

Chapter XL

In which Nicholas falls in Love. He employs a Mediator, whose Proceedings are crowned with unexpected Success, excepting in one solitary Particular

Once more out of the clutches of his old persecutor, it needed no fresh stimulation to call forth the utmost energy and exertion that Smike was capable of summoning to his aid. Without pausing for a moment to reflect upon the course he was taking, or the probability of its leading him homewards or the reverse, he fled away with surprising swiftness and constancy of purpose, borne upon such wings as only Fear can wear, and impelled by imaginary shouts in the well remembered voice of Squeers, who, with a host of pursuers, seemed to the poor fellow's disordered senses to press hard upon his track; now left at a greater distance in the rear, and now gaining faster and faster upon him, as the alternations of hope and terror agitated him by turns. Long after he had become assured that these sounds were but the creation of his excited brain, he still held on, at a pace which even weakness and exhaustion could scarcely retard. It was not until the darkness and quiet of a country road, recalled him to a sense of external objects, and the starry sky, above, warned him of the rapid flight of time, that, covered with dust and panting for breath, he stopped to listen and look about him.

All was still and silent. A glare of light in the distance, casting a warm glow upon the sky, marked where the huge city lay. Solitary fields, divided by hedges and ditches, through many of which he had crashed and scrambled in his flight, skirted the road, both by the way he had come and upon the opposite side. It was late now. They could scarcely trace him by such paths as he had taken, and if he could hope to regain his own dwelling, it must surely be at such a time as that, and under cover of the darkness. This, by degrees, became pretty plain, even to the mind of Smike. He had, at first, entertained some vague and childish idea of travelling into the country for ten or a dozen miles, and then returning homewards by a wide circuit, which should keep him clear of London - so great was his apprehension of traversing the streets alone, lest he should again encounter his dreaded enemy - but, yielding to the conviction which these thoughts inspired, he turned back, and taking the open road, though not without many fears and misgivings, made for London again, with scarcely less speed of foot than that with which he had left the temporary abode of Mr Squeers.

By the time he re-entered it, at the western extremity, the greater part of the shops were closed. Of the throngs of people who had been tempted abroad after the heat of the day, but few remained in the streets, and they were lounging home. But of these he asked his way

from time to time, and by dint of repeated inquiries, he at length reached the dwelling of Newman Noggs.

All that evening, Newman had been hunting and searching in byways and corners for the very person who now knocked at his door, while Nicholas had been pursuing the same inquiry in other directions. He was sitting, with a melancholy air, at his poor supper, when Smike's timorous and uncertain knock reached his ears. Alive to every sound, in his anxious and expectant state, Newman hurried downstairs, and, uttering a cry of joyful surprise, dragged the welcome visitor into the passage and up the stairs, and said not a word until he had him safe in his own garret and the door was shut behind them, when he mixed a great mug-full of gin-and-water, and holding it to Smike's mouth, as one might hold a bowl of medicine to the lips of a refractory child, commanded him to drain it to the last drop.

Newman looked uncommonly blank when he found that Smike did little more than put his lips to the precious mixture; he was in the act of raising the mug to his own mouth with a deep sigh of compassion for his poor friend's weakness, when Smike, beginning to relate the adventures which had befallen him, arrested him half-way, and he stood listening, with the mug in his hand.

It was odd enough to see the change that came over Newman as Smike proceeded. At first he stood, rubbing his lips with the back of his hand, as a preparatory ceremony towards composing himself for a draught; then, at the mention of Squeers, he took the mug under his arm, and opening his eyes very wide, looked on, in the utmost astonishment. When Smike came to the assault upon himself in the hackney coach, he hastily deposited the mug upon the table, and limped up and down the room in a state of the greatest excitement, stopping himself with a jerk, every now and then, as if to listen more attentively. When John Browdie came to be spoken of, he dropped, by slow and gradual degrees, into a chair, and rubbing, his hands upon his knees - quicker and quicker as the story reached its climax - burst, at last, into a laugh composed of one loud sonorous 'Ha! ha!' having given vent to which, his countenance immediately fell again as he inquired, with the utmost anxiety, whether it was probable that John Browdie and Squeers had come to blows.

'No! I think not,' replied Smike. 'I don't think he could have missed me till I had got quite away.'

Newman scratched his head with a shout of great disappointment, and once more lifting up the mug, applied himself to the contents; smiling meanwhile, over the rim, with a grim and ghastly smile at Smike.

'You shall stay here,' said Newman; 'you're tired - fagged. I'll tell them you're come back. They have been half mad about you. Mr Nicholas - '

'God bless him!' cried Smike.

'Amen!' returned Newman. 'He hasn't had a minute's rest or peace; no more has the old lady, nor Miss Nickleby.'

'No, no. Has SHE thought about me?' said Smike. 'Has she though? oh, has she, has she? Don't tell me so if she has not.'

'She has,' cried Newman. 'She is as noble-hearted as she is beautiful.'

'Yes, yes!' cried Smike. 'Well said!'

'So mild and gentle,' said Newman.

'Yes, yes!' cried Smike, with increasing eagerness.

'And yet with such a true and gallant spirit,' pursued Newman.

He was going on, in his enthusiasm, when, chancing to look at his companion, he saw that he had covered his face with his hands, and that tears were stealing out between his fingers.

A moment before, the boy's eyes were sparkling with unwonted fire, and every feature had been lighted up with an excitement which made him appear, for the moment, quite a different being.

'Well, well,' muttered Newman, as if he were a little puzzled. 'It has touched ME, more than once, to think such a nature should have been exposed to such trials; this poor fellow - yes, yes, - he feels that too - it softens him - makes him think of his former misery. Hah! That's it? Yes, that's - hum!'

It was by no means clear, from the tone of these broken reflections, that Newman Noggs considered them as explaining, at all satisfactorily, the emotion which had suggested them. He sat, in a musing attitude, for some time, regarding Smike occasionally with an anxious and doubtful glance, which sufficiently showed that he was not very remotely connected with his thoughts.

At length he repeated his proposition that Smike should remain where he was for that night, and that he (Noggs) should straightway repair to the cottage to relieve the suspense of the family. But, as Smike would not hear of this - pleading his anxiety to see his friends again - they eventually sallied forth together; and the night being, by this time, far advanced, and Smike being, besides, so footsore that he could hardly

crawl along, it was within an hour of sunrise when they reached their destination.

At the first sound of their voices outside the house, Nicholas, who had passed a sleepless night, devising schemes for the recovery of his lost charge, started from his bed, and joyfully admitted them. There was so much noisy conversation, and congratulation, and indignation, that the remainder of the family were soon awakened, and Smike received a warm and cordial welcome, not only from Kate, but from Mrs Nickleby also, who assured him of her future favour and regard, and was so obliging as to relate, for his entertainment and that of the assembled circle, a most remarkable account extracted from some work the name of which she had never known, of a miraculous escape from some prison, but what one she couldn't remember, effected by an officer whose name she had forgotten, confined for some crime which she didn't clearly recollect.

At first Nicholas was disposed to give his uncle credit for some portion of this bold attempt (which had so nearly proved successful) to carry off Smike; but on more mature consideration, he was inclined to think that the full merit of it rested with Mr Squeers. Determined to ascertain, if he could, through John Browdie, how the case really stood, he betook himself to his daily occupation: meditating, as he went, on a great variety of schemes for the punishment of the Yorkshire schoolmaster, all of which had their foundation in the strictest principles of retributive justice, and had but the one drawback of being wholly impracticable.

'A fine morning, Mr Linkinwater!' said Nicholas, entering the office.

'Ah!' replied Tim, 'talk of the country, indeed! What do you think of this, now, for a day - a London day - eh?'

'It's a little clearer out of town,' said Nicholas.

'Clearer!' echoed Tim Linkinwater. 'You should see it from my bedroom window.'

'You should see it from MINE,' replied Nicholas, with a smile.

'Pooh! pooh!' said Tim Linkinwater, 'don't tell me. Country!' (Bow was quite a rustic place to Tim.) 'Nonsense! What can you get in the country but new-laid eggs and flowers? I can buy new-laid eggs in Leadenhall Market, any morning before breakfast; and as to flowers, it's worth a run upstairs to smell my mignonette, or to see the double wallflower in the back-attic window, at No. 6, in the court.'

'There is a double wallflower at No. 6, in the court, is there?' said Nicholas.

'Yes, is there!' replied Tim, 'and planted in a cracked jug, without a spout. There were hyacinths there, this last spring, blossoming, in - but you'll laugh at that, of course.'

'At what?'

'At their blossoming in old blacking-bottles,' said Tim.

'Not I, indeed,' returned Nicholas. Tim looked wistfully at him, for a moment, as if he were encouraged by the tone of this reply to be more communicative on the subject; and sticking behind his ear, a pen that he had been making, and shutting up his knife with a smart click, said,

'They belong to a sickly bedridden hump-backed boy, and seem to be the only pleasure, Mr Nickleby, of his sad existence. How many years is it,' said Tim, pondering, 'since I first noticed him, quite a little child, dragging himself about on a pair of tiny crutches? Well! Well! Not many; but though they would appear nothing, if I thought of other things, they seem a long, long time, when I think of him. It is a sad thing,' said Tim, breaking off, 'to see a little deformed child sitting apart from other children, who are active and merry, watching the games he is denied the power to share in. He made my heart ache very often.'

'It is a good heart,' said Nicholas, 'that disentangles itself from the close avocations of every day, to heed such things. You were saying - '

'That the flowers belonged to this poor boy,' said Tim; 'that's all. When it is fine weather, and he can crawl out of bed, he draws a chair close to the window, and sits there, looking at them and arranging them, all day long. He used to nod, at first, and then we came to speak. Formerly, when I called to him of a morning, and asked him how he was, he would smile, and say, 'Better!' but now he shakes his head, and only bends more closely over his old plants. It must be dull to watch the dark housetops and the flying clouds, for so many months; but he is very patient.'

'Is there nobody in the house to cheer or help him?' asked Nicholas.

'His father lives there, I believe,' replied Tim, 'and other people too; but no one seems to care much for the poor sickly cripple. I have asked him, very often, if I can do nothing for him; his answer is always the same. 'Nothing.' His voice is growing weak of late, but I can SEE that he makes the old reply. He can't leave his bed now, so they have

moved it close beside the window, and there he lies, all day: now looking at the sky, and now at his flowers, which he still makes shift to trim and water, with his own thin hands. At night, when he sees my candle, he draws back his curtain, and leaves it so, till I am in bed. It seems such company to him to know that I am there, that I often sit at my window for an hour or more, that he may see I am still awake; and sometimes I get up in the night to look at the dull melancholy light in his little room, and wonder whether he is awake or sleeping.

'The night will not be long coming,' said Tim, 'when he will sleep, and never wake again on earth. We have never so much as shaken hands in all our lives; and yet I shall miss him like an old friend. Are there any country flowers that could interest me like these, do you think? Or do you suppose that the withering of a hundred kinds of the choicest flowers that blow, called by the hardest Latin names that were ever invented, would give me one fraction of the pain that I shall feel when these old jugs and bottles are swept away as lumber? Country!' cried Tim, with a contemptuous emphasis; 'don't you know that I couldn't have such a court under my bedroom window, anywhere, but in London?'

With which inquiry, Tim turned his back, and pretending to be absorbed in his accounts, took an opportunity of hastily wiping his eyes when he supposed Nicholas was looking another way.

Whether it was that Tim's accounts were more than usually intricate that morning, or whether it was that his habitual serenity had been a little disturbed by these recollections, it so happened that when Nicholas returned from executing some commission, and inquired whether Mr Charles Cheeryble was alone in his room, Tim promptly, and without the smallest hesitation, replied in the affirmative, although somebody had passed into the room not ten minutes before, and Tim took especial and particular pride in preventing any intrusion on either of the brothers when they were engaged with any visitor whatever.

'I'll take this letter to him at once,' said Nicholas, 'if that's the case.' And with that, he walked to the room and knocked at the door.

No answer.

Another knock, and still no answer.

'He can't be here,' thought Nicholas. 'I'll lay it on his table.'

So, Nicholas opened the door and walked in; and very quickly he turned to walk out again, when he saw, to his great astonishment and discomfiture, a young lady upon her knees at Mr Cheeryble's feet, and

Mr Cheeryble beseeching her to rise, and entreating a third person, who had the appearance of the young lady's female attendant, to add her persuasions to his to induce her to do so.

Nicholas stammered out an awkward apology, and was precipitately retiring, when the young lady, turning her head a little, presented to his view the features of the lovely girl whom he had seen at the register-office on his first visit long before. Glancing from her to the attendant, he recognised the same clumsy servant who had accompanied her then; and between his admiration of the young lady's beauty, and the confusion and surprise of this unexpected recognition, he stood stock-still, in such a bewildered state of surprise and embarrassment that, for the moment, he was quite bereft of the power either to speak or move.

'My dear ma'am - my dear young lady,' cried brother Charles in violent agitation, 'pray don't - not another word, I beseech and entreat you! I implore you - I beg of you - to rise. We - we - are not alone.'

As he spoke, he raised the young lady, who staggered to a chair and swooned away.

'She has fainted, sir,' said Nicholas, darting eagerly forward.

'Poor dear, poor dear!' cried brother Charles 'Where is my brother Ned? Ned, my dear brother, come here pray.'

'Brother Charles, my dear fellow,' replied his brother, hurrying into the room, 'what is the - ah! what - '

'Hush! hush! - not a word for your life, brother Ned,' returned the other. 'Ring for the housekeeper, my dear brother - call Tim Linkinwater! Here, Tim Linkinwater, sir - Mr Nickleby, my dear sir, leave the room, I beg and beseech of you.'

'I think she is better now,' said Nicholas, who had been watching the patient so eagerly, that he had not heard the request.

'Poor bird!' cried brother Charles, gently taking her hand in his, and laying her head upon his arm. 'Brother Ned, my dear fellow, you will be surprised, I know, to witness this, in business hours; but - ' here he was again reminded of the presence of Nicholas, and shaking him by the hand, earnestly requested him to leave the room, and to send Tim Linkinwater without an instant's delay.

Nicholas immediately withdrew and, on his way to the counting-house, met both the old housekeeper and Tim Linkinwater, jostling each other in the passage, and hurrying to the scene of action with

extraordinary speed. Without waiting to hear his message, Tim Linkinwater darted into the room, and presently afterwards Nicholas heard the door shut and locked on the inside.

He had abundance of time to ruminate on this discovery, for Tim Linkinwater was absent during the greater part of an hour, during the whole of which time Nicholas thought of nothing but the young lady, and her exceeding beauty, and what could possibly have brought her there, and why they made such a mystery of it. The more he thought of all this, the more it perplexed him, and the more anxious he became to know who and what she was. 'I should have known her among ten thousand,' thought Nicholas. And with that he walked up and down the room, and recalling her face and figure (of which he had a peculiarly vivid remembrance), discarded all other subjects of reflection and dwelt upon that alone.

At length Tim Linkinwater came back - provokingly cool, and with papers in his hand, and a pen in his mouth, as if nothing had happened.

'Is she quite recovered?' said Nicholas, impetuously.

'Who?' returned Tim Linkinwater.

'Who!' repeated Nicholas. 'The young lady.'

'What do you make, Mr Nickleby,' said Tim, taking his pen out of his mouth, 'what do you make of four hundred and twenty-seven times three thousand two hundred and thirty-eight?'

'Nay,' returned Nicholas, 'what do you make of my question first? I asked you - '

'About the young lady,' said Tim Linkinwater, putting on his spectacles. 'To be sure. Yes. Oh! she's very well.'

'Very well, is she?' returned Nicholas.

'Very well,' replied Mr Linkinwater, gravely.

'Will she be able to go home today?' asked Nicholas.

'She's gone,' said Tim.

'Gone!'

'Yes.'

'I hope she has not far to go?' said Nicholas, looking earnestly at the other.

'Ay,' replied the immovable Tim, 'I hope she hasn't.'

Nicholas hazarded one or two further remarks, but it was evident that Tim Linkinwater had his own reasons for evading the subject, and that he was determined to afford no further information respecting the fair unknown, who had awakened so much curiosity in the breast of his young friend. Nothing daunted by this repulse, Nicholas returned to the charge next day, emboldened by the circumstance of Mr Linkinwater being in a very talkative and communicative mood; but, directly he resumed the theme, Tim relapsed into a state of most provoking taciturnity, and from answering in monosyllables, came to returning no answers at all, save such as were to be inferred from several grave nods and shrugs, which only served to whet that appetite for intelligence in Nicholas, which had already attained a most unreasonable height.

Foiled in these attempts, he was fain to content himself with watching for the young lady's next visit, but here again he was disappointed. Day after day passed, and she did not return. He looked eagerly at the superscription of all the notes and letters, but there was not one among them which he could fancy to be in her handwriting. On two or three occasions he was employed on business which took him to a distance, and had formerly been transacted by Tim Linkinwater. Nicholas could not help suspecting that, for some reason or other, he was sent out of the way on purpose, and that the young lady was there in his absence. Nothing transpired, however, to confirm this suspicion, and Tim could not be entrapped into any confession or admission tending to support it in the smallest degree.

Mystery and disappointment are not absolutely indispensable to the growth of love, but they are, very often, its powerful auxiliaries. 'Out of sight, out of mind,' is well enough as a proverb applicable to cases of friendship, though absence is not always necessary to hollowness of heart, even between friends, and truth and honesty, like precious stones, are perhaps most easily imitated at a distance, when the counterfeits often pass for real. Love, however, is very materially assisted by a warm and active imagination: which has a long memory, and will thrive, for a considerable time, on very slight and sparing food. Thus it is, that it often attains its most luxuriant growth in separation and under circumstances of the utmost difficulty; and thus it was, that Nicholas, thinking of nothing but the unknown young lady, from day to day and from hour to hour, began, at last, to think that he was very desperately in love with her, and that never was such an ill-used and persecuted lover as he.

Still, though he loved and languished after the most orthodox models, and was only deterred from making a confidante of Kate by the slight considerations of having never, in all his life, spoken to the object of his passion, and having never set eyes upon her, except on two occasions, on both of which she had come and gone like a flash of lightning - or, as Nicholas himself said, in the numerous conversations he held with himself, like a vision of youth and beauty much too bright to last - his ardour and devotion remained without its reward. The young lady appeared no more; so there was a great deal of love wasted (enough indeed to have set up half-a-dozen young gentlemen, as times go, with the utmost decency), and nobody was a bit the wiser for it; not even Nicholas himself, who, on the contrary, became more dull, sentimental, and lackadaisical, every day.

While matters were in this state, the failure of a correspondent of the brothers Cheeryble, in Germany, imposed upon Tim Linkinwater and Nicholas the necessity of going through some very long and complicated accounts, extending over a considerable space of time. To get through them with the greater dispatch, Tim Linkinwater proposed that they should remain at the counting-house, for a week or so, until ten o'clock at night; to this, as nothing damped the zeal of Nicholas in the service of his kind patrons - not even romance, which has seldom business habits - he cheerfully assented. On the very first night of these later hours, at nine exactly, there came: not the young lady herself, but her servant, who, being closeted with brother Charles for some time, went away, and returned next night at the same hour, and on the next, and on the next again.

These repeated visits inflamed the curiosity of Nicholas to the very highest pitch. Tantalised and excited, beyond all bearing, and unable to fathom the mystery without neglecting his duty, he confided the whole secret to Newman Noggs, imploring him to be on the watch next night; to follow the girl home; to set on foot such inquiries relative to the name, condition, and history of her mistress, as he could, without exciting suspicion; and to report the result to him with the least possible delay.

Beyond all measure proud of this commission, Newman Noggs took up his post, in the square, on the following evening, a full hour before the needful time, and planting himself behind the pump and pulling his hat over his eyes, began his watch with an elaborate appearance of mystery, admirably calculated to excite the suspicion of all beholders. Indeed, divers servant girls who came to draw water, and sundry little boys who stopped to drink at the ladle, were almost scared out of their senses, by the apparition of Newman Noggs looking stealthily round the pump, with nothing of him visible but his face, and that wearing the expression of a meditative Ogre.

Punctual to her time, the messenger came again, and, after an interview of rather longer duration than usual, departed. Newman had made two appointments with Nicholas: one for the next evening, conditional on his success: and one the next night following, which was to be kept under all circumstances. The first night he was not at the place of meeting (a certain tavern about half-way between the city and Golden Square), but on the second night he was there before Nicholas, and received him with open arms.

'It's all right,' whispered Newman. 'Sit down. Sit down, there's a dear young man, and let me tell you all about it.'

Nicholas needed no second invitation, and eagerly inquired what was the news.

'There's a great deal of news,' said Newman, in a flutter of exultation. 'It's all right. Don't be anxious. I don't know where to begin. Never mind that. Keep up your spirits. It's all right.'

'Well?' said Nicholas eagerly. 'Yes?'

'Yes,' replied Newman. 'That's it.'

'What's it?' said Nicholas. 'The name - the name, my dear fellow!'

'The name's Bobster,' replied Newman. 'Bobster!' repeated Nicholas, indignantly.

'That's the name,' said Newman. 'I remember it by lobster.'

'Bobster!' repeated Nicholas, more emphatically than before. 'That must be the servant's name.'

'No, it an't,' said Newman, shaking his head with great positiveness. 'Miss Cecilia Bobster.'

'Cecilia, eh?' returned Nicholas, muttering the two names together over and over again in every variety of tone, to try the effect. 'Well, Cecilia is a pretty name.'

'Very. And a pretty creature too,' said Newman.

'Who?' said Nicholas.

'Miss Bobster.'

'Why, where have you seen her?' demanded Nicholas.

'Never mind, my dear boy,' retorted Noggs, clapping him on the shoulder. 'I HAVE seen her. You shall see her. I've managed it all.'

'My dear Newman,' cried Nicholas, grasping his hand, 'are you serious?'

'I am,' replied Newman. 'I mean it all. Every word. You shall see her tomorrow night. She consents to hear you speak for yourself. I persuaded her. She is all affability, goodness, sweetness, and beauty.'

'I know she is; I know she must be, Newman!' said Nicholas, wringing his hand.

'You are right,' returned Newman.

'Where does she live?' cried Nicholas. 'What have you learnt of her history? Has she a father - mother - any brothers - sisters? What did she say? How came you to see her? Was she not very much surprised? Did you say how passionately I have longed to speak to her? Did you tell her where I had seen her? Did you tell her how, and when, and where, and how long, and how often, I have thought of that sweet face which came upon me in my bitterest distress like a glimpse of some better world - did you, Newman - did you?'

Poor Noggs literally gasped for breath as this flood of questions rushed upon him, and moved spasmodically in his chair at every fresh inquiry, staring at Nicholas meanwhile with a most ludicrous expression of perplexity.

'No,' said Newman, 'I didn't tell her that.'

'Didn't tell her which?' asked Nicholas.

'About the glimpse of the better world,' said Newman. 'I didn't tell her who you were, either, or where you'd seen her. I said you loved her to distraction.'

'That's true, Newman,' replied Nicholas, with his characteristic vehemence. 'Heaven knows I do!'

'I said too, that you had admired her for a long time in secret,' said Newman.

'Yes, yes. What did she say to that?' asked Nicholas.

'Blushed,' said Newman.

'To be sure. Of course she would,' said Nicholas approvingly. Newman then went on to say, that the young lady was an only child, that her mother was dead, that she resided with her father, and that she had been induced to allow her lover a secret interview, at the intercession of her servant, who had great influence with her. He further related how it required much moving and great eloquence to bring the young lady to this pass; how it was expressly understood that she merely afforded Nicholas an opportunity of declaring his passion; and how she by no means pledged herself to be favourably impressed with his attentions. The mystery of her visits to the brothers Cheeryble remained wholly unexplained, for Newman had not alluded to them, either in his preliminary conversations with the servant or his subsequent interview with the mistress, merely remarking that he had been instructed to watch the girl home and plead his young friend's cause, and not saying how far he had followed her, or from what point. But Newman hinted that from what had fallen from the confidante, he had been led to suspect that the young lady led a very miserable and unhappy life, under the strict control of her only parent, who was of a violent and brutal temper; a circumstance which he thought might in some degree account, both for her having sought the protection and friendship of the brothers, and her suffering herself to be prevailed upon to grant the promised interview. The last he held to be a very logical deduction from the premises, inasmuch as it was but natural to suppose that a young lady, whose present condition was so unenviable, would be more than commonly desirous to change it.

It appeared, on further questioning - for it was only by a very long and arduous process that all this could be got out of Newman Noggs - that Newman, in explanation of his shabby appearance, had represented himself as being, for certain wise and indispensable purposes connected with that intrigue, in disguise; and, being questioned how he had come to exceed his commission so far as to procure an interview, he responded, that the lady appearing willing to grant it, he considered himself bound, both in duty and gallantry, to avail himself of such a golden means of enabling Nicholas to prosecute his addresses. After these and all possible questions had been asked and answered twenty times over, they parted, undertaking to meet on the following night at half-past ten, for the purpose of fulfilling the appointment; which was for eleven o'clock.

'Things come about very strangely!' thought Nicholas, as he walked home. 'I never contemplated anything of this kind; never dreamt of the possibility of it. To know something of the life of one in whom I felt such interest; to see her in the street, to pass the house in which she lived, to meet her sometimes in her walks, to hope that a day might come when I might be in a condition to tell her of my love, this was

the utmost extent of my thoughts. Now, however - but I should be a fool, indeed, to repine at my own good fortune!

Still, Nicholas was dissatisfied; and there was more in the dissatisfaction than mere revulsion of feeling. He was angry with the young lady for being so easily won, 'because,' reasoned Nicholas, 'it is not as if she knew it was I, but it might have been anybody,' - which was certainly not pleasant. The next moment, he was angry with himself for entertaining such thoughts, arguing that nothing but goodness could dwell in such a temple, and that the behaviour of the brothers sufficiently showed the estimation in which they held her. 'The fact is, she's a mystery altogether,' said Nicholas. This was not more satisfactory than his previous course of reflection, and only drove him out upon a new sea of speculation and conjecture, where he tossed and tumbled, in great discomfort of mind, until the clock struck ten, and the hour of meeting drew nigh.

Nicholas had dressed himself with great care, and even Newman Noggs had trimmed himself up a little; his coat presenting the phenomenon of two consecutive buttons, and the supplementary pins being inserted at tolerably regular intervals. He wore his hat, too, in the newest taste, with a pocket-handkerchief in the crown, and a twisted end of it straggling out behind after the fashion of a pigtail, though he could scarcely lay claim to the ingenuity of inventing this latter decoration, inasmuch as he was utterly unconscious of it: being in a nervous and excited condition which rendered him quite insensible to everything but the great object of the expedition.

They traversed the streets in profound silence; and after walking at a round pace for some distance, arrived in one, of a gloomy appearance and very little frequented, near the Edgeware Road.

'Number twelve,' said Newman.

'Oh!' replied Nicholas, looking about him.

'Good street?' said Newman.

'Yes,' returned Nicholas. 'Rather dull.'

Newman made no answer to this remark, but, halting abruptly, planted Nicholas with his back to some area railings, and gave him to understand that he was to wait there, without moving hand or foot, until it was satisfactorily ascertained that the coast was clear. This done, Noggs limped away with great alacrity; looking over his shoulder every instant, to make quite certain that Nicholas was obeying his directions; and, ascending the steps of a house some half-dozen doors off, was lost to view.

After a short delay, he reappeared, and limping back again, halted midway, and beckoned Nicholas to follow him.

'Well?' said Nicholas, advancing towards him on tiptoe.

'All right,' replied Newman, in high glee. 'All ready; nobody at home. Couldn't be better. Ha! ha!'

With this fortifying assurance, he stole past a street-door, on which Nicholas caught a glimpse of a brass plate, with 'BOBSTER,' in very large letters; and, stopping at the area-gate, which was open, signed to his young friend to descend.

'What the devil!' cried Nicholas, drawing back. 'Are we to sneak into the kitchen, as if we came after the forks?'

'Hush!' replied Newman. 'Old Bobster - ferocious Turk. He'd kill 'em all - box the young lady's ears - he does - often.'

'What!' cried Nicholas, in high wrath, 'do you mean to tell me that any man would dare to box the ears of such a - '

He had no time to sing the praises of his mistress, just then, for Newman gave him a gentle push which had nearly precipitated him to the bottom of the area steps. Thinking it best to take the hint in good part, Nicholas descended, without further remonstrance, but with a countenance bespeaking anything rather than the hope and rapture of a passionate lover. Newman followed - he would have followed head first, but for the timely assistance of Nicholas - and, taking his hand, led him through a stone passage, profoundly dark, into a back-kitchen or cellar, of the blackest and most pitchy obscurity, where they stopped.

'Well!' said Nicholas, in a discontented whisper, 'this is not all, I suppose, is it?'

'No, no,' rejoined Noggs; 'they'll be here directly. It's all right.'

'I am glad to hear it,' said Nicholas. 'I shouldn't have thought it, I confess.'

They exchanged no further words, and there Nicholas stood, listening to the loud breathing of Newman Noggs, and imagining that his nose seemed to glow like a red-hot coal, even in the midst of the darkness which enshrouded them. Suddenly the sound of cautious footsteps attracted his ear, and directly afterwards a female voice inquired if the gentleman was there.

'Yes,' replied Nicholas, turning towards the corner from which the voice proceeded. 'Who is that?'

'Only me, sir,' replied the voice. 'Now if you please, ma'am.'

A gleam of light shone into the place, and presently the servant girl appeared, bearing a light, and followed by her young mistress, who seemed to be overwhelmed by modesty and confusion.

At sight of the young lady, Nicholas started and changed colour; his heart beat violently, and he stood rooted to the spot. At that instant, and almost simultaneously with her arrival and that of the candle, there was heard a loud and furious knocking at the street-door, which caused Newman Noggs to jump up, with great agility, from a beer-barrel on which he had been seated astride, and to exclaim abruptly, and with a face of ashy paleness, 'Bobster, by the Lord!'

The young lady shrieked, the attendant wrung her hands, Nicholas gazed from one to the other in apparent stupefaction, and Newman hurried to and fro, thrusting his hands into all his pockets successively, and drawing out the linings of every one in the excess of his irresolution. It was but a moment, but the confusion crowded into that one moment no imagination can exaggerate.

'Leave the house, for Heaven's sake! We have done wrong, we deserve it all,' cried the young lady. 'Leave the house, or I am ruined and undone for ever.'

'Will you hear me say but one word?' cried Nicholas. 'Only one. I will not detain you. Will you hear me say one word, in explanation of this mischance?'

But Nicholas might as well have spoken to the wind, for the young lady, with distracted looks, hurried up the stairs. He would have followed her, but Newman, twisting his hand in his coat collar, dragged him towards the passage by which they had entered.

'Let me go, Newman, in the Devil's name!' cried Nicholas. 'I must speak to her. I will! I will not leave this house without.'

'Reputation - character - violence - consider,' said Newman, clinging round him with both arms, and hurrying him away. 'Let them open the door. We'll go, as we came, directly it's shut. Come. This way. Here.'

Overpowered by the remonstrances of Newman, and the tears and prayers of the girl, and the tremendous knocking above, which had never ceased, Nicholas allowed himself to be hurried off; and, precisely

as Mr Bobster made his entrance by the street-door, he and Noggs made their exit by the area-gate.

They hurried away, through several streets, without stopping or speaking. At last, they halted and confronted each other with blank and rueful faces.

'Never mind,' said Newman, gasping for breath. 'Don't be cast down. It's all right. More fortunate next time. It couldn't be helped. I did MY part.'

'Excellently,' replied Nicholas, taking his hand. 'Excellently, and like the true and zealous friend you are. Only - mind, I am not disappointed, Newman, and feel just as much indebted to you - only IT WAS THE WRONG LADY.'

'Eh?' cried Newman Noggs. 'Taken in by the servant?'

'Newman, Newman,' said Nicholas, laying his hand upon his shoulder: 'it was the wrong servant too.'

Newman's under-jaw dropped, and he gazed at Nicholas, with his sound eye fixed fast and motionless in his head.

'Don't take it to heart,' said Nicholas; 'it's of no consequence; you see I don't care about it; you followed the wrong person, that's all.'

That WAS all. Whether Newman Noggs had looked round the pump, in a slanting direction, so long, that his sight became impaired; or whether, finding that there was time to spare, he had recruited himself with a few drops of something stronger than the pump could yield - by whatsoever means it had come to pass, this was his mistake. And Nicholas went home to brood upon it, and to meditate upon the charms of the unknown young lady, now as far beyond his reach as ever.