Chapter XLIV

Mr Ralph Nickleby cuts an old Acquaintance. It would also appear from the Contents hereof, that a Joke, even between Husband and Wife, may be sometimes carried too far

There are some men who, living with the one object of enriching themselves, no matter by what means, and being perfectly conscious of the baseness and rascality of the means which they will use every day towards this end, affect nevertheless - even to themselves - a high tone of moral rectitude, and shake their heads and sigh over the depravity of the world. Some of the craftiest scoundrels that ever walked this earth, or rather - for walking implies, at least, an erect position and the bearing of a man - that ever crawled and crept through life by its dirtiest and narrowest ways, will gravely jot down in diaries the events of every day, and keep a regular debtor and creditor account with Heaven, which shall always show a floating balance in their own favour. Whether this is a gratuitous (the only gratuitous) part of the falsehood and trickery of such men's lives, or whether they really hope to cheat Heaven itself, and lay up treasure in the next world by the same process which has enabled them to lay up treasure in this - not to question how it is, so it is. And, doubtless, such book-keeping (like certain autobiographies which have enlightened the world) cannot fail to prove serviceable, in the one respect of sparing the recording Angel some time and labour.

Ralph Nickleby was not a man of this stamp. Stern, unyielding, dogged, and impenetrable, Ralph cared for nothing in life, or beyond it, save the gratification of two passions, avarice, the first and predominant appetite of his nature, and hatred, the second. Affecting to consider himself but a type of all humanity, he was at little pains to conceal his true character from the world in general, and in his own heart he exulted over and cherished every bad design as it had birth. The only scriptural admonition that Ralph Nickleby heeded, in the letter, was 'know thyself.' He knew himself well, and choosing to imagine that all mankind were cast in the same mould, hated them; for, though no man hates himself, the coldest among us having too much self-love for that, yet most men unconsciously judge the world from themselves, and it will be very generally found that those who sneer habitually at human nature, and affect to despise it, are among its worst and least pleasant samples.

But the present business of these adventures is with Ralph himself, who stood regarding Newman Noggs with a heavy frown, while that worthy took off his fingerless gloves, and spreading them carefully on the palm of his left hand, and flattening them with his right to take the creases out, proceeded to roll them up with an absent air as if he

were utterly regardless of all things else, in the deep interest of the ceremonial.

'Gone out of town!' said Ralph, slowly. 'A mistake of yours. Go back again.'

'No mistake,' returned Newman. 'Not even going; gone.'

'Has he turned girl or baby?' muttered Ralph, with a fretful gesture.

'I don't know,' said Newman, 'but he's gone.'

The repetition of the word 'gone' seemed to afford Newman Noggs inexpressible delight, in proportion as it annoyed Ralph Nickleby. He uttered the word with a full round emphasis, dwelling upon it as long as he decently could, and when he could hold out no longer without attracting observation, stood gasping it to himself as if even that were a satisfaction.

'And WHERE has he gone?' said Ralph.

'France,' replied Newman. 'Danger of another attack of erysipelas - a worse attack - in the head. So the doctors ordered him off. And he's gone.'

'And Lord Frederick - ?' began Ralph.

'He's gone too,' replied Newman.

'And he carries his drubbing with him, does he?' said Ralph, turning away; 'pockets his bruises, and sneaks off without the retaliation of a word, or seeking the smallest reparation!'

'He's too ill,' said Newman.

'Too ill!' repeated Ralph. 'Why I would have it if I were dying; in that case I should only be the more determined to have it, and that without delay - I mean if I were he. But he's too ill! Poor Sir Mulberry! Too ill!'

Uttering these words with supreme contempt and great irritation of manner, Ralph signed hastily to Newman to leave the room; and throwing himself into his chair, beat his foot impatiently upon the ground.

'There is some spell about that boy,' said Ralph, grinding his teeth. 'Circumstances conspire to help him. Talk of fortune's favours! What is even money to such Devil's luck as this?'

He thrust his hands impatiently into his pockets, but notwithstanding his previous reflection there was some consolation there, for his face relaxed a little; and although there was still a deep frown upon the contracted brow, it was one of calculation, and not of disappointment.

'This Hawk will come back, however,' muttered Ralph; 'and if I know the man (and I should by this time) his wrath will have lost nothing of its violence in the meanwhile. Obliged to live in retirement - the monotony of a sick-room to a man of his habits - no life - no drink - no play - nothing that he likes and lives by. He is not likely to forget his obligations to the cause of all this. Few men would; but he of all others? No, no!'

He smiled and shook his head, and resting his chin upon his hand, fell a musing, and smiled again. After a time he rose and rang the bell.

'That Mr Squeers; has he been here?' said Ralph.

'He was here last night. I left him here when I went home,' returned Newman.

'I know that, fool, do I not?' said Ralph, irascibly. 'Has he been here since? Was he here this morning?'

'No,' bawled Newman, in a very loud key.

'If he comes while I am out - he is pretty sure to be here by nine tonight - let him wait. And if there's another man with him, as there will be - perhaps,' said Ralph, checking himself, 'let him wait too.'

'Let 'em both wait?' said Newman.

'Ay,' replied Ralph, turning upon him with an angry look. 'Help me on with this spencer, and don't repeat after me, like a croaking parrot.'

'I wish I was a parrot,' Newman, sulkily.

'I wish you were,' rejoined Ralph, drawing his spencer on; 'I'd have wrung your neck long ago.'

Newman returned no answer to this compliment, but looked over Ralph's shoulder for an instant, (he was adjusting the collar of the spencer behind, just then,) as if he were strongly disposed to tweak him by the nose. Meeting Ralph's eye, however, he suddenly recalled his wandering fingers, and rubbed his own red nose with a vehemence quite astonishing.

Bestowing no further notice upon his eccentric follower than a threatening look, and an admonition to be careful and make no mistake, Ralph took his hat and gloves, and walked out.

He appeared to have a very extraordinary and miscellaneous connection, and very odd calls he made, some at great rich houses, and some at small poor ones, but all upon one subject: money. His face was a talisman to the porters and servants of his more dashing clients, and procured him ready admission, though he trudged on foot, and others, who were denied, rattled to the door in carriages. Here he was all softness and cringing civility; his step so light, that it scarcely produced a sound upon the thick carpets; his voice so soft that it was not audible beyond the person to whom it was addressed. But in the poorer habitations Ralph was another man; his boots creaked upon the passage floor as he walked boldly in; his voice was harsh and loud as he demanded the money that was overdue; his threats were coarse and angry. With another class of customers, Ralph was again another man. These were attorneys of more than doubtful reputation, who helped him to new business, or raised fresh profits upon old. With them Ralph was familiar and jocose, humorous upon the topics of the day, and especially pleasant upon bankruptcies and pecuniary difficulties that made good for trade. In short, it would have been difficult to have recognised the same man under these various aspects, but for the bulky leather case full of bills and notes which he drew from his pocket at every house, and the constant repetition of the same complaint, (varied only in tone and style of delivery,) that the world thought him rich, and that perhaps he might be if he had his own; but there was no getting money in when it was once out, either principal or interest, and it was a hard matter to live; even to live from day to day.

It was evening before a long round of such visits (interrupted only by a scanty dinner at an eating-house) terminated at Pimlico, and Ralph walked along St James's Park, on his way home.

There were some deep schemes in his head, as the puckered brow and firmly-set mouth would have abundantly testified, even if they had been unaccompanied by a complete indifference to, or unconsciousness of, the objects about him. So complete was his abstraction, however, that Ralph, usually as quick-sighted as any man, did not observe that he was followed by a shambling figure, which at one time stole behind him with noiseless footsteps, at another crept a few paces before him, and at another glided along by his side; at all times regarding him with an eye so keen, and a look so eager and attentive, that it was more like the expression of an intrusive face in some powerful picture or strongly marked dream, than the scrutiny even of a most interested and anxious observer.

The sky had been lowering and dark for some time, and the commencement of a violent storm of rain drove Ralph for shelter to a tree. He was leaning against it with folded arms, still buried in thought, when, happening to raise his eyes, he suddenly met those of a man who, creeping round the trunk, peered into his face with a searching look. There was something in the usurer's expression at the moment, which the man appeared to remember well, for it decided him; and stepping close up to Ralph, he pronounced his name.

Astonished for the moment, Ralph fell back a couple of paces and surveyed him from head to foot. A spare, dark, withered man, of about his own age, with a stooping body, and a very sinister face rendered more ill-favoured by hollow and hungry cheeks, deeply sunburnt, and thick black eyebrows, blacker in contrast with the perfect whiteness of his hair; roughly clothed in shabby garments, of a strange and uncouth make; and having about him an indefinable manner of depression and degradation - this, for a moment, was all he saw. But he looked again, and the face and person seemed gradually to grow less strange; to change as he looked, to subside and soften into lineaments that were familiar, until at last they resolved themselves, as if by some strange optical illusion, into those of one whom he had known for many years, and forgotten and lost sight of for nearly as many more.

The man saw that the recognition was mutual, and beckoning to Ralph to take his former place under the tree, and not to stand in the falling rain, of which, in his first surprise, he had been quite regardless, addressed him in a hoarse, faint tone.

'You would hardly have known me from my voice, I suppose, Mr Nickleby?' he said.

'No,' returned Ralph, bending a severe look upon him. 'Though there is something in that, that I remember now.'

'There is little in me that you can call to mind as having been there eight years ago, I dare say?' observed the other.

'Quite enough,' said Ralph, carelessly, and averting his face. 'More than enough.'

'If I had remained in doubt about YOU, Mr Nickleby,' said the other, 'this reception, and YOUR manner, would have decided me very soon.'

'Did you expect any other?' asked Ralph, sharply.

'No!' said the man.

'You were right,' retorted Ralph; 'and as you feel no surprise, need express none.'

'Mr Nickleby,' said the man, bluntly, after a brief pause, during which he had seemed to struggle with an inclination to answer him by some reproach, 'will you hear a few words that I have to say?'

'I am obliged to wait here till the rain holds a little,' said Ralph, looking abroad. 'If you talk, sir, I shall not put my fingers in my ears, though your talking may have as much effect as if I did.'

'I was once in your confidence - ' thus his companion began. Ralph looked round, and smiled involuntarily.

'Well,' said the other, 'as much in your confidence as you ever chose to let anybody be.'

'Ah!' rejoined Ralph, folding his arms; 'that's another thing, quite another thing.'

'Don't let us play upon words, Mr Nickleby, in the name of humanity.'

'Of what?' said Ralph.

'Of humanity,' replied the other, sternly. 'I am hungry and in want. If the change that you must see in me after so long an absence - must see, for I, upon whom it has come by slow and hard degrees, see it and know it well - will not move you to pity, let the knowledge that bread; not the daily bread of the Lord's Prayer, which, as it is offered up in cities like this, is understood to include half the luxuries of the world for the rich, and just as much coarse food as will support life for the poor - not that, but bread, a crust of dry hard bread, is beyond my reach today - let that have some weight with you, if nothing else has.'

'If this is the usual form in which you beg, sir,' said Ralph, 'you have studied your part well; but if you will take advice from one who knows something of the world and its ways, I should recommend a lower tone; a little lower tone, or you stand a fair chance of being starved in good earnest.'

As he said this, Ralph clenched his left wrist tightly with his right hand, and inclining his head a little on one side and dropping his chin upon his breast, looked at him whom he addressed with a frowning, sullen face. The very picture of a man whom nothing could move or soften.

'Yesterday was my first day in London,' said the old man, glancing at his travel-stained dress and worn shoes.

'It would have been better for you, I think, if it had been your last also,' replied Ralph.

'I have been seeking you these two days, where I thought you were most likely to be found,' resumed the other more humbly, 'and I met you here at last, when I had almost given up the hope of encountering you, Mr Nickleby.'

He seemed to wait for some reply, but Ralph giving him none, he continued:

'I am a most miserable and wretched outcast, nearly sixty years old, and as destitute and helpless as a child of six.'

'I am sixty years old, too,' replied Ralph, 'and am neither destitute nor helpless. Work. Don't make fine play-acting speeches about bread, but earn it.'

'How?' cried the other. 'Where? Show me the means. Will you give them to me - will you?'

'I did once,' replied Ralph, composedly; 'you scarcely need ask me whether I will again.'

'It's twenty years ago, or more,' said the man, in a suppressed voice, 'since you and I fell out. You remember that? I claimed a share in the profits of some business I brought to you, and, as I persisted, you arrested me for an old advance of ten pounds, odd shillings, including interest at fifty per cent, or so.'

'I remember something of it,' replied Ralph, carelessly. 'What then?'

'That didn't part us,' said the man. 'I made submission, being on the wrong side of the bolts and bars; and as you were not the made man then that you are now, you were glad enough to take back a clerk who wasn't over nice, and who knew something of the trade you drove.'

'You begged and prayed, and I consented,' returned Ralph. 'That was kind of me. Perhaps I did want you. I forget. I should think I did, or you would have begged in vain. You were useful; not too honest, not too delicate, not too nice of hand or heart; but useful.'

'Useful, indeed!' said the man. 'Come. You had pinched and ground me down for some years before that, but I had served you faithfully up to that time, in spite of all your dog's usage. Had I?'

Ralph made no reply.

'Had I?' said the man again.

'You had had your wages,' rejoined Ralph, 'and had done your work. We stood on equal ground so far, and could both cry quits.'

'Then, but not afterwards,' said the other.

'Not afterwards, certainly, nor even then, for (as you have just said) you owed me money, and do still,' replied Ralph.

'That's not all,' said the man, eagerly. 'That's not all. Mark that. I didn't forget that old sore, trust me. Partly in remembrance of that, and partly in the hope of making money someday by the scheme, I took advantage of my position about you, and possessed myself of a hold upon you, which you would give half of all you have to know, and never can know but through me. I left you - long after that time, remember - and, for some poor trickery that came within the law, but was nothing to what you money-makers daily practise just outside its bounds, was sent away a convict for seven years. I have returned what you see me. Now, Mr Nickleby,' said the man, with a strange mixture of humility and sense of power, 'what help and assistance will you give me; what bribe, to speak out plainly? My expectations are not monstrous, but I must live, and to live I must eat and drink. Money is on your side, and hunger and thirst on mine. You may drive an easy bargain.'

'Is that all?' said Ralph, still eyeing his companion with the same steady look, and moving nothing but his lips.

'It depends on you, Mr Nickleby, whether that's all or not,' was the rejoinder.

'Why then, harkye, Mr - , I don't know by what name I am to call you,' said Ralph.

'By my old one, if you like.'

'Why then, harkye, Mr Brooker,' said Ralph, in his harshest accents, 'and don't expect to draw another speech from me. Harkye, sir. I know you of old for a ready scoundrel, but you never had a stout heart; and hard work, with (maybe) chains upon those legs of yours, and shorter food than when I ‘pinched’ and ‘ground’ you, has blunted your wits, or you would not come with such a tale as this to me. You a hold upon me! Keep it, or publish it to the world, if you like.'

'I can't do that,' interposed Brooker. 'That wouldn't serve me.'

'Wouldn't it?' said Ralph. 'It will serve you as much as bringing it to me, I promise you. To be plain with you, I am a careful man, and know my affairs thoroughly. I know the world, and the world knows me. Whatever you gleaned, or heard, or saw, when you served me, the world knows and magnifies already. You could tell it nothing that would surprise it, unless, indeed, it redounded to my credit or honour, and then it would scout you for a liar. And yet I don't find business slack, or clients scrupulous. Quite the contrary. I am reviled or threatened every day by one man or another,' said Ralph; 'but things roll on just the same, and I don't grow poorer either.'

'I neither revile nor threaten,' rejoined the man. 'I can tell you of what you have lost by my act, what I only can restore, and what, if I die without restoring, dies with me, and never can be regained.'

'I tell my money pretty accurately, and generally keep it in my own custody,' said Ralph. 'I look sharply after most men that I deal with, and most of all I looked sharply after you. You are welcome to all you have kept from me.'

'Are those of your own name dear to you?' said the man emphatically. 'If they are - '

'They are not,' returned Ralph, exasperated at this perseverance, and the thought of Nicholas, which the last question awakened. 'They are not. If you had come as a common beggar, I might have thrown a sixpence to you in remembrance of the clever knave you used to be; but since you try to palm these stale tricks upon one you might have known better, I'll not part with a halfpenny - nor would I to save you from rotting. And remember this, 'scape-gallows,' said Ralph, menacing him with his hand, 'that if we meet again, and you so much as notice me by one begging gesture, you shall see the inside of a jail once more, and tighten this hold upon me in intervals of the hard labour that vagabonds are put to. There's my answer to your trash. Take it.'

With a disdainful scowl at the object of his anger, who met his eye but uttered not a word, Ralph walked away at his usual pace, without manifesting the slightest curiosity to see what became of his late companion, or indeed once looking behind him. The man remained on the same spot with his eyes fixed upon his retreating figure until it was lost to view, and then drawing his arm about his chest, as if the damp and lack of food struck coldly to him, lingered with slouching steps by the wayside, and begged of those who passed along.

Ralph, in no-wise moved by what had lately passed, further than as he had already expressed himself, walked deliberately on, and turning out of the Park and leaving Golden Square on his right, took his way

through some streets at the west end of the town until he arrived in that particular one in which stood the residence of Madame Mantalini. The name of that lady no longer appeared on the flaming door-plate, that of Miss Knag being substituted in its stead; but the bonnets and dresses were still dimly visible in the first-floor windows by the decaying light of a summer's evening, and excepting this ostensible alteration in the proprietorship, the establishment wore its old appearance.

'Humph!' muttered Ralph, drawing his hand across his mouth with a connoisseur-like air, and surveying the house from top to bottom; 'these people look pretty well. They can't last long; but if I know of their going in good time, I am safe, and a fair profit too. I must keep them closely in view; that's all.'

So, nodding his head very complacently, Ralph was leaving the spot, when his quick ear caught the sound of a confused noise and hubbub of voices, mingled with a great running up and down stairs, in the very house which had been the subject of his scrutiny; and while he was hesitating whether to knock at the door or listen at the keyhole a little longer, a female servant of Madame Mantalini's (whom he had often seen) opened it abruptly and bounced out, with her blue cap-ribbons streaming in the air.

'Hallo here. Stop!' cried Ralph. 'What's the matter? Here am I. Didn't you hear me knock?'

'Oh! Mr Nickleby, sir,' said the girl. 'Go up, for the love of Gracious. Master's been and done it again.'

'Done what?' said Ralph, tartly; 'what d'ye mean?'

'I knew he would if he was drove to it,' cried the girl. 'I said so all along.'

'Come here, you silly wench,' said Ralph, catching her by the wrist; 'and don't carry family matters to the neighbours, destroying the credit of the establishment. Come here; do you hear me, girl?'

Without any further expostulation, he led or rather pulled the frightened handmaid into the house, and shut the door; then bidding her walk upstairs before him, followed without more ceremony.

Guided by the noise of a great many voices all talking together, and passing the girl in his impatience, before they had ascended many steps, Ralph quickly reached the private sitting-room, when he was rather amazed by the confused and inexplicable scene in which he suddenly found himself.

There were all the young-lady workers, some with bonnets and some without, in various attitudes expressive of alarm and consternation; some gathered round Madame Mantalini, who was in tears upon one chair; and others round Miss Knag, who was in opposition tears upon another; and others round Mr Mantalini, who was perhaps the most striking figure in the whole group, for Mr Mantalini's legs were extended at full length upon the floor, and his head and shoulders were supported by a very tall footman, who didn't seem to know what to do with them, and Mr Mantalini's eyes were closed, and his face was pale and his hair was comparatively straight, and his whiskers and moustache were limp, and his teeth were clenched, and he had a little bottle in his right hand, and a little tea-spoon in his left; and his hands, arms, legs, and shoulders, were all stiff and powerless. And yet Madame Mantalini was not weeping upon the body, but was scolding violently upon her chair; and all this amidst a clamour of tongues perfectly deafening, and which really appeared to have driven the unfortunate footman to the utmost verge of distraction.

'What is the matter here?' said Ralph, pressing forward.

At this inquiry, the clamour was increased twenty-fold, and an astounding string of such shrill contradictions as 'He's poisoned himself' - 'He hasn't' - 'Send for a doctor' - 'Don't' - 'He's dying' - 'He isn't, he's only pretending' - with various other cries, poured forth with bewildering volubility, until Madame Mantalini was seen to address herself to Ralph, when female curiosity to know what she would say, prevailed, and, as if by general consent, a dead silence, unbroken by a single whisper, instantaneously succeeded.

'Mr Nickleby,' said Madame Mantalini; 'by what chance you came here, I don't know.'

Here a gurgling voice was heard to ejaculate, as part of the wanderings of a sick man, the words 'Demnition sweetness!' but nobody heeded them except the footman, who, being startled to hear such awful tones proceeding, as it were, from between his very fingers, dropped his master's head upon the floor with a pretty loud crash, and then, without an effort to lift it up, gazed upon the bystanders, as if he had done something rather clever than otherwise.

'I will, however,' continued Madame Mantalini, drying her eyes, and speaking with great indignation, 'say before you, and before everybody here, for the first time, and once for all, that I never will supply that man's extravagances and viciousness again. I have been a dupe and a fool to him long enough. In future, he shall support himself if he can, and then he may spend what money he pleases, upon whom and how he pleases; but it shall not be mine, and therefore you had better pause before you trust him further.'

Thereupon Madame Mantalini, quite unmoved by some most pathetic lamentations on the part of her husband, that the apothecary had not mixed the prussic acid strong enough, and that he must take another bottle or two to finish the work he had in hand, entered into a catalogue of that amiable gentleman's gallantries, deceptions, extravagances, and infidelities (especially the last), winding up with a protest against being supposed to entertain the smallest remnant of regard for him; and adducing, in proof of the altered state of her affections, the circumstance of his having poisoned himself in private no less than six times within the last fortnight, and her not having once interfered by word or deed to save his life.

'And I insist on being separated and left to myself,' said Madame Mantalini, sobbing. 'If he dares to refuse me a separation, I'll have one in law - I can - and I hope this will be a warning to all girls who have seen this disgraceful exhibition.'

Miss Knag, who was unquestionably the oldest girl in company, said with great solemnity, that it would be a warning to HER, and so did the young ladies generally, with the exception of one or two who appeared to entertain some doubts whether such whispers could do wrong.

'Why do you say all this before so many listeners?' said Ralph, in a low voice. 'You know you are not in earnest.'

'I AM in earnest,' replied Madame Mantalini, aloud, and retreating towards Miss Knag.

'Well, but consider,' reasoned Ralph, who had a great interest in the matter. 'It would be well to reflect. A married woman has no property.'

'Not a solitary single individual dem, my soul,' and Mr Mantalini, raising himself upon his elbow.

'I am quite aware of that,' retorted Madame Mantalini, tossing her head; 'and I have none. The business, the stock, this house, and everything in it, all belong to Miss Knag.'

'That's quite true, Madame Mantalini,' said Miss Knag, with whom her late employer had secretly come to an amicable understanding on this point. 'Very true, indeed, Madame Mantalini - hem - very true. And I never was more glad in all my life, that I had strength of mind to resist matrimonial offers, no matter how advantageous, than I am when I think of my present position as compared with your most unfortunate and most undeserved one, Madame Mantalini.'

'Demmit!' cried Mr Mantalini, turning his head towards his wife. 'Will it not slap and pinch the envious dowager, that dares to reflect upon its own delicious?'

But the day of Mr Mantalini's blandishments had departed. 'Miss Knag, sir,' said his wife, 'is my particular friend;' and although Mr Mantalini leered till his eyes seemed in danger of never coming back to their right places again, Madame Mantalini showed no signs of softening.

To do the excellent Miss Knag justice, she had been mainly instrumental in bringing about this altered state of things, for, finding by daily experience, that there was no chance of the business thriving, or even continuing to exist, while Mr Mantalini had any hand in the expenditure, and having now a considerable interest in its well-doing, she had sedulously applied herself to the investigation of some little matters connected with that gentleman's private character, which she had so well elucidated, and artfully imparted to Madame Mantalini, as to open her eyes more effectually than the closest and most philosophical reasoning could have done in a series of years. To which end, the accidental discovery by Miss Knag of some tender correspondence, in which Madame Mantalini was described as 'old' and 'ordinary,' had most providentially contributed.

However, notwithstanding her firmness, Madame Mantalini wept very piteously; and as she leant upon Miss Knag, and signed towards the door, that young lady and all the other young ladies with sympathising faces, proceeded to bear her out.

'Nickleby,' said Mr Mantalini in tears, 'you have been made a witness to this demnition cruelty, on the part of the demdest enslaver and captivator that never was, oh dem! I forgive that woman.'

'Forgive!' repeated Madame Mantalini, angrily.

'I do forgive her, Nickleby,' said Mr Mantalini. 'You will blame me, the world will blame me, the women will blame me; everybody will laugh, and scoff, and smile, and grin most demnebly. They will say, 'She had a blessing. She did not know it. He was too weak; he was too good; he was a dem'd fine fellow, but he loved too strong; he could not bear her to be cross, and call him wicked names. It was a dem'd case, there never was a demder.' But I forgive her.'

With this affecting speech Mr Mantalini fell down again very flat, and lay to all appearance without sense or motion, until all the females had left the room, when he came cautiously into a sitting posture, and confronted Ralph with a very blank face, and the little bottle still in one hand and the tea-spoon in the other.

'You may put away those fooleries now, and live by your wits again,' said Ralph, coolly putting on his hat.

'Demmit, Nickleby, you're not serious?'

'I seldom joke,' said Ralph. 'Good-night.'

'No, but Nickleby - ' said Mantalini.

'I am wrong, perhaps,' rejoined Ralph. 'I hope so. You should know best. Good-night.'

Affecting not to hear his entreaties that he would stay and advise with him, Ralph left the crest-fallen Mr Mantalini to his meditations, and left the house quietly.

'Oho!' he said, 'sets the wind that way so soon? Half knave and half fool, and detected in both characters? I think your day is over, sir.'

As he said this, he made some memorandum in his pocket-book in which Mr Mantalini's name figured conspicuously, and finding by his watch that it was between nine and ten o'clock, made all speed home.

'Are they here?' was the first question he asked of Newman.

Newman nodded. 'Been here half an hour.'

'Two of them? One a fat sleek man?'

'Ay,' said Newman. 'In your room now.'

'Good,' rejoined Ralph. 'Get me a coach.'

'A coach! What, you - going to - eh?' stammered Newman.

Ralph angrily repeated his orders, and Noggs, who might well have been excused for wondering at such an unusual and extraordinary circumstance (for he had never seen Ralph in a coach in his life) departed on his errand, and presently returned with the conveyance.

Into it went Mr Squeers, and Ralph, and the third man, whom Newman Noggs had never seen. Newman stood upon the door-step to see them off, not troubling himself to wonder where or upon what business they were going, until he chanced by mere accident to hear Ralph name the address whither the coachman was to drive.

Quick as lightning and in a state of the most extreme wonder, Newman darted into his little office for his hat, and limped after the

coach as if with the intention of getting up behind; but in this design he was balked, for it had too much the start of him and was soon hopelessly ahead, leaving him gaping in the empty street.

'I don't know though,' said Noggs, stopping for breath, 'any good that I could have done by going too. He would have seen me if I had. Drive THERE! What can come of this? If I had only known it yesterday I could have told - drive there! There's mischief in it. There must be.'

His reflections were interrupted by a grey-haired man of a very remarkable, though far from prepossessing appearance, who, coming stealthily towards him, solicited relief.

Newman, still cogitating deeply, turned away; but the man followed him, and pressed him with such a tale of misery that Newman (who might have been considered a hopeless person to beg from, and who had little enough to give) looked into his hat for some halfpence which he usually kept screwed up, when he had any, in a corner of his pocket-handkerchief.

While he was busily untwisting the knot with his teeth, the man said something which attracted his attention; whatever that something was, it led to something else, and in the end he and Newman walked away side by side - the strange man talking earnestly, and Newman listening.