

Chapter XLI

Containing some Romantic Passages between Mrs Nickleby and the Gentleman in the Small-clothes next Door

Ever since her last momentous conversation with her son, Mrs Nickleby had begun to display unusual care in the adornment of her person, gradually superadding to those staid and matronly habiliments, which had, up to that time, formed her ordinary attire, a variety of embellishments and decorations, slight perhaps in themselves, but, taken together, and considered with reference to the subject of her disclosure, of no mean importance. Even her black dress assumed something of a deadly-lively air from the jaunty style in which it was worn; and, eked out as its lingering attractions were; by a prudent disposal, here and there, of certain juvenile ornaments of little or no value, which had, for that reason alone, escaped the general wreck and been permitted to slumber peacefully in odd corners of old drawers and boxes where daylight seldom shone, her mourning garments assumed quite a new character. From being the outward tokens of respect and sorrow for the dead, they became converted into signals of very slaughterous and killing designs upon the living.

Mrs Nickleby might have been stimulated to this proceeding by a lofty sense of duty, and impulses of unquestionable excellence. She might, by this time, have become impressed with the sinfulness of long indulgence in unavailing woe, or the necessity of setting a proper example of neatness and decorum to her blooming daughter. Considerations of duty and responsibility apart, the change might have taken its rise in feelings of the purest and most disinterested charity. The gentleman next door had been vilified by Nicholas; rudely stigmatised as a dotard and an idiot; and for these attacks upon his understanding, Mrs Nickleby was, in some sort, accountable. She might have felt that it was the act of a good Christian to show by all means in her power, that the abused gentleman was neither the one nor the other. And what better means could she adopt, towards so virtuous and laudable an end, than proving to all men, in her own person, that his passion was the most rational and reasonable in the world, and just the very result, of all others, which discreet and thinking persons might have foreseen, from her incautiously displaying her matured charms, without reserve, under the very eye, as it were, of an ardent and too-susceptible man?

'Ah!' said Mrs Nickleby, gravely shaking her head; 'if Nicholas knew what his poor dear papa suffered before we were engaged, when I used to hate him, he would have a little more feeling. Shall I ever forget the morning I looked scornfully at him when he offered to carry my

parasol? Or that night, when I frowned at him? It was a mercy he didn't emigrate. It very nearly drove him to it.'

Whether the deceased might not have been better off if he had emigrated in his bachelor days, was a question which his relict did not stop to consider; for Kate entered the room, with her workbox, in this stage of her reflections; and a much slighter interruption, or no interruption at all, would have diverted Mrs Nickleby's thoughts into a new channel at any time.

'Kate, my dear,' said Mrs Nickleby; 'I don't know how it is, but a fine warm summer day like this, with the birds singing in every direction, always puts me in mind of roast pig, with sage and onion sauce, and made gravy.'

'That's a curious association of ideas, is it not, mama?'

'Upon my word, my dear, I don't know,' replied Mrs Nickleby. 'Roast pig; let me see. On the day five weeks after you were christened, we had a roast - no, that couldn't have been a pig, either, because I recollect there were a pair of them to carve, and your poor papa and I could never have thought of sitting down to two pigs - they must have been partridges. Roast pig! I hardly think we ever could have had one, now I come to remember, for your papa could never bear the sight of them in the shops, and used to say that they always put him in mind of very little babies, only the pigs had much fairer complexions; and he had a horror of little babies, to, because he couldn't very well afford any increase to his family, and had a natural dislike to the subject. It's very odd now, what can have put that in my head! I recollect dining once at Mrs Bevan's, in that broad street round the corner by the coachmaker's, where the tipsy man fell through the cellar-flap of an empty house nearly a week before the quarter-day, and wasn't found till the new tenant went in - and we had roast pig there. It must be that, I think, that reminds me of it, especially as there was a little bird in the room that would keep on singing all the time of dinner - at least, not a little bird, for it was a parrot, and he didn't sing exactly, for he talked and swore dreadfully: but I think it must be that. Indeed I am sure it must. Shouldn't you say so, my dear?'

'I should say there was not a doubt about it, mama,' returned Kate, with a cheerful smile.

'No; but DO you think so, Kate?' said Mrs Nickleby, with as much gravity as if it were a question of the most imminent and thrilling interest. 'If you don't, say so at once, you know; because it's just as well to be correct, particularly on a point of this kind, which is very curious and worth settling while one thinks about it.'

Kate laughingly replied that she was quite convinced; and as her mama still appeared undetermined whether it was not absolutely essential that the subject should be renewed, proposed that they should take their work into the summer-house, and enjoy the beauty of the afternoon. Mrs Nickleby readily assented, and to the summer-house they repaired, without further discussion.

'Well, I will say,' observed Mrs Nickleby, as she took her seat, 'that there never was such a good creature as Smike. Upon my word, the pains he has taken in putting this little arbour to rights, and training the sweetest flowers about it, are beyond anything I could have - I wish he wouldn't put ALL the gravel on your side, Kate, my dear, though, and leave nothing but mould for me.'

'Dear mama,' returned Kate, hastily, 'take this seat - do - to oblige me, mama.'

'No, indeed, my dear. I shall keep my own side,' said Mrs Nickleby. 'Well! I declare!'

Kate looked up inquiringly.

'If he hasn't been,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'and got, from somewhere or other, a couple of roots of those flowers that I said I was so fond of, the other night, and asked you if you were not - no, that YOU said YOU were so fond of, the other night, and asked me if I wasn't - it's the same thing. Now, upon my word, I take that as very kind and attentive indeed! I don't see,' added Mrs Nickleby, looking narrowly about her, 'any of them on my side, but I suppose they grow best near the gravel. You may depend upon it they do, Kate, and that's the reason they are all near you, and he has put the gravel there, because it's the sunny side. Upon my word, that's very clever now! I shouldn't have had half as much thought myself!'

'Mama,' said Kate, bending over her work so that her face was almost hidden, 'before you were married - '

'Dear me, Kate,' interrupted Mrs Nickleby, 'what in the name of goodness graciousness makes you fly off to the time before I was married, when I'm talking to you about his thoughtfulness and attention to me? You don't seem to take the smallest interest in the garden.'

'Oh! mama,' said Kate, raising her face again, 'you know I do.'

'Well then, my dear, why don't you praise the neatness and prettiness with which it's kept?' said Mrs Nickleby. 'How very odd you are, Kate!'

'I do praise it, mama,' answered Kate, gently. 'Poor fellow!'

'I scarcely ever hear you, my dear,' retorted Mrs Nickleby; 'that's all I've got to say.' By this time the good lady had been a long while upon one topic, so she fell at once into her daughter's little trap, if trap it were, and inquired what she had been going to say.

'About what, mama?' said Kate, who had apparently quite forgotten her diversion.

'Lor, Kate, my dear,' returned her mother, 'why, you're asleep or stupid! About the time before I was married.'

'Oh yes!' said Kate, 'I remember. I was going to ask, mama, before you were married, had you many suitors?'

'Suitors, my dear!' cried Mrs Nickleby, with a smile of wonderful complacency. 'First and last, Kate, I must have had a dozen at least.'

'Mama!' returned Kate, in a tone of remonstrance.

'I had indeed, my dear,' said Mrs Nickleby; 'not including your poor papa, or a young gentleman who used to go, at that time, to the same dancing school, and who WOULD send gold watches and bracelets to our house in gilt-edged paper, (which were always returned,) and who afterwards unfortunately went out to Botany Bay in a cadet ship - a convict ship I mean - and escaped into a bush and killed sheep, (I don't know how they got there,) and was going to be hung, only he accidentally choked himself, and the government pardoned him. Then there was young Lukin,' said Mrs Nickleby, beginning with her left thumb and checking off the names on her fingers - 'Mogley - Tipslark - Cabbery - Smifser - '

Having now reached her little finger, Mrs Nickleby was carrying the account over to the other hand, when a loud 'Hem!' which appeared to come from the very foundation of the garden-wall, gave both herself and her daughter a violent start.

'Mama! what was that?' said Kate, in a low tone of voice.

'Upon my word, my dear,' returned Mrs Nickleby, considerably startled, 'unless it was the gentleman belonging to the next house, I don't know what it could possibly - '

'A - hem!' cried the same voice; and that, not in the tone of an ordinary clearing of the throat, but in a kind of bellow, which woke up all the echoes in the neighbourhood, and was prolonged to an extent which must have made the unseen bellower quite black in the face.

'I understand it now, my dear,' said Mrs Nickleby, laying her hand on Kate's; 'don't be alarmed, my love, it's not directed to you, and is not intended to frighten anybody. Let us give everybody their due, Kate; I am bound to say that.'

So saying, Mrs Nickleby nodded her head, and patted the back of her daughter's hand, a great many times, and looked as if she could tell something vastly important if she chose, but had self-denial, thank Heaven; and wouldn't do it.

'What do you mean, mama?' demanded Kate, in evident surprise.

'Don't be flurried, my dear,' replied Mrs Nickleby, looking towards the garden-wall, 'for you see I'm not, and if it would be excusable in anybody to be flurried, it certainly would - under all the circumstances - be excusable in me, but I am not, Kate - not at all.'

'It seems designed to attract our attention, mama,' said Kate.

'It is designed to attract our attention, my dear; at least,' rejoined Mrs Nickleby, drawing herself up, and patting her daughter's hand more blandly than before, 'to attract the attention of one of us. Hem! you needn't be at all uneasy, my dear.'

Kate looked very much perplexed, and was apparently about to ask for further explanation, when a shouting and scuffling noise, as of an elderly gentleman whooping, and kicking up his legs on loose gravel, with great violence, was heard to proceed from the same direction as the former sounds; and before they had subsided, a large cucumber was seen to shoot up in the air with the velocity of a sky-rocket, whence it descended, tumbling over and over, until it fell at Mrs Nickleby's feet.

This remarkable appearance was succeeded by another of a precisely similar description; then a fine vegetable marrow, of unusually large dimensions, was seen to whirl aloft, and come toppling down; then, several cucumbers shot up together; and, finally, the air was darkened by a shower of onions, turnip-radishes, and other small vegetables, which fell rolling and scattering, and bumping about, in all directions.

As Kate rose from her seat, in some alarm, and caught her mother's hand to run with her into the house, she felt herself rather retarded than assisted in her intention; and following the direction of Mrs Nickleby's eyes, was quite terrified by the apparition of an old black velvet cap, which, by slow degrees, as if its wearer were ascending a ladder or pair of steps, rose above the wall dividing their garden from that of the next cottage, (which, like their own, was a detached

building,) and was gradually followed by a very large head, and an old face, in which were a pair of most extraordinary grey eyes: very wild, very wide open, and rolling in their sockets, with a dull, languishing, leering look, most ugly to behold.

'Mama!' cried Kate, really terrified for the moment, 'why do you stop, why do you lose an instant? Mama, pray come in!'

'Kate, my dear,' returned her mother, still holding back, 'how can you be so foolish? I'm ashamed of you. How do you suppose you are ever to get through life, if you're such a coward as this? What do you want, sir?' said Mrs Nickleby, addressing the intruder with a sort of simpering displeasure. 'How dare you look into this garden?'

'Queen of my soul,' replied the stranger, folding his hands together, 'this goblet sip!'

'Nonsense, sir,' said Mrs Nickleby. 'Kate, my love, pray be quiet.'

'Won't you sip the goblet?' urged the stranger, with his head imploringly on one side, and his right hand on his breast. 'Oh, do sip the goblet!'

'I shall not consent to do anything of the kind, sir,' said Mrs Nickleby. 'Pray, begone.'

'Why is it,' said the old gentleman, coming up a step higher, and leaning his elbows on the wall, with as much complacency as if he were looking out of window, 'why is it that beauty is always obdurate, even when admiration is as honourable and respectful as mine?' Here he smiled, kissed his hand, and made several low bows. 'Is it owing to the bees, who, when the honey season is over, and they are supposed to have been killed with brimstone, in reality fly to Barbary and lull the captive Moors to sleep with their drowsy songs? Or is it,' he added, dropping his voice almost to a whisper, 'in consequence of the statue at Charing Cross having been lately seen, on the Stock Exchange at midnight, walking arm-in-arm with the Pump from Aldgate, in a riding-habit?'

'Mama,' murmured Kate, 'do you hear him?'

'Hush, my dear!' replied Mrs Nickleby, in the same tone of voice, 'he is very polite, and I think that was a quotation from the poets. Pray, don't worry me so - you'll pinch my arm black and blue. Go away, sir!'

'Quite away?' said the gentleman, with a languishing look. 'Oh! quite away?'

'Yes,' returned Mrs Nickleby, 'certainly. You have no business here. This is private property, sir; you ought to know that.'

'I do know,' said the old gentleman, laying his finger on his nose, with an air of familiarity, most reprehensible, 'that this is a sacred and enchanted spot, where the most divine charms' - here he kissed his hand and bowed again - 'waft mellifluousness over the neighbours' gardens, and force the fruit and vegetables into premature existence. That fact I am acquainted with. But will you permit me, fairest creature, to ask you one question, in the absence of the planet Venus, who has gone on business to the Horse Guards, and would otherwise - jealous of your superior charms - interpose between us?'

'Kate,' observed Mrs Nickleby, turning to her daughter, 'it's very awkward, positively. I really don't know what to say to this gentleman. One ought to be civil, you know.'

'Dear mama,' rejoined Kate, 'don't say a word to him, but let us run away as fast as we can, and shut ourselves up till Nicholas comes home.'

Mrs Nickleby looked very grand, not to say contemptuous, at this humiliating proposal; and, turning to the old gentleman, who had watched them during these whispers with absorbing eagerness, said:

'If you will conduct yourself, sir, like the gentleman I should imagine you to be, from your language and - and - appearance, (quite the counterpart of your grandpapa, Kate, my dear, in his best days,) and will put your question to me in plain words, I will answer it.'

If Mrs Nickleby's excellent papa had borne, in his best days, a resemblance to the neighbour now looking over the wall, he must have been, to say the least, a very queer-looking old gentleman in his prime. Perhaps Kate thought so, for she ventured to glance at his living portrait with some attention, as he took off his black velvet cap, and, exhibiting a perfectly bald head, made a long series of bows, each accompanied with a fresh kiss of the hand. After exhausting himself, to all appearance, with this fatiguing performance, he covered his head once more, pulled the cap very carefully over the tips of his ears, and resuming his former attitude, said,

'The question is - '

Here he broke off to look round in every direction, and satisfy himself beyond all doubt that there were no listeners near. Assured that there were not, he tapped his nose several times, accompanying the action with a cunning look, as though congratulating himself on his caution; and stretching out his neck, said in a loud whisper,

'Are you a princess?'

'You are mocking me, sir,' replied Mrs Nickleby, making a feint of retreating towards the house.

'No, but are you?' said the old gentleman.

'You know I am not, sir,' replied Mrs Nickleby.

'Then are you any relation to the Archbishop of Canterbury?' inquired the old gentleman with great anxiety, 'or to the Pope of Rome? Or the Speaker of the House of Commons? Forgive me, if I am wrong, but I was told you were niece to the Commissioners of Paving, and daughter-in-law to the Lord Mayor and Court of Common Council, which would account for your relationship to all three.'

'Whoever has spread such reports, sir,' returned Mrs Nickleby, with some warmth, 'has taken great liberties with my name, and one which I am sure my son Nicholas, if he was aware of it, would not allow for an instant. The idea!' said Mrs Nickleby, drawing herself up, 'niece to the Commissioners of Paving!'

'Pray, mama, come away!' whispered Kate.

'Pray mama!' Nonsense, Kate,' said Mrs Nickleby, angrily, 'but that's just the way. If they had said I was niece to a piping bullfinch, what would you care? But I have no sympathy,' whimpered Mrs Nickleby. 'I don't expect it, that's one thing.'

'Tears!' cried the old gentleman, with such an energetic jump, that he fell down two or three steps and grated his chin against the wall. 'Catch the crystal globules - catch 'em - bottle 'em up - cork 'em tight - put sealing wax on the top - seal 'em with a cupid - label 'em 'Best quality' - and stow 'em away in the fourteen binn, with a bar of iron on the top to keep the thunder off!'

Issuing these commands, as if there were a dozen attendants all actively engaged in their execution, he turned his velvet cap inside out, put it on with great dignity so as to obscure his right eye and three-fourths of his nose, and sticking his arms a-kimbo, looked very fiercely at a sparrow hard by, till the bird flew away, when he put his cap in his pocket with an air of great satisfaction, and addressed himself with respectful demeanour to Mrs Nickleby.

'Beautiful madam,' such were his words, 'if I have made any mistake with regard to your family or connections, I humbly beseech you to pardon me. If I supposed you to be related to Foreign Powers or Native Boards, it is because you have a manner, a carriage, a dignity, which

you will excuse my saying that none but yourself (with the single exception perhaps of the tragic muse, when playing extemporaneously on the barrel organ before the East India Company) can parallel. I am not a youth, ma'am, as you see; and although beings like you can never grow old, I venture to presume that we are fitted for each other.'

'Really, Kate, my love!' said Mrs Nickleby faintly, and looking another way.

'I have estates, ma'am,' said the old gentleman, flourishing his right hand negligently, as if he made very light of such matters, and speaking very fast; 'jewels, lighthouses, fish-ponds, a whalery of my own in the North Sea, and several oyster-beds of great profit in the Pacific Ocean. If you will have the kindness to step down to the Royal Exchange and to take the cocked-hat off the stoutest beadle's head, you will find my card in the lining of the crown, wrapped up in a piece of blue paper. My walking-stick is also to be seen on application to the chaplain of the House of Commons, who is strictly forbidden to take any money for showing it. I have enemies about me, ma'am,' he looked towards his house and spoke very low, 'who attack me on all occasions, and wish to secure my property. If you bless me with your hand and heart, you can apply to the Lord Chancellor or call out the military if necessary - sending my toothpick to the commander-in-chief will be sufficient - and so clear the house of them before the ceremony is performed. After that, love, bliss and rapture; rapture, love and bliss. Be mine, be mine!'

Repeating these last words with great rapture and enthusiasm, the old gentleman put on his black velvet cap again, and looking up into the sky in a hasty manner, said something that was not quite intelligible concerning a balloon he expected, and which was rather after its time.

'Be mine, be mine!' repeated the old gentleman.

'Kate, my dear,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'I have hardly the power to speak; but it is necessary for the happiness of all parties that this matter should be set at rest for ever.'

'Surely there is no necessity for you to say one word, mama?' reasoned Kate.

'You will allow me, my dear, if you please, to judge for myself,' said Mrs Nickleby.

'Be mine, be mine!' cried the old gentleman.

'It can scarcely be expected, sir,' said Mrs Nickleby, fixing her eyes modestly on the ground, 'that I should tell a stranger whether I feel

flattered and obliged by such proposals, or not. They certainly are made under very singular circumstances; still at the same time, as far as it goes, and to a certain extent of course' (Mrs Nickleby's customary qualification), 'they must be gratifying and agreeable to one's feelings.'

'Be mine, be mine,' cried the old gentleman. 'Gog and Magog, Gog and Magog. Be mine, be mine!'

'It will be sufficient for me to say, sir,' resumed Mrs Nickleby, with perfect seriousness - 'and I'm sure you'll see the propriety of taking an answer and going away - that I have made up my mind to remain a widow, and to devote myself to my children. You may not suppose I am the mother of two children - indeed many people have doubted it, and said that nothing on earth could ever make 'em believe it possible - but it is the case, and they are both grown up. We shall be very glad to have you for a neighbour - very glad; delighted, I'm sure - but in any other character it's quite impossible, quite. As to my being young enough to marry again, that perhaps may be so, or it may not be; but I couldn't think of it for an instant, not on any account whatever. I said I never would, and I never will. It's a very painful thing to have to reject proposals, and I would much rather that none were made; at the same time this is the answer that I determined long ago to make, and this is the answer I shall always give.'

These observations were partly addressed to the old gentleman, partly to Kate, and partly delivered in soliloquy. Towards their conclusion, the suitor evinced a very irreverent degree of inattention, and Mrs Nickleby had scarcely finished speaking, when, to the great terror both of that lady and her daughter, he suddenly flung off his coat, and springing on the top of the wall, threw himself into an attitude which displayed his small-clothes and grey worsteds to the fullest advantage, and concluded by standing on one leg, and repeating his favourite bellow with increased vehemence.

While he was still dwelling on the last note, and embellishing it with a prolonged flourish, a dirty hand was observed to glide stealthily and swiftly along the top of the wall, as if in pursuit of a fly, and then to clasp with the utmost dexterity one of the old gentleman's ankles. This done, the companion hand appeared, and clasped the other ankle.

Thus encumbered the old gentleman lifted his legs awkwardly once or twice, as if they were very clumsy and imperfect pieces of machinery, and then looking down on his own side of the wall, burst into a loud laugh.

'It's you, is it?' said the old gentleman.

'Yes, it's me,' replied a gruff voice.

'How's the Emperor of Tartary?' said the old gentleman.

'Oh! he's much the same as usual,' was the reply. 'No better and no worse.'

'The young Prince of China,' said the old gentleman, with much interest. 'Is he reconciled to his father-in-law, the great potato salesman?'

'No,' answered the gruff voice; 'and he says he never will be, that's more.'

'If that's the case,' observed the old gentleman, 'perhaps I'd better come down.'

'Well,' said the man on the other side, 'I think you had, perhaps.'

One of the hands being then cautiously unclasped, the old gentleman dropped into a sitting posture, and was looking round to smile and bow to Mrs Nickleby, when he disappeared with some precipitation, as if his legs had been pulled from below.

Very much relieved by his disappearance, Kate was turning to speak to her mama, when the dirty hands again became visible, and were immediately followed by the figure of a coarse squat man, who ascended by the steps which had been recently occupied by their singular neighbour.

'Beg your pardon, ladies,' said this new comer, grinning and touching his hat. 'Has he been making love to either of you?'

'Yes,' said Kate.

'Ah!' rejoined the man, taking his handkerchief out of his hat and wiping his face, 'he always will, you know. Nothing will prevent his making love.'

'I need not ask you if he is out of his mind, poor creature,' said Kate.

'Why no,' replied the man, looking into his hat, throwing his handkerchief in at one dab, and putting it on again. 'That's pretty plain, that is.'

'Has he been long so?' asked Kate.

'A long while.'

'And is there no hope for him?' said Kate, compassionately

'Not a bit, and don't deserve to be,' replied the keeper. 'He's a deal pleasanter without his senses than with 'em. He was the cruellest, wickedest, out-and-outerest old flint that ever drew breath.'

'Indeed!' said Kate.

'By George!' replied the keeper, shaking his head so emphatically that he was obliged to frown to keep his hat on. 'I never come across such a vagabond, and my mate says the same. Broke his poor wife's heart, turned his daughters out of doors, drove his sons into the streets; it was a blessing he went mad at last, through evil tempers, and covetousness, and selfishness, and guzzling, and drinking, or he'd have drove many others so. Hope for HIM, an old rip! There isn't too much hope going' but I'll bet a crown that what there is, is saved for more deserving chaps than him, anyhow.'

With which confession of his faith, the keeper shook his head again, as much as to say that nothing short of this would do, if things were to go on at all; and touching his hat sulkily - not that he was in an ill humour, but that his subject ruffled him - descended the ladder, and took it away.

During this conversation, Mrs Nickleby had regarded the man with a severe and steadfast look. She now heaved a profound sigh, and pursing up her lips, shook her head in a slow and doubtful manner.

'Poor creature!' said Kate.

'Ah! poor indeed!' rejoined Mrs Nickleby. 'It's shameful that such things should be allowed. Shameful!'

'How can they be helped, mama?' said Kate, mournfully. 'The infirmities of nature - '

'Nature!' said Mrs Nickleby. 'What! Do YOU suppose this poor gentleman is out of his mind?'

'Can anybody who sees him entertain any other opinion, mama?'

'Why then, I just tell you this, Kate,' returned Mrs Nickleby, 'that, he is nothing of the kind, and I am surprised you can be so imposed upon. It's some plot of these people to possess themselves of his property - didn't he say so himself? He may be a little odd and flighty, perhaps, many of us are that; but downright mad! and express himself as he does, respectfully, and in quite poetical language, and making offers with so much thought, and care, and prudence - not as if he ran into the streets, and went down upon his knees to the first

chit of a girl he met, as a madman would! No, no, Kate, there's a great deal too much method in HIS madness; depend upon that, my dear.'