

## Chapter XXXVII

**Nicholas finds further Favour in the Eyes of the brothers Cheeryble and Mr Timothy Linkinwater. The brothers give a Banquet on a great Annual Occasion. Nicholas, on returning Home from it, receives a mysterious and important Disclosure from the Lips of Mrs Nickleby**

The square in which the counting-house of the brothers Cheeryble was situated, although it might not wholly realise the very sanguine expectations which a stranger would be disposed to form on hearing the fervent encomiums bestowed upon it by Tim Linkinwater, was, nevertheless, a sufficiently desirable nook in the heart of a busy town like London, and one which occupied a high place in the affectionate remembrances of several grave persons domiciled in the neighbourhood, whose recollections, however, dated from a much more recent period, and whose attachment to the spot was far less absorbing, than were the recollections and attachment of the enthusiastic Tim.

And let not those whose eyes have been accustomed to the aristocratic gravity of Grosvenor Square and Hanover Square, the dowager barrenness and frigidity of Fitzroy Square, or the gravel walks and garden seats of the Squares of Russell and Euston, suppose that the affections of Tim Linkinwater, or the inferior lovers of this particular locality, had been awakened and kept alive by any refreshing associations with leaves, however dingy, or grass, however bare and thin. The city square has no enclosure, save the lamp-post in the middle: and no grass, but the weeds which spring up round its base. It is a quiet, little-frequented, retired spot, favourable to melancholy and contemplation, and appointments of long-waiting; and up and down its every side the Appointed saunters idly by the hour together wakening the echoes with the monotonous sound of his footsteps on the smooth worn stones, and counting, first the windows, and then the very bricks of the tall silent houses that hem him round about. In winter-time, the snow will linger there, long after it has melted from the busy streets and highways. The summer's sun holds it in some respect, and while he darts his cheerful rays sparingly into the square, keeps his fiery heat and glare for noisier and less-imposing precincts. It is so quiet, that you can almost hear the ticking of your own watch when you stop to cool in its refreshing atmosphere. There is a distant hum - of coaches, not of insects - but no other sound disturbs the stillness of the square. The ticket porter leans idly against the post at the corner: comfortably warm, but not hot, although the day is broiling. His white apron flaps languidly in the air, his head gradually droops upon his breast, he takes very long winks with both eyes at once; even he is unable to withstand the soporific influence of the place, and is gradually falling asleep. But now, he

starts into full wakefulness, recoils a step or two, and gazes out before him with eager wildness in his eye. Is it a job, or a boy at marbles? Does he see a ghost, or hear an organ? No; sight more unwonted still - there is a butterfly in the square - a real, live butterfly! astray from flowers and sweets, and fluttering among the iron heads of the dusty area railings.

But if there were not many matters immediately without the doors of Cheeryble Brothers, to engage the attention or distract the thoughts of the young clerk, there were not a few within, to interest and amuse him. There was scarcely an object in the place, animate or inanimate, which did not partake in some degree of the scrupulous method and punctuality of Mr Timothy Linkinwater. Punctual as the counting-house dial, which he maintained to be the best time-keeper in London next after the clock of some old, hidden, unknown church hard by, (for Tim held the fabled goodness of that at the Horse Guards to be a pleasant fiction, invented by jealous West-enders,) the old clerk performed the minutest actions of the day, and arranged the minutest articles in the little room, in a precise and regular order, which could not have been exceeded if it had actually been a real glass case, fitted with the choicest curiosities. Paper, pens, ink, ruler, sealing-wax, wafers, pounce-box, string-box, fire-box, Tim's hat, Tim's scrupulously-folded gloves, Tim's other coat - looking precisely like a back view of himself as it hung against the wall - all had their accustomed inches of space. Except the clock, there was not such an accurate and unimpeachable instrument in existence as the little thermometer which hung behind the door. There was not a bird of such methodical and business-like habits in all the world, as the blind blackbird, who dreamed and dozed away his days in a large snug cage, and had lost his voice, from old age, years before Tim first bought him. There was not such an eventful story in the whole range of anecdote, as Tim could tell concerning the acquisition of that very bird; how, compassionating his starved and suffering condition, he had purchased him, with the view of humanely terminating his wretched life; how he determined to wait three days and see whether the bird revived; how, before half the time was out, the bird did revive; and how he went on reviving and picking up his appetite and good looks until he gradually became what - 'what you see him now, sir,' - Tim would say, glancing proudly at the cage. And with that, Tim would utter a melodious chirrup, and cry 'Dick;' and Dick, who, for any sign of life he had previously given, might have been a wooden or stuffed representation of a blackbird indifferently executed, would come to the side of the cage in three small jumps, and, thrusting his bill between the bars, turn his sightless head towards his old master - and at that moment it would be very difficult to determine which of the two was the happier, the bird or Tim Linkinwater.

Nor was this all. Everything gave back, besides, some reflection of the kindly spirit of the brothers. The warehousemen and porters were such sturdy, jolly fellows, that it was a treat to see them. Among the shipping announcements and steam-packet list's which decorated the counting-house wall, were designs for almshouses, statements of charities, and plans for new hospitals. A blunderbuss and two swords hung above the chimney-piece, for the terror of evil-doers, but the blunderbuss was rusty and shattered, and the swords were broken and edgeless. Elsewhere, their open display in such a condition would have realised a smile; but, there, it seemed as though even violent and offensive weapons partook of the reigning influence, and became emblems of mercy and forbearance.

Such thoughts as these occurred to Nicholas very strongly, on the morning when he first took possession of the vacant stool, and looked about him, more freely and at ease, than he had before enjoyed an opportunity of doing. Perhaps they encouraged and stimulated him to exertion, for, during the next two weeks, all his spare hours, late at night and early in the morning, were incessantly devoted to acquiring the mysteries of book-keeping and some other forms of mercantile account. To these, he applied himself with such steadiness and perseverance that, although he brought no greater amount of previous knowledge to the subject than certain dim recollections of two or three very long sums entered into a ciphering-book at school, and relieved for parental inspection by the effigy of a fat swan tastefully flourished by the writing-master's own hand, he found himself, at the end of a fortnight, in a condition to report his proficiency to Mr Linkinwater, and to claim his promise that he, Nicholas Nickleby, should now be allowed to assist him in his graver labours.

It was a sight to behold Tim Linkinwater slowly bring out a massive ledger and day-book, and, after turning them over and over, and affectionately dusting their backs and sides, open the leaves here and there, and cast his eyes, half mournfully, half proudly, upon the fair and unblotted entries.

'Four-and-forty year, next May!' said Tim. 'Many new ledgers since then. Four-and-forty year!'

Tim closed the book again.

'Come, come,' said Nicholas, 'I am all impatience to begin.'

Tim Linkinwater shook his head with an air of mild reproof. Mr Nickleby was not sufficiently impressed with the deep and awful nature of his undertaking. Suppose there should be any mistake - any scratching out!

Young men are adventurous. It is extraordinary what they will rush upon, sometimes. Without even taking the precaution of sitting himself down upon his stool, but standing leisurely at the desk, and with a smile upon his face - actually a smile - there was no mistake about it; Mr Linkinwater often mentioned it afterwards - Nicholas dipped his pen into the inkstand before him, and plunged into the books of Cheeryble Brothers!

Tim Linkinwater turned pale, and tilting up his stool on the two legs nearest Nicholas, looked over his shoulder in breathless anxiety. Brother Charles and brother Ned entered the counting-house together; but Tim Linkinwater, without looking round, impatiently waved his hand as a caution that profound silence must be observed, and followed the nib of the inexperienced pen with strained and eager eyes.

The brothers looked on with smiling faces, but Tim Linkinwater smiled not, nor moved for some minutes. At length, he drew a long slow breath, and still maintaining his position on the tilted stool, glanced at brother Charles, secretly pointed with the feather of his pen towards Nicholas, and nodded his head in a grave and resolute manner, plainly signifying 'He'll do.'

Brother Charles nodded again, and exchanged a laughing look with brother Ned; but, just then, Nicholas stopped to refer to some other page, and Tim Linkinwater, unable to contain his satisfaction any longer, descended from his stool, and caught him rapturously by the hand.

'He has done it!' said Tim, looking round at his employers and shaking his head triumphantly. 'His capital B's and D's are exactly like mine; he dots all his small i's and crosses every t as he writes it. There an't such a young man as this in all London,' said Tim, clapping Nicholas on the back; 'not one. Don't tell me! The city can't produce his equal. I challenge the city to do it!'

With this casting down of his gauntlet, Tim Linkinwater struck the desk such a blow with his clenched fist, that the old blackbird tumbled off his perch with the start it gave him, and actually uttered a feeble croak, in the extremity of his astonishment.

'Well said, Tim - well said, Tim Linkinwater!' cried brother Charles, scarcely less pleased than Tim himself, and clapping his hands gently as he spoke. 'I knew our young friend would take great pains, and I was quite certain he would succeed, in no time. Didn't I say so, brother Ned?'

'You did, my dear brother; certainly, my dear brother, you said so, and you were quite right,' replied Ned. 'Quite right. Tim Linkinwater is excited, but he is justly excited, properly excited. Tim is a fine fellow. Tim Linkinwater, sir - you're a fine fellow.'

'Here's a pleasant thing to think of!' said Tim, wholly regardless of this address to himself, and raising his spectacles from the ledger to the brothers. 'Here's a pleasant thing. Do you suppose I haven't often thought of what would become of these books when I was gone? Do you suppose I haven't often thought that things might go on irregular and untidy here, after I was taken away? But now,' said Tim, extending his forefinger towards Nicholas, 'now, when I've shown him a little more, I'm satisfied. The business will go on, when I'm dead, as well as it did when I was alive - just the same - and I shall have the satisfaction of knowing that there never were such books - never were such books! No, nor never will be such books - as the books of Cheeryble Brothers.'

Having thus expressed his sentiments, Mr Linkinwater gave vent to a short laugh, indicative of defiance to the cities of London and Westminster, and, turning again to his desk, quietly carried seventy-six from the last column he had added up, and went on with his work.

'Tim Linkinwater, sir,' said brother Charles; 'give me your hand, sir. This is your birthday. How dare you talk about anything else till you have been wished many happy returns of the day, Tim Linkinwater? God bless you, Tim! God bless you!'

'My dear brother,' said the other, seizing Tim's disengaged fist, 'Tim Linkinwater looks ten years younger than he did on his last birthday.'

'Brother Ned, my dear boy,' returned the other old fellow, 'I believe that Tim Linkinwater was born a hundred and fifty years old, and is gradually coming down to five-and-twenty; for he's younger every birthday than he was the year before.'

'So he is, brother Charles, so he is,' replied brother Ned. 'There's not a doubt about it.'

'Remember, Tim,' said brother Charles, 'that we dine at half-past five today instead of two o'clock; we always depart from our usual custom on this anniversary, as you very well know, Tim Linkinwater. Mr Nickleby, my dear sir, you will make one. Tim Linkinwater, give me your snuff-box as a remembrance to brother Charles and myself of an attached and faithful rascal, and take that, in exchange, as a feeble mark of our respect and esteem, and don't open it until you go to bed, and never say another word upon the subject, or I'll kill the blackbird. A dog! He should have had a golden cage half-a-dozen years ago, if it

would have made him or his master a bit the happier. Now, brother Ned, my dear fellow, I'm ready. At half-past five, remember, Mr Nickleby! Tim Linkinwater, sir, take care of Mr Nickleby at half-past five. Now, brother Ned.'

Chattering away thus, according to custom, to prevent the possibility of any thanks or acknowledgment being expressed on the other side, the twins trotted off, arm-in-arm; having endowed Tim Linkinwater with a costly gold snuff-box, enclosing a bank note worth more than its value ten times told.

At a quarter past five o'clock, punctual to the minute, arrived, according to annual usage, Tim Linkinwater's sister; and a great to-do there was, between Tim Linkinwater's sister and the old housekeeper, respecting Tim Linkinwater's sister's cap, which had been dispatched, per boy, from the house of the family where Tim Linkinwater's sister boarded, and had not yet come to hand: notwithstanding that it had been packed up in a bandbox, and the bandbox in a handkerchief, and the handkerchief tied on to the boy's arm; and notwithstanding, too, that the place of its consignment had been duly set forth, at full length, on the back of an old letter, and the boy enjoined, under pain of divers horrible penalties, the full extent of which the eye of man could not foresee, to deliver the same with all possible speed, and not to loiter by the way. Tim Linkinwater's sister lamented; the housekeeper condoled; and both kept thrusting their heads out of the second-floor window to see if the boy was 'coming' - which would have been highly satisfactory, and, upon the whole, tantamount to his being come, as the distance to the corner was not quite five yards - when, all of a sudden, and when he was least expected, the messenger, carrying the bandbox with elaborate caution, appeared in an exactly opposite direction, puffing and panting for breath, and flushed with recent exercise; as well he might be; for he had taken the air, in the first instance, behind a hackney coach that went to Camberwell, and had followed two Punches afterwards and had seen the Stilts home to their own door. The cap was all safe, however - that was one comfort - and it was no use scolding him - that was another; so the boy went upon his way rejoicing, and Tim Linkinwater's sister presented herself to the company below-stairs, just five minutes after the half-hour had struck by Tim Linkinwater's own infallible clock.

The company consisted of the brothers Cheeryble, Tim Linkinwater, a ruddy-faced white-headed friend of Tim's (who was a superannuated bank clerk), and Nicholas, who was presented to Tim Linkinwater's sister with much gravity and solemnity. The party being now completed, brother Ned rang for dinner, and, dinner being shortly afterwards announced, led Tim Linkinwater's sister into the next room, where it was set forth with great preparation. Then, brother Ned took the head of the table, and brother Charles the foot; and Tim

Linkinwater's sister sat on the left hand of brother Ned, and Tim Linkinwater himself on his right: and an ancient butler of apoplectic appearance, and with very short legs, took up his position at the back of brother Ned's armchair, and, waving his right arm preparatory to taking off the covers with a flourish, stood bolt upright and motionless.

'For these and all other blessings, brother Charles,' said Ned.

'Lord, make us truly thankful, brother Ned,' said Charles.

Whereupon the apoplectic butler whisked off the top of the soup tureen, and shot, all at once, into a state of violent activity.

There was abundance of conversation, and little fear of its ever flagging, for the good-humour of the glorious old twins drew everybody out, and Tim Linkinwater's sister went off into a long and circumstantial account of Tim Linkinwater's infancy, immediately after the very first glass of champagne - taking care to premise that she was very much Tim's junior, and had only become acquainted with the facts from their being preserved and handed down in the family. This history concluded, brother Ned related how that, exactly thirty-five years ago, Tim Linkinwater was suspected to have received a love-letter, and how that vague information had been brought to the counting-house of his having been seen walking down Cheapside with an uncommonly handsome spinster; at which there was a roar of laughter, and Tim Linkinwater being charged with blushing, and called upon to explain, denied that the accusation was true; and further, that there would have been any harm in it if it had been; which last position occasioned the superannuated bank clerk to laugh tremendously, and to declare that it was the very best thing he had ever heard in his life, and that Tim Linkinwater might say a great many things before he said anything which would beat THAT.

There was one little ceremony peculiar to the day, both the matter and manner of which made a very strong impression upon Nicholas. The cloth having been removed and the decanters sent round for the first time, a profound silence succeeded, and in the cheerful faces of the brothers there appeared an expression, not of absolute melancholy, but of quiet thoughtfulness very unusual at a festive table. As Nicholas, struck by this sudden alteration, was wondering what it could portend, the brothers rose together, and the one at the top of the table leaning forward towards the other, and speaking in a low voice as if he were addressing him individually, said:

'Brother Charles, my dear fellow, there is another association connected with this day which must never be forgotten, and never can be forgotten, by you and me. This day, which brought into the world a

most faithful and excellent and exemplary fellow, took from it the kindest and very best of parents, the very best of parents to us both. I wish that she could have seen us in our prosperity, and shared it, and had the happiness of knowing how dearly we loved her in it, as we did when we were two poor boys; but that was not to be. My dear brother - The Memory of our Mother.'

'Good Lord!' thought Nicholas, 'and there are scores of people of their own station, knowing all this, and twenty thousand times more, who wouldn't ask these men to dinner because they eat with their knives and never went to school!'

But there was no time to moralise, for the joviality again became very brisk, and the decanter of port being nearly out, brother Ned pulled the bell, which was instantly answered by the apoplectic butler.

'David,' said brother Ned.

'Sir,' replied the butler.

'A magnum of the double-diamond, David, to drink the health of Mr Linkinwater.'

Instantly, by a feat of dexterity, which was the admiration of all the company, and had been, annually, for some years past, the apoplectic butler, bringing his left hand from behind the small of his back, produced the bottle with the corkscrew already inserted; uncorked it at a jerk; and placed the magnum and the cork before his master with the dignity of conscious cleverness.

'Ha!' said brother Ned, first examining the cork and afterwards filling his glass, while the old butler looked complacently and amiably on, as if it were all his own property, but the company were quite welcome to make free with it, 'this looks well, David.'

'It ought to, sir,' replied David. 'You'd be troubled to find such a glass of wine as is our double-diamond, and that Mr Linkinwater knows very well. That was laid down when Mr Linkinwater first come: that wine was, gentlemen.'

'Nay, David, nay,' interposed brother Charles.

'I wrote the entry in the cellar-book myself, sir, if you please,' said David, in the tone of a man, quite confident in the strength of his facts. 'Mr Linkinwater had only been here twenty year, sir, when that pipe of double-diamond was laid down.'



'David is quite right, quite right, brother Charles,' said Ned: 'are the people here, David?'

'Outside the door, sir,' replied the butler.

'Show 'em in, David, show 'em in.'

At this bidding, the older butler placed before his master a small tray of clean glasses, and opening the door admitted the jolly porters and warehousemen whom Nicholas had seen below. They were four in all, and as they came in, bowing, and grinning, and blushing, the housekeeper, and cook, and housemaid, brought up the rear.

'Seven,' said brother Ned, filling a corresponding number of glasses with the double-diamond, 'and David, eight. There! Now, you're all of you to drink the health of your best friend Mr Timothy Linkinwater, and wish him health and long life and many happy returns of this day, both for his own sake and that of your old masters, who consider him an inestimable treasure. Tim Linkinwater, sir, your health. Devil take you, Tim Linkinwater, sir, God bless you.'

With this singular contradiction of terms, brother Ned gave Tim Linkinwater a slap on the back, which made him look, for the moment, almost as apoplectic as the butler: and tossed off the contents of his glass in a twinkling.

The toast was scarcely drunk with all honour to Tim Linkinwater, when the sturdiest and jolliest subordinate elbowed himself a little in advance of his fellows, and exhibiting a very hot and flushed countenance, pulled a single lock of grey hair in the middle of his forehead as a respectful salute to the company, and delivered himself as follows - rubbing the palms of his hands very hard on a blue cotton handkerchief as he did so:

'We're allowed to take a liberty once a year, gen'lemen, and if you please we'll take it now; there being no time like the present, and no two birds in the hand worth one in the bush, as is well known - leastways in a contrary sense, which the meaning is the same. (A pause - the butler unconvinced.) What we mean to say is, that there never was (looking at the butler) - such - (looking at the cook) noble - excellent - (looking everywhere and seeing nobody) free, generous-spirited masters as them as has treated us so handsome this day. And here's thanking of 'em for all their goodness as is so constancy a diffusing of itself over everywhere, and wishing they may live long and die happy!'

When the foregoing speech was over - and it might have been much more elegant and much less to the purpose - the whole body of

subordinates under command of the apoplectic butler gave three soft cheers; which, to that gentleman's great indignation, were not very regular, inasmuch as the women persisted in giving an immense number of little shrill hurrahs among themselves, in utter disregard of the time. This done, they withdrew; shortly afterwards, Tim Linkinwater's sister withdrew; in reasonable time after that, the sitting was broken up for tea and coffee, and a round game of cards.

At half-past ten - late hours for the square - there appeared a little tray of sandwiches and a bowl of bishop, which bishop coming on the top of the double-diamond, and other excitements, had such an effect upon Tim Linkinwater, that he drew Nicholas aside, and gave him to understand, confidentially, that it was quite true about the uncommonly handsome spinster, and that she was to the full as good-looking as she had been described - more so, indeed - but that she was in too much of a hurry to change her condition, and consequently, while Tim was courting her and thinking of changing his, got married to somebody else. 'After all, I dare say it was my fault,' said Tim. 'I'll show you a print I have got upstairs, one of these days. It cost me five-and-twenty shillings. I bought it soon after we were cool to each other. Don't mention it, but it's the most extraordinary accidental likeness you ever saw - her very portrait, sir!'

By this time it was past eleven o'clock; and Tim Linkinwater's sister declaring that she ought to have been at home a full hour ago, a coach was procured, into which she was handed with great ceremony by brother Ned, while brother Charles imparted the fullest directions to the coachman, and besides paying the man a shilling over and above his fare, in order that he might take the utmost care of the lady, all but choked him with a glass of spirits of uncommon strength, and then nearly knocked all the breath out of his body in his energetic endeavours to knock it in again.

At length the coach rumbled off, and Tim Linkinwater's sister being now fairly on her way home, Nicholas and Tim Linkinwater's friend took their leaves together, and left old Tim and the worthy brothers to their repose.

As Nicholas had some distance to walk, it was considerably past midnight by the time he reached home, where he found his mother and Smike sitting up to receive him. It was long after their usual hour of retiring, and they had expected him, at the very latest, two hours ago; but the time had not hung heavily on their hands, for Mrs Nickleby had entertained Smike with a genealogical account of her family by the mother's side, comprising biographical sketches of the principal members, and Smike had sat wondering what it was all about, and whether it was learnt from a book, or said out of Mrs Nickleby's own head; so that they got on together very pleasantly.

Nicholas could not go to bed without expatiating on the excellences and munificence of the brothers Cheeryble, and relating the great success which had attended his efforts that day. But before he had said a dozen words, Mrs Nickleby, with many sly winks and nods, observed, that she was sure Mr Smike must be quite tired out, and that she positively must insist on his not sitting up a minute longer.

'A most biddable creature he is, to be sure,' said Mrs Nickleby, when Smike had wished them good-night and left the room. 'I know you'll excuse me, Nicholas, my dear, but I don't like to do this before a third person; indeed, before a young man it would not be quite proper, though really, after all, I don't know what harm there is in it, except that to be sure it's not a very becoming thing, though some people say it is very much so, and really I don't know why it should not be, if it's well got up, and the borders are small-plaited; of course, a good deal depends upon that.'

With which preface, Mrs Nickleby took her nightcap from between the leaves of a very large prayer-book where it had been folded up small, and proceeded to tie it on: talking away in her usual discursive manner, all the time.

'People may say what they like,' observed Mrs Nickleby, 'but there's a great deal of comfort in a nightcap, as I'm sure you would confess, Nicholas my dear, if you would only have strings to yours, and wear it like a Christian, instead of sticking it upon the very top of your head like a blue-coat boy. You needn't think it an unmanly or quizzical thing to be particular about your nightcap, for I have often heard your poor dear papa, and the Reverend Mr What's-his-name, who used to read prayers in that old church with the curious little steeple that the weathercock was blown off the night week before you were born, - I have often heard them say, that the young men at college are uncommonly particular about their nightcaps, and that the Oxford nightcaps are quite celebrated for their strength and goodness; so much so, indeed, that the young men never dream of going to bed without 'em, and I believe it's admitted on all hands that THEY know what's good, and don't coddle themselves.'

Nicholas laughed, and entering no further into the subject of this lengthened harangue, reverted to the pleasant tone of the little birthday party. And as Mrs Nickleby instantly became very curious respecting it, and made a great number of inquiries touching what they had had for dinner, and how it was put on table, and whether it was overdone or underdone, and who was there, and what 'the Mr Cherrybles' said, and what Nicholas said, and what the Mr Cherrybles said when he said that; Nicholas described the festivities at full length, and also the occurrences of the morning.

'Late as it is,' said Nicholas, 'I am almost selfish enough to wish that Kate had been up to hear all this. I was all impatience, as I came along, to tell her.'

'Why, Kate,' said Mrs Nickleby, putting her feet upon the fender, and drawing her chair close to it, as if settling herself for a long talk. 'Kate has been in bed - oh! a couple of hours - and I'm very glad, Nicholas my dear, that I prevailed upon her not to sit up, for I wished very much to have an opportunity of saying a few words to you. I am naturally anxious about it, and of course it's a very delightful and consoling thing to have a grown-up son that one can put confidence in, and advise with; indeed I don't know any use there would be in having sons at all, unless people could put confidence in them.'

Nicholas stopped in the middle of a sleepy yawn, as his mother began to speak: and looked at her with fixed attention.

'There was a lady in our neighbourhood,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'speaking of sons puts me in mind of it - a lady in our neighbourhood when we lived near Dawlish, I think her name was Rogers; indeed I am sure it was if it wasn't Murphy, which is the only doubt I have - '

'Is it about her, mother, that you wished to speak to me?' said Nicholas quietly.

'About HER!' cried Mrs Nickleby. 'Good gracious, Nicholas, my dear, how CAN you be so ridiculous! But that was always the way with your poor dear papa, - just his way - always wandering, never able to fix his thoughts on any one subject for two minutes together. I think I see him now!' said Mrs Nickleby, wiping her eyes, 'looking at me while I was talking to him about his affairs, just as if his ideas were in a state of perfect conglomeration! Anybody who had come in upon us suddenly, would have supposed I was confusing and distracting him instead of making things plainer; upon my word they would.'

'I am very sorry, mother, that I should inherit this unfortunate slowness of apprehension,' said Nicholas, kindly; 'but I'll do my best to understand you, if you'll only go straight on: indeed I will.'

'Your poor pa!' said Mrs Nickleby, pondering. 'He never knew, till it was too late, what I would have had him do!'

This was undoubtedly the case, inasmuch as the deceased Mr Nickleby had not arrived at the knowledge. Then he died. Neither had Mrs Nickleby herself; which is, in some sort, an explanation of the circumstance.

'However,' said Mrs Nickleby, drying her tears, 'this has nothing to do - certainly nothing whatever to do - with the gentleman in the next house.'

'I should suppose that the gentleman in the next house has as little to do with us,' returned Nicholas.

'There can be no doubt,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'that he IS a gentleman, and has the manners of a gentleman, and the appearance of a gentleman, although he does wear smalls and grey worsted stockings. That may be eccentricity, or he may be proud of his legs. I don't see why he shouldn't be. The Prince Regent was proud of his legs, and so was Daniel Lambert, who was also a fat man; HE was proud of his legs. So was Miss Biffin: she was - no,' added Mrs Nickleby, correcting, herself, 'I think she had only toes, but the principle is the same.'

Nicholas looked on, quite amazed at the introduction of this new theme. Which seemed just what Mrs Nickleby had expected him to be.

'You may well be surprised, Nicholas, my dear,' she said, 'I am sure I was. It came upon me like a flash of fire, and almost froze my blood. The bottom of his garden joins the bottom of ours, and of course I had several times seen him sitting among the scarlet-beans in his little arbour, or working at his little hot-beds. I used to think he stared rather, but I didn't take any particular notice of that, as we were newcomers, and he might be curious to see what we were like. But when he began to throw his cucumbers over our wall - '

'To throw his cucumbers over our wall!' repeated Nicholas, in great astonishment.

'Yes, Nicholas, my dear,' replied Mrs Nickleby in a very serious tone; 'his cucumbers over our wall. And vegetable marrows likewise.'

'Confound his impudence!' said Nicholas, firing immediately. 'What does he mean by that?'

'I don't think he means it impertinently at all,' replied Mrs Nickleby.

'What!' said Nicholas, 'cucumbers and vegetable marrows flying at the heads of the family as they walk in their own garden, and not meant impertinently! Why, mother - '

Nicholas stopped short; for there was an indescribable expression of placid triumph, mingled with a modest confusion, lingering between the borders of Mrs Nickleby's nightcap, which arrested his attention suddenly.

'He must be a very weak, and foolish, and inconsiderate man,' said Mrs Nickleby; 'blamable indeed - at least I suppose other people would consider him so; of course I can't be expected to express any opinion on that point, especially after always defending your poor dear papa when other people blamed him for making proposals to me; and to be sure there can be no doubt that he has taken a very singular way of showing it. Still at the same time, his attentions are - that is, as far as it goes, and to a certain extent of course - a flattering sort of thing; and although I should never dream of marrying again with a dear girl like Kate still unsettled in life - '

'Surely, mother, such an idea never entered your brain for an instant?' said Nicholas.

'Bless my heart, Nicholas my dear,' returned his mother in a peevish tone, 'isn't that precisely what I am saying, if you would only let me speak? Of course, I never gave it a second thought, and I am surprised and astonished that you should suppose me capable of such a thing. All I say is, what step is the best to take, so as to reject these advances civilly and delicately, and without hurting his feelings too much, and driving him to despair, or anything of that kind? My goodness me!' exclaimed Mrs Nickleby, with a half-simper, 'suppose he was to go doing anything rash to himself. Could I ever be happy again, Nicholas?'

Despite his vexation and concern, Nicholas could scarcely help smiling, as he rejoined, 'Now, do you think, mother, that such a result would be likely to ensue from the most cruel repulse?'

'Upon my word, my dear, I don't know,' returned Mrs Nickleby; 'really, I don't know. I am sure there was a case in the day before yesterday's paper, extracted from one of the French newspapers, about a journeyman shoemaker who was jealous of a young girl in an adjoining village, because she wouldn't shut herself up in an air-tight three-pair-of-stairs, and charcoal herself to death with him; and who went and hid himself in a wood with a sharp-pointed knife, and rushed out, as she was passing by with a few friends, and killed himself first, and then all the friends, and then her - no, killed all the friends first, and then herself, and then HIMself - which it is quite frightful to think of. Somehow or other,' added Mrs Nickleby, after a momentary pause, 'they always ARE journeyman shoemakers who do these things in France, according to the papers. I don't know how it is - something in the leather, I suppose.'

'But this man, who is not a shoemaker - what has he done, mother, what has he said?' inquired Nicholas, fretted almost beyond endurance, but looking nearly as resigned and patient as Mrs

Nickleby herself. 'You know, there is no language of vegetables, which converts a cucumber into a formal declaration of attachment.'

'My dear,' replied Mrs Nickleby, tossing her head and looking at the ashes in the grate, 'he has done and said all sorts of things.'

'Is there no mistake on your part?' asked Nicholas.

'Mistake!' cried Mrs Nickleby. 'Lord, Nicholas my dear, do you suppose I don't know when a man's in earnest?'

'Well, well!' muttered Nicholas.

'Every time I go to the window,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'he kisses one hand, and lays the other upon his heart - of course it's very foolish of him to do so, and I dare say you'll say it's very wrong, but he does it very respectfully - very respectfully indeed - and very tenderly, extremely tenderly. So far, he deserves the greatest credit; there can be no doubt about that. Then, there are the presents which come pouring over the wall every day, and very fine they certainly are, very fine; we had one of the cucumbers at dinner yesterday, and think of pickling the rest for next winter. And last evening,' added Mrs Nickleby, with increased confusion, 'he called gently over the wall, as I was walking in the garden, and proposed marriage, and an elopement. His voice is as clear as a bell or a musical glass - very like a musical glass indeed - but of course I didn't listen to it. Then, the question is, Nicholas my dear, what am I to do?'

'Does Kate know of this?' asked Nicholas.

'I have not said a word about it yet,' answered his mother.

'Then, for Heaven's sake,' rejoined Nicholas, rising, 'do not, for it would make her very unhappy. And with regard to what you should do, my dear mother, do what your good sense and feeling, and respect for my father's memory, would prompt. There are a thousand ways in which you can show your dislike of these preposterous and doting attentions. If you act as decidedly as you ought and they are still continued, and to your annoyance, I can speedily put a stop to them. But I should not interfere in a matter so ridiculous, and attach importance to it, until you have vindicated yourself. Most women can do that, but especially one of your age and condition, in circumstances like these, which are unworthy of a serious thought. I would not shame you by seeming to take them to heart, or treat them earnestly for an instant. Absurd old idiot!'

So saying, Nicholas kissed his mother, and bade her good-night, and they retired to their respective chambers.

To do Mrs Nickleby justice, her attachment to her children would have prevented her seriously contemplating a second marriage, even if she could have so far conquered her recollections of her late husband as to have any strong inclinations that way. But, although there was no evil and little real selfishness in Mrs Nickleby's heart, she had a weak head and a vain one; and there was something so flattering in being sought (and vainly sought) in marriage at this time of day, that she could not dismiss the passion of the unknown gentleman quite so summarily or lightly as Nicholas appeared to deem becoming.

'As to its being preposterous, and doting, and ridiculous,' thought Mrs Nickleby, communing with herself in her own room, 'I don't see that, at all. It's hopeless on his part, certainly; but why he should be an absurd old idiot, I confess I don't see. He is not to be supposed to know it's hopeless. Poor fellow! He is to be pitied, I think!'

Having made these reflections, Mrs Nickleby looked in her little dressing-glass, and walking backward a few steps from it, tried to remember who it was who used to say that when Nicholas was one-and-twenty he would have more the appearance of her brother than her son. Not being able to call the authority to mind, she extinguished her candle, and drew up the window-blind to admit the light of morning, which had, by this time, begun to dawn.

'It's a bad light to distinguish objects in,' murmured Mrs Nickleby, peering into the garden, 'and my eyes are not very good - I was short-sighted from a child - but, upon my word, I think there's another large vegetable marrow sticking, at this moment, on the broken glass bottles at the top of the wall!'