

Chapter XXXVIII

Comprises certain Particulars arising out of a Visit of Condolence, which may prove important hereafter. Smike unexpectedly encounters a very old Friend, who invites him to his House, and will take no Denial

Quite unconscious of the demonstrations of their amorous neighbour, or their effects upon the susceptible bosom of her mama, Kate Nickleby had, by this time, begun to enjoy a settled feeling of tranquillity and happiness, to which, even in occasional and transitory glimpses, she had long been a stranger. Living under the same roof with the beloved brother from whom she had been so suddenly and hardly separated: with a mind at ease, and free from any persecutions which could call a blush into her cheek, or a pang into her heart, she seemed to have passed into a new state of being. Her former cheerfulness was restored, her step regained its elasticity and lightness, the colour which had forsaken her cheek visited it once again, and Kate Nickleby looked more beautiful than ever.

Such was the result to which Miss La Creevy's ruminations and observations led her, when the cottage had been, as she emphatically said, 'thoroughly got to rights, from the chimney-pots to the street-door scraper,' and the busy little woman had at length a moment's time to think about its inmates.

'Which I declare I haven't had since I first came down here,' said Miss La Creevy; 'for I have thought of nothing but hammers, nails, screwdrivers, and gimlets, morning, noon, and night.'

'You never bestowed one thought upon yourself, I believe,' returned Kate, smiling.

'Upon my word, my dear, when there are so many pleasanter things to think of, I should be a goose if I did,' said Miss La Creevy. 'By-the-bye, I HAVE thought of somebody too. Do you know, that I observe a great change in one of this family - a very extraordinary change?'

'In whom?' asked Kate, anxiously. 'Not in - '

'Not in your brother, my dear,' returned Miss La Creevy, anticipating the close of the sentence, 'for he is always the same affectionate good-natured clever creature, with a spice of the - I won't say who - in him when there's any occasion, that he was when I first knew you. No. Smike, as he WILL be called, poor fellow! for he won't hear of a MR before his name, is greatly altered, even in this short time.'

'How?' asked Kate. 'Not in health?'

'N - n - o; perhaps not in health exactly,' said Miss La Creevy, pausing to consider, 'although he is a worn and feeble creature, and has that in his face which it would wring my heart to see in yours. No; not in health.'

'How then?'

'I scarcely know,' said the miniature painter. 'But I have watched him, and he has brought the tears into my eyes many times. It is not a very difficult matter to do that, certainly, for I am easily melted; still I think these came with good cause and reason. I am sure that since he has been here, he has grown, from some strong cause, more conscious of his weak intellect. He feels it more. It gives him greater pain to know that he wanders sometimes, and cannot understand very simple things. I have watched him when you have not been by, my dear, sit brooding by himself, with such a look of pain as I could scarcely bear to see, and then get up and leave the room: so sorrowfully, and in such dejection, that I cannot tell you how it has hurt me. Not three weeks ago, he was a light-hearted busy creature, overjoyed to be in a bustle, and as happy as the day was long. Now, he is another being - the same willing, harmless, faithful, loving creature - but the same in nothing else.'

'Surely this will all pass off,' said Kate. 'Poor fellow!'

'I hope,' returned her little friend, with a gravity very unusual in her, 'it may. I hope, for the sake of that poor lad, it may. However,' said Miss La Creevy, relapsing into the cheerful, chattering tone, which was habitual to her, 'I have said my say, and a very long say it is, and a very wrong say too, I shouldn't wonder at all. I shall cheer him up tonight, at all events, for if he is to be my squire all the way to the Strand, I shall talk on, and on, and on, and never leave off, till I have roused him into a laugh at something. So the sooner he goes, the better for him, and the sooner I go, the better for me, I am sure, or else I shall have my maid gallivanting with somebody who may rob the house - though what there is to take away, besides tables and chairs, I don't know, except the miniatures: and he is a clever thief who can dispose of them to any great advantage, for I can't, I know, and that's the honest truth.'

So saying, little Miss La Creevy hid her face in a very flat bonnet, and herself in a very big shawl; and fixing herself tightly into the latter, by means of a large pin, declared that the omnibus might come as soon as it pleased, for she was quite ready.

But there was still Mrs Nickleby to take leave of; and long before that good lady had concluded some reminiscences bearing upon, and appropriate to, the occasion, the omnibus arrived. This put Miss La

Creevy in a great bustle, in consequence whereof, as she secretly rewarded the servant girl with eighteen-pence behind the street-door, she pulled out of her reticule ten-pennyworth of halfpence, which rolled into all possible corners of the passage, and occupied some considerable time in the picking up. This ceremony had, of course, to be succeeded by a second kissing of Kate and Mrs Nickleby, and a gathering together of the little basket and the brown-paper parcel, during which proceedings, 'the omnibus,' as Miss La Creevy protested, 'swore so dreadfully, that it was quite awful to hear it.' At length and at last, it made a feint of going away, and then Miss La Creevy darted out, and darted in, apologising with great volubility to all the passengers, and declaring that she wouldn't purposely have kept them waiting on any account whatever. While she was looking about for a convenient seat, the conductor pushed Smike in, and cried that it was all right - though it wasn't - and away went the huge vehicle, with the noise of half-a-dozen brewers' drays at least.

Leaving it to pursue its journey at the pleasure of the conductor aforementioned, who lounged gracefully on his little shelf behind, smoking an odoriferous cigar; and leaving it to stop, or go on, or gallop, or crawl, as that gentleman deemed expedient and advisable; this narrative may embrace the opportunity of ascertaining the condition of Sir Mulberry Hawk, and to what extent he had, by this time, recovered from the injuries consequent on being flung violently from his cabriolet, under the circumstances already detailed.

With a shattered limb, a body severely bruised, a face disfigured by half-healed scars, and pallid from the exhaustion of recent pain and fever, Sir Mulberry Hawk lay stretched upon his back, on the couch to which he was doomed to be a prisoner for some weeks yet to come. Mr Pyke and Mr Pluck sat drinking hard in the next room, now and then varying the monotonous murmurs of their conversation with a half-smothered laugh, while the young lord - the only member of the party who was not thoroughly irredeemable, and who really had a kind heart - sat beside his Mentor, with a cigar in his mouth, and read to him, by the light of a lamp, such scraps of intelligence from a paper of the day, as were most likely to yield him interest or amusement.

'Curse those hounds!' said the invalid, turning his head impatiently towards the adjoining room; 'will nothing stop their infernal throats?'

Messrs Pyke and Pluck heard the exclamation, and stopped immediately: winking to each other as they did so, and filling their glasses to the brim, as some recompense for the deprivation of speech.

'Damn!' muttered the sick man between his teeth, and writhing impatiently in his bed. 'Isn't this mattress hard enough, and the room

dull enough, and pain bad enough, but THEY must torture me? What's the time?

'Half-past eight,' replied his friend.

'Here, draw the table nearer, and let us have the cards again,' said Sir Mulberry. 'More piquet. Come.'

It was curious to see how eagerly the sick man, debarred from any change of position save the mere turning of his head from side to side, watched every motion of his friend in the progress of the game; and with what eagerness and interest he played, and yet how warily and coolly. His address and skill were more than twenty times a match for his adversary, who could make little head against them, even when fortune favoured him with good cards, which was not often the case. Sir Mulberry won every game; and when his companion threw down the cards, and refused to play any longer, thrust forth his wasted arm and caught up the stakes with a boastful oath, and the same hoarse laugh, though considerably lowered in tone, that had resounded in Ralph Nickleby's dining-room, months before.

While he was thus occupied, his man appeared, to announce that Mr Ralph Nickleby was below, and wished to know how he was, tonight.

'Better,' said Sir Mulberry, impatiently.

'Mr Nickleby wishes to know, sir - '

'I tell you, better,' replied Sir Mulberry, striking his hand upon the table.

The man hesitated for a moment or two, and then said that Mr Nickleby had requested permission to see Sir Mulberry Hawk, if it was not inconvenient. 'It IS inconvenient. I can't see him. I can't see anybody,' said his master, more violently than before. 'You know that, you blockhead.'

'I am very sorry, sir,' returned the man. 'But Mr Nickleby pressed so much, sir - '

The fact was, that Ralph Nickleby had bribed the man, who, being anxious to earn his money with a view to future favours, held the door in his hand, and ventured to linger still.

'Did he say whether he had any business to speak about?' inquired Sir Mulberry, after a little impatient consideration.

'No, sir. He said he wished to see you, sir. Particularly, Mr Nickleby said, sir.'

'Tell him to come up. Here,' cried Sir Mulberry, calling the man back, as he passed his hand over his disfigured face, 'move that lamp, and put it on the stand behind me. Wheel that table away, and place a chair there - further off. Leave it so.'

The man obeyed these directions as if he quite comprehended the motive with which they were dictated, and left the room. Lord Frederick Verisopht, remarking that he would look in presently, strolled into the adjoining apartment, and closed the folding door behind him.

Then was heard a subdued footstep on the stairs; and Ralph Nickleby, hat in hand, crept softly into the room, with his body bent forward as if in profound respect, and his eyes fixed upon the face of his worthy client.

'Well, Nickleby,' said Sir Mulberry, motioning him to the chair by the couch side, and waving his hand in assumed carelessness, 'I have had a bad accident, you see.'

'I see,' rejoined Ralph, with the same steady gaze. 'Bad, indeed! I should not have known you, Sir Mulberry. Dear, dear! This IS bad.'

Ralph's manner was one of profound humility and respect; and the low tone of voice was that, which the gentlest consideration for a sick man would have taught a visitor to assume. But the expression of his face, Sir Mulberry's being averted, was in extraordinary contrast; and as he stood, in his usual attitude, calmly looking on the prostrate form before him, all that part of his features which was not cast into shadow by his protruding and contracted brows, bore the impress of a sarcastic smile.

'Sit down,' said Sir Mulberry, turning towards him, as though by a violent effort. 'Am I a sight, that you stand gazing there?'

As he turned his face, Ralph recoiled a step or two, and making as though he were irresistibly impelled to express astonishment, but was determined not to do so, sat down with well-acted confusion.

'I have inquired at the door, Sir Mulberry, every day,' said Ralph, 'twice a day, indeed, at first - and tonight, presuming upon old acquaintance, and past transactions by which we have mutually benefited in some degree, I could not resist soliciting admission to your chamber. Have you - have you suffered much?' said Ralph,

bending forward, and allowing the same harsh smile to gather upon his face, as the other closed his eyes.

'More than enough to please me, and less than enough to please some broken-down hacks that you and I know of, and who lay their ruin between us, I dare say,' returned Sir Mulberry, tossing his arm restlessly upon the coverlet.

Ralph shrugged his shoulders in deprecation of the intense irritation with which this had been said; for there was an aggravating, cold distinctness in his speech and manner which so grated on the sick man that he could scarcely endure it.

'And what is it in these 'past transactions,' that brought you here tonight?' asked Sir Mulberry.

'Nothing,' replied Ralph. 'There are some bills of my lord's which need renewal; but let them be till you are well. I - I - came,' said Ralph, speaking more slowly, and with harsher emphasis, 'I came to say how grieved I am that any relative of mine, although disowned by me, should have inflicted such punishment on you as - '

'Punishment!' interposed Sir Mulberry.

'I know it has been a severe one,' said Ralph, wilfully mistaking the meaning of the interruption, 'and that has made me the more anxious to tell you that I disown this vagabond - that I acknowledge him as no kin of mine - and that I leave him to take his deserts from you, and every man besides. You may wring his neck if you please. I shall not interfere.'

'This story that they tell me here, has got abroad then, has it?' asked Sir Mulberry, clenching his hands and teeth.

'Noised in all directions,' replied Ralph. 'Every club and gaming-room has rung with it. There has been a good song made about it, as I am told,' said Ralph, looking eagerly at his questioner. 'I have not heard it myself, not being in the way of such things, but I have been told it's even printed - for private circulation - but that's all over town, of course.'

'It's a lie!' said Sir Mulberry; 'I tell you it's all a lie. The mare took fright.'

'They SAY he frightened her,' observed Ralph, in the same unmoved and quiet manner. 'Some say he frightened you, but THAT'S a lie, I know. I have said that boldly - oh, a score of times! I am a peaceable man, but I can't hear folks tell that of you. No, no.'

When Sir Mulberry found coherent words to utter, Ralph bent forward with his hand to his ear, and a face as calm as if its every line of sternness had been cast in iron.

'When I am off this cursed bed,' said the invalid, actually striking at his broken leg in the ecstasy of his passion, 'I'll have such revenge as never man had yet. By God, I will. Accident favouring him, he has marked me for a week or two, but I'll put a mark on him that he shall carry to his grave. I'll slit his nose and ears, flog him, maim him for life. I'll do more than that; I'll drag that pattern of chastity, that pink of prudery, the delicate sister, through - '

It might have been that even Ralph's cold blood tingled in his cheeks at that moment. It might have been that Sir Mulberry remembered, that, knave and usurer as he was, he must, in some early time of infancy, have twined his arm about her father's neck. He stopped, and menacing with his hand, confirmed the unuttered threat with a tremendous oath.

'It is a galling thing,' said Ralph, after a short term of silence, during which he had eyed the sufferer keenly, 'to think that the man about town, the rake, the ROUE, the rook of twenty seasons should be brought to this pass by a mere boy!'

Sir Mulberry darted a wrathful look at him, but Ralph's eyes were bent upon the ground, and his face wore no other expression than one of thoughtfulness.

'A raw, slight stripling,' continued Ralph, 'against a man whose very weight might crush him; to say nothing of his skill in - I am right, I think,' said Ralph, raising his eyes, 'you WERE a patron of the ring once, were you not?'

The sick man made an impatient gesture, which Ralph chose to consider as one of acquiescence.

'Ha!' he said, 'I thought so. That was before I knew you, but I was pretty sure I couldn't be mistaken. He is light and active, I suppose. But those were slight advantages compared with yours. Luck, luck! These hang-dog outcasts have it.'

'He'll need the most he has, when I am well again,' said Sir Mulberry Hawk, 'let him fly where he will.'

'Oh!' returned Ralph quickly, 'he doesn't dream of that. He is here, good sir, waiting your pleasure, here in London, walking the streets at noonday; carrying it off jauntily; looking for you, I swear,' said Ralph, his face darkening, and his own hatred getting the upper hand of him,

for the first time, as this gay picture of Nicholas presented itself; 'if we were only citizens of a country where it could be safely done, I'd give good money to have him stabbed to the heart and rolled into the kennel for the dogs to tear.'

As Ralph, somewhat to the surprise of his old client, vented this little piece of sound family feeling, and took up his hat preparatory to departing, Lord Frederick Verisopht looked in.

'Why what in the deyvle's name, Hawk, have you and Nickleby been talking about?' said the young man. 'I neyver heard such an insufferable riot. Croak, croak, croak. Bow, wow, wow. What has it all been about?'

'Sir Mulberry has been angry, my Lord,' said Ralph, looking towards the couch.

'Not about money, I hope? Nothing has gone wrong in business, has it, Nickleby?'

'No, my Lord, no,' returned Ralph. 'On that point we always agree. Sir Mulberry has been calling to mind the cause of - '

There was neither necessity nor opportunity for Ralph to proceed; for Sir Mulberry took up the theme, and vented his threats and oaths against Nicholas, almost as ferociously as before.

Ralph, who was no common observer, was surprised to see that as this tirade proceeded, the manner of Lord Frederick Verisopht, who at the commencement had been twirling his whiskers with a most dandified and listless air, underwent a complete alteration. He was still more surprised when, Sir Mulberry ceasing to speak, the young lord angrily, and almost unaffectedly, requested never to have the subject renewed in his presence.

'Mind that, Hawk!' he added, with unusual energy. 'I never will be a party to, or permit, if I can help it, a cowardly attack upon this young fellow.'

'Cowardly!' interrupted his friend.

'Ye-es,' said the other, turning full upon him. 'If you had told him who you were; if you had given him your card, and found out, afterwards, that his station or character prevented your fighting him, it would have been bad enough then; upon my soul it would have been bad enough then. As it is, you did wrong. I did wrong too, not to interfere, and I am sorry for it. What happened to you afterwards, was as much the consequence of accident as design, and more your fault than his;

and it shall not, with my knowledge, be cruelly visited upon him, it shall not indeed.'

With this emphatic repetition of his concluding words, the young lord turned upon his heel; but before he had reached the adjoining room he turned back again, and said, with even greater vehemence than he had displayed before,

'I do believe, now; upon my honour I do believe, that the sister is as virtuous and modest a young lady as she is a handsome one; and of the brother, I say this, that he acted as her brother should, and in a manly and spirited manner. And I only wish, with all my heart and soul, that any one of us came out of this matter half as well as he does.'

So saying, Lord Frederick Verisopht walked out of the room, leaving Ralph Nickleby and Sir Mulberry in most unpleasant astonishment.

'Is this your pupil?' asked Ralph, softly, 'or has he come fresh from some country parson?'

'Green fools take these fits sometimes,' replied Sir Mulberry Hawk, biting his lip, and pointing to the door. 'Leave him to me.'

Ralph exchanged a familiar look with his old acquaintance; for they had suddenly grown confidential again in this alarming surprise; and took his way home, thoughtfully and slowly.

While these things were being said and done, and long before they were concluded, the omnibus had disgorged Miss La Creevy and her escort, and they had arrived at her own door. Now, the good-nature of the little miniature painter would by no means allow of Smike's walking back again, until he had been previously refreshed with just a sip of something comfortable and a mixed biscuit or so; and Smike, entertaining no objection either to the sip of something comfortable, or the mixed biscuit, but, considering on the contrary that they would be a very pleasant preparation for a walk to Bow, it fell out that he delayed much longer than he originally intended, and that it was some half-hour after dusk when he set forth on his journey home.

There was no likelihood of his losing his way, for it lay quite straight before him, and he had walked into town with Nicholas, and back alone, almost every day. So, Miss La Creevy and he shook hands with mutual confidence, and, being charged with more kind remembrances to Mrs and Miss Nickleby, Smike started off.

At the foot of Ludgate Hill, he turned a little out of the road to satisfy his curiosity by having a look at Newgate. After staring up at the

sombre walls, from the opposite side of the way, with great care and dread for some minutes, he turned back again into the old track, and walked briskly through the city; stopping now and then to gaze in at the window of some particularly attractive shop, then running for a little way, then stopping again, and so on, as any other country lad might do.

He had been gazing for a long time through a jeweller's window, wishing he could take some of the beautiful trinkets home as a present, and imagining what delight they would afford if he could, when the clocks struck three-quarters past eight; roused by the sound, he hurried on at a very quick pace, and was crossing the corner of a by-street when he felt himself violently brought to, with a jerk so sudden that he was obliged to cling to a lamp-post to save himself from falling. At the same moment, a small boy clung tight round his leg, and a shrill cry of 'Here he is, father! Hooray!' vibrated in his ears.

Smike knew that voice too well. He cast his despairing eyes downward towards the form from which it had proceeded, and, shuddering from head to foot, looked round. Mr Squeers had hooked him in the coat collar with the handle of his umbrella, and was hanging on at the other end with all his might and main. The cry of triumph proceeded from Master Wackford, who, regardless of all his kicks and struggles, clung to him with the tenacity of a bull-dog!

One glance showed him this; and in that one glance the terrified creature became utterly powerless and unable to utter a sound.

'Here's a go!' cried Mr Squeers, gradually coming hand-over-hand down the umbrella, and only unhooking it when he had got tight hold of the victim's collar. 'Here's a delicious go! Wackford, my boy, call up one of them coaches.'

'A coach, father!' cried little Wackford.

'Yes, a coach, sir,' replied Squeers, feasting his eyes upon the countenance of Smike. 'Damn the expense. Let's have him in a coach.'

'What's he been a doing of?' asked a labourer with a hod of bricks, against whom and a fellow-labourer Mr Squeers had backed, on the first jerk of the umbrella.

'Everything!' replied Mr Squeers, looking fixedly at his old pupil in a sort of rapturous trance. 'Everything - running away, sir - joining in bloodthirsty attacks upon his master - there's nothing that's bad that he hasn't done. Oh, what a delicious go is this here, good Lord!'

The man looked from Squeers to Smike; but such mental faculties as the poor fellow possessed, had utterly deserted him. The coach came up; Master Wackford entered; Squeers pushed in his prize, and following close at his heels, pulled up the glasses. The coachman mounted his box and drove slowly off, leaving the two bricklayers, and an old apple-woman, and a town-made little boy returning from an evening school, who had been the only witnesses of the scene, to meditate upon it at their leisure.

Mr Squeers sat himself down on the opposite seat to the unfortunate Smike, and, planting his hands firmly on his knees, looked at him for some five minutes, when, seeming to recover from his trance, he uttered a loud laugh, and slapped his old pupil's face several times - taking the right and left sides alternately.

'It isn't a dream!' said Squeers. 'That's real flesh and blood! I know the feel of it!' and being quite assured of his good fortune by these experiments, Mr Squeers administered a few boxes on the ear, lest the entertainments should seem to partake of sameness, and laughed louder and longer at every one.

'Your mother will be fit to jump out of her skin, my boy, when she hears of this,' said Squeers to his son.

'Oh, won't she though, father?' replied Master Wackford.

'To think,' said Squeers, 'that you and me should be turning out of a street, and come upon him at the very nick; and that I should have him tight, at only one cast of the umbrella, as if I had hooked him with a grappling-iron! Ha, ha!'

'Didn't I catch hold of his leg, neither, father?' said little Wackford.

'You did; like a good 'un, my boy,' said Mr Squeers, patting his son's head, 'and you shall have the best button-over jacket and waistcoat that the next new boy brings down, as a reward of merit. Mind that. You always keep on in the same path, and do them things that you see your father do, and when you die you'll go right slap to Heaven and no questions asked.'

Improving the occasion in these words, Mr Squeers patted his son's head again, and then patted Smike's - but harder; and inquired in a bantering tone how he found himself by this time.

'I must go home,' replied Smike, looking wildly round.

'To be sure you must. You're about right there,' replied Mr Squeers. 'You'll go home very soon, you will. You'll find yourself at the peaceful

village of Dotheboys, in Yorkshire, in something under a week's time, my young friend; and the next time you get away from there, I give you leave to keep away. Where's the clothes you run off in, you ungrateful robber?' said Mr Squeers, in a severe voice.

Smike glanced at the neat attire which the care of Nicholas had provided for him; and wrung his hands.

'Do you know that I could hang you up, outside of the Old Bailey, for making away with them articles of property?' said Squeers. 'Do you know that it's a hanging matter - and I an't quite certain whether it an't an anatomy one besides - to walk off with up'ards of the valley of five pound from a dwelling-house? Eh? Do you know that? What do you suppose was the worth of them clothes you had? Do you know that that Wellington boot you wore, cost eight-and-twenty shillings when it was a pair, and the shoe seven-and-six? But you came to the right shop for mercy when you came to me, and thank your stars that it IS me as has got to serve you with the article.'

Anybody not in Mr Squeers's confidence would have supposed that he was quite out of the article in question, instead of having a large stock on hand ready for all comers; nor would the opinion of sceptical persons have undergone much alteration when he followed up the remark by poking Smike in the chest with the ferrule of his umbrella, and dealing a smart shower of blows, with the ribs of the same instrument, upon his head and shoulders.

'I never threshed a boy in a hackney coach before,' said Mr Squeers, when he stopped to rest. 'There's inconveniency in it, but the novelty gives it a sort of relish, too!'

Poor Smike! He warded off the blows, as well as he could, and now shrunk into a corner of the coach, with his head resting on his hands, and his elbows on his knees; he was stunned and stupefied, and had no more idea that any act of his, would enable him to escape from the all-powerful Squeers, now that he had no friend to speak to or to advise with, than he had had in all the weary years of his Yorkshire life which preceded the arrival of Nicholas.

The journey seemed endless; street after street was entered and left behind; and still they went jolting on. At last Mr Squeers began to thrust his head out of the widow every half-minute, and to bawl a variety of directions to the coachman; and after passing, with some difficulty, through several mean streets which the appearance of the houses and the bad state of the road denoted to have been recently built, Mr Squeers suddenly tugged at the check string with all his might, and cried, 'Stop!'

'What are you pulling a man's arm off for?' said the coachman looking angrily down.

'That's the house,' replied Squeers. 'The second of them four little houses, one story high, with the green shutters. There's brass plate on the door, with the name of Snawley.'

'Couldn't you say that without wrenching a man's limbs off his body?' inquired the coachman.

'No!' bawled Mr Squeers. 'Say another word, and I'll summons you for having a broken winder. Stop!'

Obedient to this direction, the coach stopped at Mr Snawley's door. Mr Snawley may be remembered as the sleek and sanctified gentleman who confided two sons (in law) to the parental care of Mr Squeers, as narrated in the fourth chapter of this history. Mr Snawley's house was on the extreme borders of some new settlements adjoining Somers Town, and Mr Squeers had taken lodgings therein for a short time, as his stay was longer than usual, and the Saracen, having experience of Master Wackford's appetite, had declined to receive him on any other terms than as a full-grown customer.

'Here we are!' said Squeers, hurrying Smike into the little parlour, where Mr Snawley and his wife were taking a lobster supper. 'Here's the vagrant - the felon - the rebel - the monster of unthankfulness.'

'What! The boy that run away!' cried Snawley, resting his knife and fork upright on the table, and opening his eyes to their full width.

'The very boy', said Squeers, putting his fist close to Smike's nose, and drawing it away again, and repeating the process several times, with a vicious aspect. 'If there wasn't a lady present, I'd fetch him such a - : never mind, I'll owe it him.'

And here Mr Squeers related how, and in what manner, and when and where, he had picked up the runaway.

'It's clear that there has been a Providence in it, sir,' said Mr Snawley, casting down his eyes with an air of humility, and elevating his fork, with a bit of lobster on the top of it, towards the ceiling.

'Providence is against him, no doubt,' replied Mr Squeers, scratching his nose. 'Of course; that was to be expected. Anybody might have known that.'

'Hard-heartedness and evil-doing will never prosper, sir,' said Mr Snawley.

'Never was such a thing known,' rejoined Squeers, taking a little roll of notes from his pocket-book, to see that they were all safe.

'I have been, Mr Snawley,' said Mr Squeers, when he had satisfied himself upon this point, 'I have been that chap's benefactor, feeder, teacher, and clother. I have been that chap's classical, commercial, mathematical, philosophical, and trigonometrical friend. My son - my only son, Wackford - has been his brother; Mrs Squeers has been his mother, grandmother, aunt, - ah! and I may say uncle too, all in one. She never cottoned to anybody, except them two engaging and delightful boys of yours, as she cottoned to this chap. What's my return? What's come of my milk of human kindness? It turns into curds and whey when I look at him.'

'Well it may, sir,' said Mrs Snawley. 'Oh! Well it may, sir.'

'Where has he been all this time?' inquired Snawley. 'Has he been living with - ?'

'Ah, sir!' interposed Squeers, confronting him again. 'Have you been a living with that there devilish Nickleby, sir?'

But no threats or cuffs could elicit from Smike one word of reply to this question; for he had internally resolved that he would rather perish in the wretched prison to which he was again about to be consigned, than utter one syllable which could involve his first and true friend. He had already called to mind the strict injunctions of secrecy as to his past life, which Nicholas had laid upon him when they travelled from Yorkshire; and a confused and perplexed idea that his benefactor might have committed some terrible crime in bringing him away, which would render him liable to heavy punishment if detected, had contributed, in some degree, to reduce him to his present state of apathy and terror.

Such were the thoughts - if to visions so imperfect and undefined as those which wandered through his enfeebled brain, the term can be applied - which were present to the mind of Smike, and rendered him deaf alike to intimidation and persuasion. Finding every effort useless, Mr Squeers conducted him to a little back room up-stairs, where he was to pass the night; and, taking the precaution of removing his shoes, and coat and waistcoat, and also of locking the door on the outside, lest he should muster up sufficient energy to make an attempt at escape, that worthy gentleman left him to his meditations.

What those meditations were, and how the poor creature's heart sunk within him when he thought - when did he, for a moment, cease to think? - of his late home, and the dear friends and familiar faces with which it was associated, cannot be told. To prepare the mind for such

a heavy sleep, its growth must be stopped by rigour and cruelty in childhood; there must be years of misery and suffering, lightened by no ray of hope; the chords of the heart, which beat a quick response to the voice of gentleness and affection, must have rusted and broken in their secret places, and bear the lingering echo of no old word of love or kindness. Gloomy, indeed, must have been the short day, and dull the long, long twilight, preceding such a night of intellect as his.

There were voices which would have roused him, even then; but their welcome tones could not penetrate there; and he crept to bed the same listless, hopeless, blighted creature, that Nicholas had first found him at the Yorkshire school.