

Chapter XXXIV

Wherein Mr Ralph Nickleby is visited by Persons with whom the Reader has been already made acquainted

'What a demnition long time you have kept me ringing at this confounded old cracked tea-kettle of a bell, every tinkle of which is enough to throw a strong man into blue convulsions, upon my life and soul, oh demmit,' - said Mr Mantalini to Newman Noggs, scraping his boots, as he spoke, on Ralph Nickleby's scraper.

'I didn't hear the bell more than once,' replied Newman.

'Then you are most immensely and outr-i-geously deaf,' said Mr Mantalini, 'as deaf as a demnition post.'

Mr Mantalini had got by this time into the passage, and was making his way to the door of Ralph's office with very little ceremony, when Newman interposed his body; and hinting that Mr Nickleby was unwilling to be disturbed, inquired whether the client's business was of a pressing nature.

'It is most demnebly particular,' said Mr Mantalini. 'It is to melt some scraps of dirty paper into bright, shining, chinking, tinkling, demd mint sauce.'

Newman uttered a significant grunt, and taking Mr Mantalini's proffered card, limped with it into his master's office. As he thrust his head in at the door, he saw that Ralph had resumed the thoughtful posture into which he had fallen after perusing his nephew's letter, and that he seemed to have been reading it again, as he once more held it open in his hand. The glance was but momentary, for Ralph, being disturbed, turned to demand the cause of the interruption.

As Newman stated it, the cause himself swaggered into the room, and grasping Ralph's horny hand with uncommon affection, vowed that he had never seen him looking so well in all his life.

'There is quite a bloom upon your demd countenance,' said Mr Mantalini, seating himself unbidden, and arranging his hair and whiskers. 'You look quite juvenile and jolly, demmit!'

'We are alone,' returned Ralph, tartly. 'What do you want with me?'

'Good!' cried Mr Mantalini, displaying his teeth. 'What did I want! Yes. Ha, ha! Very good. WHAT did I want. Ha, ha. Oh dem!'

'What DO you want, man?' demanded Ralph, sternly.

'Demnition discount,' returned Mr Mantalini, with a grin, and shaking his head waggishly.

'Money is scarce,' said Ralph.

'Demd scarce, or I shouldn't want it,' interrupted Mr Mantalini.

'The times are bad, and one scarcely knows whom to trust,' continued Ralph. 'I don't want to do business just now, in fact I would rather not; but as you are a friend - how many bills have you there?'

'Two,' returned Mr Mantalini.

'What is the gross amount?'

'Demd trifling - five-and-seventy.'

'And the dates?'

'Two months, and four.'

'I'll do them for you - mind, for YOU; I wouldn't for many people - for five-and-twenty pounds,' said Ralph, deliberately.

'Oh demmit!' cried Mr Mantalini, whose face lengthened considerably at this handsome proposal.

'Why, that leaves you fifty,' retorted Ralph. 'What would you have? Let me see the names.'

'You are so demd hard, Nickleby,' remonstrated Mr Mantalini.

'Let me see the names,' replied Ralph, impatiently extending his hand for the bills. 'Well! They are not sure, but they are safe enough. Do you consent to the terms, and will you take the money? I don't want you to do so. I would rather you didn't.'

'Demmit, Nickleby, can't you - ' began Mr Mantalini.

'No,' replied Ralph, interrupting him. 'I can't. Will you take the money - down, mind; no delay, no going into the city and pretending to negotiate with some other party who has no existence, and never had. Is it a bargain, or is it not?'

Ralph pushed some papers from him as he spoke, and carelessly rattled his cash-box, as though by mere accident. The sound was too much for Mr Mantalini. He closed the bargain directly it reached his ears, and Ralph told the money out upon the table.

He had scarcely done so, and Mr Mantalini had not yet gathered it all up, when a ring was heard at the bell, and immediately afterwards Newman ushered in no less a person than Madame Mantalini, at sight of whom Mr Mantalini evinced considerable discomposure, and swept the cash into his pocket with remarkable alacrity.

'Oh, you ARE here,' said Madame Mantalini, tossing her head.

'Yes, my life and soul, I am,' replied her husband, dropping on his knees, and pouncing with kitten-like playfulness upon a stray sovereign. 'I am here, my soul's delight, upon Tom Tiddler's ground, picking up the demnition gold and silver.'

'I am ashamed of you,' said Madame Mantalini, with much indignation.

'Ashamed - of ME, my joy? It knows it is talking demd charming sweetness, but naughty fibs,' returned Mr Mantalini. 'It knows it is not ashamed of its own popolorum tibby.' Whatever were the circumstances which had led to such a result, it certainly appeared as though the popolorum tibby had rather miscalculated, for the nonce, the extent of his lady's affection. Madame Mantalini only looked scornful in reply; and, turning to Ralph, begged him to excuse her intrusion.

'Which is entirely attributable,' said Madame, 'to the gross misconduct and most improper behaviour of Mr Mantalini.'

'Of me, my essential juice of pineapple!'

'Of you,' returned his wife. 'But I will not allow it. I will not submit to be ruined by the extravagance and profligacy of any man. I call Mr Nickleby to witness the course I intend to pursue with you.'

'Pray don't call me to witness anything, ma'am,' said Ralph. 'Settle it between yourselves, settle it between yourselves.'

'No, but I must beg you as a favour,' said Madame Mantalini, 'to hear me give him notice of what it is my fixed intention to do - my fixed intention, sir,' repeated Madame Mantalini, darting an angry look at her husband.

'Will she call me 'Sir'?' cried Mantalini. 'Me who dote upon her with the demdest ardour! She, who coils her fascinations round me like a pure angelic rattlesnake! It will be all up with my feelings; she will throw me into a demd state.' 'Don't talk of feelings, sir,' rejoined Madame Mantalini, seating herself, and turning her back upon him. 'You don't consider mine.'

'I do not consider yours, my soul!' exclaimed Mr Mantalini.

'No,' replied his wife.

And notwithstanding various blandishments on the part of Mr Mantalini, Madame Mantalini still said no, and said it too with such determined and resolute ill-temper, that Mr Mantalini was clearly taken aback.

'His extravagance, Mr Nickleby,' said Madame Mantalini, addressing herself to Ralph, who leant against his easy-chair with his hands behind him, and regarded the amiable couple with a smile of the supremest and most unmitigated contempt, - 'his extravagance is beyond all bounds.'

'I should scarcely have supposed it,' answered Ralph, sarcastically.

'I assure you, Mr Nickleby, however, that it is,' returned Madame Mantalini. 'It makes me miserable! I am under constant apprehensions, and in constant difficulty. And even this,' said Madame Mantalini, wiping her eyes, 'is not the worst. He took some papers of value out of my desk this morning without asking my permission.'

Mr Mantalini groaned slightly, and buttoned his trousers pocket.

'I am obliged,' continued Madame Mantalini, 'since our late misfortunes, to pay Miss Knag a great deal of money for having her name in the business, and I really cannot afford to encourage him in all his wastefulness. As I have no doubt that he came straight here, Mr Nickleby, to convert the papers I have spoken of, into money, and as you have assisted us very often before, and are very much connected with us in this kind of matters, I wish you to know the determination at which his conduct has compelled me to arrive.'

Mr Mantalini groaned once more from behind his wife's bonnet, and fitting a sovereign into one of his eyes, winked with the other at Ralph. Having achieved this performance with great dexterity, he whipped the coin into his pocket, and groaned again with increased penitence.

'I have made up my mind,' said Madame Mantalini, as tokens of impatience manifested themselves in Ralph's countenance, 'to allowance him.'

'To do that, my joy?' inquired Mr Mantalini, who did not seem to have caught the words.

'To put him,' said Madame Mantalini, looking at Ralph, and prudently abstaining from the slightest glance at her husband, lest his many graces should induce her to falter in her resolution, 'to put him upon a fixed allowance; and I say that if he has a hundred and twenty pounds a year for his clothes and pocket-money, he may consider himself a very fortunate man.'

Mr Mantalini waited, with much decorum, to hear the amount of the proposed stipend, but when it reached his ears, he cast his hat and cane upon the floor, and drawing out his pocket-handkerchief, gave vent to his feelings in a dismal moan.

'Demnition!' cried Mr Mantalini, suddenly skipping out of his chair, and as suddenly skipping into it again, to the great discomposure of his lady's nerves. 'But no. It is a demd horrid dream. It is not reality. No!'

Comforting himself with this assurance, Mr Mantalini closed his eyes and waited patiently till such time as he should wake up.

'A very judicious arrangement,' observed Ralph with a sneer, 'if your husband will keep within it, ma'am - as no doubt he will.'

'Demmit!' exclaimed Mr Mantalini, opening his eyes at the sound of Ralph's voice, 'it is a horrid reality. She is sitting there before me. There is the graceful outline of her form; it cannot be mistaken - there is nothing like it. The two countesses had no outlines at all, and the dowager's was a demd outline. Why is she so excruciatingly beautiful that I cannot be angry with her, even now?'

'You have brought it upon yourself, Alfred,' returned Madame Mantalini - still reproachfully, but in a softened tone.

'I am a demd villain!' cried Mr Mantalini, smiting himself on the head. 'I will fill my pockets with change for a sovereign in halfpence and drown myself in the Thames; but I will not be angry with her, even then, for I will put a note in the twopenny-post as I go along, to tell her where the body is. She will be a lovely widow. I shall be a body. Some handsome women will cry; she will laugh demnebly.'

'Alfred, you cruel, cruel creature,' said Madame Mantalini, sobbing at the dreadful picture.

'She calls me cruel - me - me - who for her sake will become a demd, damp, moist, unpleasant body!' exclaimed Mr Mantalini.

'You know it almost breaks my heart, even to hear you talk of such a thing,' replied Madame Mantalini.

'Can I live to be mistrusted?' cried her husband. 'Have I cut my heart into a demd extraordinary number of little pieces, and given them all away, one after another, to the same little engrossing demnition captivater, and can I live to be suspected by her? Demmit, no I can't.'

'Ask Mr Nickleby whether the sum I have mentioned is not a proper one,' reasoned Madame Mantalini.

'I don't want any sum,' replied her disconsolate husband; 'I shall require no demd allowance. I will be a body.'

On this repetition of Mr Mantalini's fatal threat, Madame Mantalini wrung her hands, and implored the interference of Ralph Nickleby; and after a great quantity of tears and talking, and several attempts on the part of Mr Mantalini to reach the door, preparatory to straightway committing violence upon himself, that gentleman was prevailed upon, with difficulty, to promise that he wouldn't be a body. This great point attained, Madame Mantalini argued the question of the allowance, and Mr Mantalini did the same, taking occasion to show that he could live with uncommon satisfaction upon bread and water, and go clad in rags, but that he could not support existence with the additional burden of being mistrusted by the object of his most devoted and disinterested affection. This brought fresh tears into Madame Mantalini's eyes, which having just begun to open to some few of the demerits of Mr Mantalini, were only open a very little way, and could be easily closed again. The result was, that without quite giving up the allowance question, Madame Mantalini, postponed its further consideration; and Ralph saw, clearly enough, that Mr Mantalini had gained a fresh lease of his easy life, and that, for some time longer at all events, his degradation and downfall were postponed.

'But it will come soon enough,' thought Ralph; 'all love - bah! that I should use the cant of boys and girls - is fleeting enough; though that which has its sole root in the admiration of a whiskered face like that of yonder baboon, perhaps lasts the longest, as it originates in the greater blindness and is fed by vanity. Meantime the fools bring grist to my mill, so let them live out their day, and the longer it is, the better.'

These agreeable reflections occurred to Ralph Nickleby, as sundry small caresses and endearments, supposed to be unseen, were exchanged between the objects of his thoughts.

'If you have nothing more to say, my dear, to Mr Nickleby,' said Madame Mantalini, 'we will take our leaves. I am sure we have detained him much too long already.'

Mr Mantalini answered, in the first instance, by tapping Madame Mantalini several times on the nose, and then, by remarking in words that he had nothing more to say.

'Demmit! I have, though,' he added almost immediately, drawing Ralph into a corner. 'Here's an affair about your friend Sir Mulberry. Such a demd extraordinary out-of-the-way kind of thing as never was - eh?'

'What do you mean?' asked Ralph.

'Don't you know, demmit?' asked Mr Mantalini.

'I see by the paper that he was thrown from his cabriolet last night, and severely injured, and that his life is in some danger,' answered Ralph with great composure; 'but I see nothing extraordinary in that - accidents are not miraculous events, when men live hard, and drive after dinner.'

'Whew!' cried Mr Mantalini in a long shrill whistle. 'Then don't you know how it was?'

'Not unless it was as I have just supposed,' replied Ralph, shrugging his shoulders carelessly, as if to give his questioner to understand that he had no curiosity upon the subject.

'Demmit, you amaze me,' cried Mantalini.

Ralph shrugged his shoulders again, as if it were no great feat to amaze Mr Mantalini, and cast a wistful glance at the face of Newman Noggs, which had several times appeared behind a couple of panes of glass in the room door; it being a part of Newman's duty, when unimportant people called, to make various feints of supposing that the bell had rung for him to show them out: by way of a gentle hint to such visitors that it was time to go.

'Don't you know,' said Mr Mantalini, taking Ralph by the button, 'that it wasn't an accident at all, but a demd, furious, manslaughtering attack made upon him by your nephew?'

'What!' snarled Ralph, clenching his fists and turning a livid white.

'Demmit, Nickleby, you're as great a tiger as he is,' said Mantalini, alarmed at these demonstrations.

'Go on,' cried Ralph. 'Tell me what you mean. What is this story? Who told you? Speak,' growled Ralph. 'Do you hear me?'

"Gad, Nickleby," said Mr Mantalini, retreating towards his wife, "what a demneble fierce old evil genius you are! You're enough to frighten the life and soul out of her little delicious wits - flying all at once into such a blazing, ravaging, raging passion as never was, demmit!"

"Pshaw," rejoined Ralph, forcing a smile. "It is but manner."

"It is a demd uncomfortable, private-madhouse-sort of a manner," said Mr Mantalini, picking up his cane.

Ralph affected to smile, and once more inquired from whom Mr Mantalini had derived his information.

"From Pyke; and a demd, fine, pleasant, gentlemanly dog it is," replied Mantalini. "Demnition pleasant, and a tip-top sawyer."

"And what said he?" asked Ralph, knitting his brows.

"That it happened this way - that your nephew met him at a coffeehouse, fell upon him with the most demneble ferocity, followed him to his cab, swore he would ride home with him, if he rode upon the horse's back or hooked himself on to the horse's tail; smashed his countenance, which is a demd fine countenance in its natural state; frightened the horse, pitched out Sir Mulberry and himself, and - "

"And was killed?" interposed Ralph with gleaming eyes. "Was he? Is he dead?"

Mantalini shook his head.

"Ugh," said Ralph, turning away. "Then he has done nothing. Stay," he added, looking round again. "He broke a leg or an arm, or put his shoulder out, or fractured his collar-bone, or ground a rib or two? His neck was saved for the halter, but he got some painful and slow-healing injury for his trouble? Did he? You must have heard that, at least."

"No," rejoined Mantalini, shaking his head again. "Unless he was dashed into such little pieces that they blew away, he wasn't hurt, for he went off as quiet and comfortable as - as - as demnition," said Mr Mantalini, rather at a loss for a simile.

"And what," said Ralph, hesitating a little, "what was the cause of quarrel?"

"You are the demdest, knowing hand," replied Mr Mantalini, in an admiring tone, "the cunningest, rummest, superlativest old fox - oh

dem! - to pretend now not to know that it was the little bright-eyed niece - the softest, sweetest, prettiest - '

'Alfred!' interposed Madame Mantalini.

'She is always right,' rejoined Mr Mantalini soothingly, 'and when she says it is time to go, it is time, and go she shall; and when she walks along the streets with her own tulip, the women shall say, with envy, she has got a demd fine husband; and the men shall say with rapture, he has got a demd fine wife; and they shall both be right and neither wrong, upon my life and soul - oh demmit!'

With which remarks, and many more, no less intellectual and to the purpose, Mr Mantalini kissed the fingers of his gloves to Ralph Nickleby, and drawing his lady's arm through his, led her mincingly away.

'So, so,' muttered Ralph, dropping into his chair; 'this devil is loose again, and thwarting me, as he was born to do, at every turn. He told me once there should be a day of reckoning between us, sooner or later. I'll make him a true prophet, for it shall surely come.'

'Are you at home?' asked Newman, suddenly popping in his head.

'No,' replied Ralph, with equal abruptness.

Newman withdrew his head, but thrust it in again.

'You're quite sure you're not at home, are you?' said Newman.

'What does the idiot mean?' cried Ralph, testily.

'He has been waiting nearly ever since they first came in, and may have heard your voice - that's all,' said Newman, rubbing his hands.

'Who has?' demanded Ralph, wrought by the intelligence he had just heard, and his clerk's provoking coolness, to an intense pitch of irritation.

The necessity of a reply was superseded by the unlooked-for entrance of a third party - the individual in question - who, bringing his one eye (for he had but one) to bear on Ralph Nickleby, made a great many shambling bows, and sat himself down in an armchair, with his hands on his knees, and his short black trousers drawn up so high in the legs by the exertion of seating himself, that they scarcely reached below the tops of his Wellington boots.'

'Why, this IS a surprise!' said Ralph, bending his gaze upon the visitor, and half smiling as he scrutinised him attentively; 'I should know your face, Mr Squeers.'

'Ah!' replied that worthy, 'and you'd have know'd it better, sir, if it hadn't been for all that I've been a-going through. Just lift that little boy off the tall stool in the back-office, and tell him to come in here, will you, my man?' said Squeers, addressing himself to Newman. 'Oh, he's lifted his-self off. My son, sir, little Wackford. What do you think of him, sir, for a specimen of the Dotheboys Hall feeding? Ain't he fit to bust out of his clothes, and start the seams, and make the very buttons fly off with his fatness? Here's flesh!' cried Squeers, turning the boy about, and indenting the plumpest parts of his figure with divers pokes and punches, to the great discomposure of his son and heir. 'Here's firmness, here's solidness! Why you can hardly get up enough of him between your finger and thumb to pinch him anywheres.'

In however good condition Master Squeers might have been, he certainly did not present this remarkable compactness of person, for on his father's closing his finger and thumb in illustration of his remark, he uttered a sharp cry, and rubbed the place in the most natural manner possible.

'Well,' remarked Squeers, a little disconcerted, 'I had him there; but that's because we breakfasted early this morning, and he hasn't had his lunch yet. Why you couldn't shut a bit of him in a door, when he's had his dinner. Look at them tears, sir,' said Squeers, with a triumphant air, as Master Wackford wiped his eyes with the cuff of his jacket, 'there's oiliness!'

'He looks well, indeed,' returned Ralph, who, for some purposes of his own, seemed desirous to conciliate the schoolmaster. 'But how is Mrs Squeers, and how are you?'

'Mrs Squeers, sir,' replied the proprietor of Dotheboys, 'is as she always is - a mother to them lads, and a blessing, and a comfort, and a joy to all them as knows her. One of our boys - gorging his-self with vittles, and then turning in; that's their way - got a abscess on him last week. To see how she operated upon him with a pen-knife! Oh Lor!' said Squeers, heaving a sigh, and nodding his head a great many times, 'what a member of society that woman is!'

Mr Squeers indulged in a retrospective look, for some quarter of a minute, as if this allusion to his lady's excellences had naturally led his mind to the peaceful village of Dotheboys near Greta Bridge in Yorkshire; and then looked at Ralph, as if waiting for him to say something.

'Have you quite recovered that scoundrel's attack?' asked Ralph.

'I've only just done it, if I've done it now,' replied Squeers. 'I was one blessed bruise, sir,' said Squeers, touching first the roots of his hair, and then the toes of his boots, 'from HERE to THERE. Vinegar and brown paper, vinegar and brown paper, from morning to night. I suppose there was a matter of half a ream of brown paper stuck upon me, from first to last. As I laid all of a heap in our kitchen, plastered all over, you might have thought I was a large brown-paper parcel, chock full of nothing but groans. Did I groan loud, Wackford, or did I groan soft?' asked Mr Squeers, appealing to his son.

'Loud,' replied Wackford.

'Was the boys sorry to see me in such a dreadful condition, Wackford, or was they glad?' asked Mr Squeers, in a sentimental manner.

'Gl - '

'Eh?' cried Squeers, turning sharp round.

'Sorry,' rejoined his son.

'Oh!' said Squeers, catching him a smart box on the ear. 'Then take your hands out of your pockets, and don't stammer when you're asked a question. Hold your noise, sir, in a gentleman's office, or I'll run away from my family and never come back any more; and then what would become of all them precious and forlorn lads as would be let loose on the world, without their best friend at their elbers?'

'Were you obliged to have medical attendance?' inquired Ralph.

'Ay, was I,' rejoined Squeers, 'and a precious bill the medical attendant brought in too; but I paid it though.'

Ralph elevated his eyebrows in a manner which might be expressive of either sympathy or astonishment - just as the beholder was pleased to take it.

'Yes, I paid it, every farthing,' replied Squeers, who seemed to know the man he had to deal with, too well to suppose that any blinking of the question would induce him to subscribe towards the expenses; 'I wasn't out of pocket by it after all, either.'

'No!' said Ralph.

'Not a halfpenny,' replied Squeers. 'The fact is, we have only one extra with our boys, and that is for doctors when required - and not then, unless we're sure of our customers. Do you see?'

'I understand,' said Ralph.

'Very good,' rejoined Squeers. 'Then, after my bill was run up, we picked out five little boys (sons of small tradesmen, as was sure pay) that had never had the scarlet fever, and we sent one to a cottage where they'd got it, and he took it, and then we put the four others to sleep with him, and THEY took it, and then the doctor came and attended 'em once all round, and we divided my total among 'em, and added it on to their little bills, and the parents paid it. Ha! ha! ha!'

'And a good plan too,' said Ralph, eyeing the schoolmaster stealthily.

'I believe you,' rejoined Squeers. 'We always do it. Why, when Mrs Squeers was brought to bed with little Wackford here, we ran the hooping-cough through half-a-dozen boys, and charged her expenses among 'em, monthly nurse included. Ha! ha! ha!'

Ralph never laughed, but on this occasion he produced the nearest approach to it that he could, and waiting until Mr Squeers had enjoyed the professional joke to his heart's content, inquired what had brought him to town.

'Some bothering law business,' replied Squeers, scratching his head, 'connected with an action, for what they call neglect of a boy. I don't know what they would have. He had as good grazing, that boy had, as there is about us.'

Ralph looked as if he did not quite understand the observation.

'Grazing,' said Squeers, raising his voice, under the impression that as Ralph failed to comprehend him, he must be deaf. 'When a boy gets weak and ill and don't relish his meals, we give him a change of diet - turn him out, for an hour or so every day, into a neighbour's turnip field, or sometimes, if it's a delicate case, a turnip field and a piece of carrots alternately, and let him eat as many as he likes. There an't better land in the country than this perverse lad grazed on, and yet he goes and catches cold and indigestion and what not, and then his friends brings a lawsuit against ME! Now, you'd hardly suppose,' added Squeers, moving in his chair with the impatience of an ill-used man, 'that people's ingratitude would carry them quite as far as that; would you?'

'A hard case, indeed,' observed Ralph.

'You don't say more than the truth when you say that,' replied Squeers. 'I don't suppose there's a man going, as possesses the fondness for youth that I do. There's youth to the amount of eight hundred pound a year at Dotheboys Hall at this present time. I'd take sixteen hundred pound worth if I could get 'em, and be as fond of every individual twenty pound among 'em as nothing should equal it!'

'Are you stopping at your old quarters?' asked Ralph.

'Yes, we are at the Saracen,' replied Squeers, 'and as it don't want very long to the end of the half-year, we shall continney to stop there till I've collected the money, and some new boys too, I hope. I've brought little Wackford up, on purpose to show to parents and guardians. I shall put him in the advertisement, this time. Look at that boy - himself a pupil. Why he's a miracle of high feeding, that boy is!'

'I should like to have a word with you,' said Ralph, who had both spoken and listened mechanically for some time, and seemed to have been thinking.

'As many words as you like, sir,' rejoined Squeers. 'Wackford, you go and play in the back office, and don't move about too much or you'll get thin, and that won't do. You haven't got such a thing as twopence, Mr Nickleby, have you?' said Squeers, rattling a bunch of keys in his coat pocket, and muttering something about its being all silver.

'I - think I have,' said Ralph, very slowly, and producing, after much rummaging in an old drawer, a penny, a halfpenny, and two farthings.

'Thankee,' said Squeers, bestowing it upon his son. 'Here! You go and buy a tart - Mr Nickleby's man will show you where - and mind you buy a rich one. Pastry,' added Squeers, closing the door on Master Wackford, 'makes his flesh shine a good deal, and parents thinks that a healthy sign.'

With this explanation, and a peculiarly knowing look to eke it out, Mr Squeers moved his chair so as to bring himself opposite to Ralph Nickleby at no great distance off; and having planted it to his entire satisfaction, sat down.

'Attend to me,' said Ralph, bending forward a little.

Squeers nodded.

'I am not to suppose,' said Ralph, 'that you are dolt enough to forgive or forget, very readily, the violence that was committed upon you, or the exposure which accompanied it?'

'Devil a bit,' replied Squeers, tartly.

'Or to lose an opportunity of repaying it with interest, if you could get one?' said Ralph.

'Show me one, and try,' rejoined Squeers.

'Some such object it was, that induced you to call on me?' said Ralph, raising his eyes to the schoolmaster's face.

'N-n-no, I don't know that,' replied Squeers. 'I thought that if it was in your power to make me, besides the trifle of money you sent, any compensation - '

'Ah!' cried Ralph, interrupting him. 'You needn't go on.'

After a long pause, during which Ralph appeared absorbed in contemplation, he again broke silence by asking:

'Who is this boy that he took with him?'

Squeers stated his name.

'Was he young or old, healthy or sickly, tractable or rebellious? Speak out, man,' retorted Ralph.

'Why, he wasn't young,' answered Squeers; 'that is, not young for a boy, you know.'

'That is, he was not a boy at all, I suppose?' interrupted Ralph.

'Well,' returned Squeers, briskly, as if he felt relieved by the suggestion, 'he might have been nigh twenty. He wouldn't seem so old, though, to them as didn't know him, for he was a little wanting here,' touching his forehead; 'nobody at home, you know, if you knocked ever so often.'

'And you DID knock pretty often, I dare say?' muttered Ralph.

'Pretty well,' returned Squeers with a grin.

'When you wrote to acknowledge the receipt of this trifle of money as you call it,' said Ralph, 'you told me his friends had deserted him long ago, and that you had not the faintest clue or trace to tell you who he was. Is that the truth?'

'It is, worse luck!' replied Squeers, becoming more and more easy and familiar in his manner, as Ralph pursued his inquiries with the less

reserve. 'It's fourteen years ago, by the entry in my book, since a strange man brought him to my place, one autumn night, and left him there; paying five pound five, for his first quarter in advance. He might have been five or six year old at that time - not more.'

'What more do you know about him?' demanded Ralph.

'Devilish little, I'm sorry to say,' replied Squeers. 'The money was paid for some six or eight year, and then it stopped. He had given an address in London, had this chap; but when it came to the point, of course nobody knowed anything about him. So I kept the lad out of - out of - '

'Charity?' suggested Ralph drily.

'Charity, to be sure,' returned Squeers, rubbing his knees, 'and when he begins to be useful in a certain sort of way, this young scoundrel of a Nickleby comes and carries him off. But the most vexatious and aggeravating part of the whole affair is,' said Squeers, dropping his voice, and drawing his chair still closer to Ralph, 'that some questions have been asked about him at last - not of me, but, in a roundabout kind of way, of people in our village. So, that just when I might have had all arrears paid up, perhaps, and perhaps - who knows? such things have happened in our business before - a present besides for putting him out to a farmer, or sending him to sea, so that he might never turn up to disgrace his parents, supposing him to be a natural boy, as many of our boys are - damme, if that villain of a Nickleby don't collar him in open day, and commit as good as highway robbery upon my pocket.'

'We will both cry quits with him before long,' said Ralph, laying his hand on the arm of the Yorkshire schoolmaster.

'Quits!' echoed Squeers. 'Ah! and I should like to leave a small balance in his favour, to be settled when he can. I only wish Mrs Squeers could catch hold of him. Bless her heart! She'd murder him, Mr Nickleby - she would, as soon as eat her dinner.'

'We will talk of this again,' said Ralph. 'I must have time to think of it. To wound him through his own affections and fancies - . If I could strike him through this boy - '

'Strike him how you like, sir,' interrupted Squeers, 'only hit him hard enough, that's all - and with that, I'll say good-morning. Here! - just chuck that little boy's hat off that corner peg, and lift him off the stool will you?'

Bawling these requests to Newman Noggs, Mr Squeers betook himself to the little back-office, and fitted on his child's hat with parental anxiety, while Newman, with his pen behind his ear, sat, stiff and immovable, on his stool, regarding the father and son by turns with a broad stare.

'He's a fine boy, an't he?' said Squeers, throwing his head a little on one side, and falling back to the desk, the better to estimate the proportions of little Wackford.

'Very,' said Newman.

'Pretty well swelled out, an't he?' pursued Squeers. 'He has the fatness of twenty boys, he has.'

'Ah!' replied Newman, suddenly thrusting his face into that of Squeers, 'he has; - the fatness of twenty! - more! He's got it all. God help that others. Ha! ha! Oh Lord!'

Having uttered these fragmentary observations, Newman dropped upon his desk and began to write with most marvellous rapidity.

'Why, what does the man mean?' cried Squeers, colouring. 'Is he drunk?'

Newman made no reply.

'Is he mad?' said Squeers.

But, still Newman betrayed no consciousness of any presence save his own; so, Mr Squeers comforted himself by saying that he was both drunk AND mad; and, with this parting observation, he led his hopeful son away.

In exact proportion as Ralph Nickleby became conscious of a struggling and lingering regard for Kate, had his detestation of Nicholas augmented. It might be, that to atone for the weakness of inclining to any one person, he held it necessary to hate some other more intensely than before; but such had been the course of his feelings. And now, to be defied and spurned, to be held up to her in the worst and most repulsive colours, to know that she was taught to hate and despise him: to feel that there was infection in his touch, and taint in his companionship - to know all this, and to know that the mover of it all was that same boyish poor relation who had twitted him in their very first interview, and openly bearded and braved him since, wrought his quiet and stealthy malignity to such a pitch, that there was scarcely anything he would not have hazarded to gratify it, if he could have seen his way to some immediate retaliation.

But, fortunately for Nicholas, Ralph Nickleby did not; and although he cast about all that day, and kept a corner of his brain working on the one anxious subject through all the round of schemes and business that came with it, night found him at last, still harping on the same theme, and still pursuing the same unprofitable reflections.

'When my brother was such as he,' said Ralph, 'the first comparisons were drawn between us - always in my disfavour. HE was open, liberal, gallant, gay; I a crafty hunk of cold and stagnant blood, with no passion but love of saving, and no spirit beyond a thirst for gain. I recollected it well when I first saw this whipster; but I remember it better now.'

He had been occupied in tearing Nicholas's letter into atoms; and as he spoke, he scattered it in a tiny shower about him.

'Recollections like these,' pursued Ralph, with a bitter smile, 'flock upon me - when I resign myself to them - in crowds, and from countless quarters. As a portion of the world affect to despise the power of money, I must try and show them what it is.'

And being, by this time, in a pleasant frame of mind for slumber, Ralph Nickleby went to bed.