in his former seat quite breathless and exhausted.

'There,' said Newman, picking up his hat; 'that's done me good. Now I'm better, and I'll tell you all about it.'

It took some little time to reassure Miss La Creevy, who had been almost frightened out of her senses by this remarkable demonstration; but that done, Newman faithfully related all that had passed in the interview between Kate and her uncle, prefacing his narrative with a statement of his previous suspicions on the subject, and his reasons for forming them; and concluding with a communication of the step he had taken in secretly writing to Nicholas.

Though little Miss La Creevy's indignation was not so singularly displayed as Newman's, it was scarcely inferior in violence and intensity. Indeed, if Ralph Nickleby had happened to make his appearance in the room at that moment, there is some doubt whether he would not have found Miss La Creevy a more dangerous opponent than even Newman Noggs himself.

'God forgive me for saying so,' said Miss La Creevy, as a wind-up to all her expressions of anger, 'but I really feel as if I could stick this into him with pleasure.'

It was not a very awful weapon that Miss La Creevy held, it being in fact nothing more nor less than a black-lead pencil; but discovering her mistake, the little portrait painter exchanged it for a mother-of-pearl fruit knife, wherewith, in proof of her desperate thoughts, she made a lunge as she spoke, which would have scarcely disturbed the crumb of a half-quartern loaf.

'She won't stop where she is after tonight,' said Newman. 'That's a comfort.'

'Stop!' cried Miss La Creevy, 'she should have left there, weeks ago.'

' - If we had known of this,' rejoined Newman. 'But we didn't. Nobody could properly interfere but her mother or brother. The mother's weak - poor thing - weak. The dear young man will be here tonight.'

'Heart alive!' cried Miss La Creevy. 'He will do something desperate, Mr Noggs, if you tell him all at once.'

Newman left off rubbing his hands, and assumed a thoughtful look.

'Depend upon it,' said Miss La Creevy, earnestly, 'if you are not very careful in breaking out the truth to him, he will do some violence upon his uncle or one of these men that will bring some terrible calamity upon his own head, and grief and sorrow to us all.'

'I never thought of that,' rejoined Newman, his countenance falling more and more. 'I came to ask you to receive his sister in case he brought her here, but - '

'But this is a matter of much greater importance,' interrupted Miss La Creevy; 'that you might have been sure of before you came, but the end of this, nobody can foresee, unless you are very guarded and careful.'

'What CAN I do?' cried Newman, scratching his head with an air of great vexation and perplexity. 'If he was to talk of pistoling 'em all, I should be obliged to say, 'Certainly - serve 'em right.'"

Miss La Creevy could not suppress a small shriek on hearing this, and instantly set about extorting a solemn pledge from Newman that he would use his utmost endeavours to pacify the wrath of Nicholas; which, after some demur, was conceded. They then consulted together on the safest and surest mode of communicating to him the circumstances which had rendered his presence necessary.

'He must have time to cool before he can possibly do anything,' said Miss La Creevy. 'That is of the greatest consequence. He must not be told until late at night.'

'But he'll be in town between six and seven this evening,' replied Newman. 'I can't keep it from him when he asks me.'

'Then you must go out, Mr Noggs,' said Miss La Creevy. 'You can easily have been kept away by business, and must not return till nearly midnight.'

'Then he will come straight here,' retorted Newman.

'So I suppose,' observed Miss La Creevy; 'but he won't find me at home, for I'll go straight to the city the instant you leave me, make up matters with Mrs Nickleby, and take her away to the theatre, so that he may not even know where his sister lives.'

Upon further discussion, this appeared the safest and most feasible mode of proceeding that could possibly be adopted. Therefore it was finally determined that matters should be so arranged, and Newman, after listening to many supplementary cautions and entreaties, took his leave of Miss La Creevy and trudged back to Golden Square; ruminating as he went upon a vast number of possibilities and impossibilities which crowded upon his brain, and arose out of the conversation that had just terminated.