

Chapter XLVI

Throws some Light upon Nicholas's Love; but whether for Good or Evil the Reader must determine

After an anxious consideration of the painful and embarrassing position in which he was placed, Nicholas decided that he ought to lose no time in frankly stating it to the kind brothers. Availing himself of the first opportunity of being alone with Mr Charles Cheeryble at the close of next day, he accordingly related Smike's little history, and modestly but firmly expressed his hope that the good old gentleman would, under such circumstances as he described, hold him justified in adopting the extreme course of interfering between parent and child, and upholding the latter in his disobedience; even though his horror and dread of his father might seem, and would doubtless be represented as, a thing so repulsive and unnatural, as to render those who countenanced him in it, fit objects of general detestation and abhorrence.

'So deeply rooted does this horror of the man appear to be,' said Nicholas, 'that I can hardly believe he really is his son. Nature does not seem to have implanted in his breast one lingering feeling of affection for him, and surely she can never err.'

'My dear sir,' replied brother Charles, 'you fall into the very common mistake of charging upon Nature, matters with which she has not the smallest connection, and for which she is in no way responsible. Men talk of Nature as an abstract thing, and lose sight of what is natural while they do so. Here is a poor lad who has never felt a parent's care, who has scarcely known anything all his life but suffering and sorrow, presented to a man who he is told is his father, and whose first act is to signify his intention of putting an end to his short term of happiness, of consigning him to his old fate, and taking him from the only friend he has ever had - which is yourself. If Nature, in such a case, put into that lad's breast but one secret prompting which urged him towards his father and away from you, she would be a liar and an idiot.'

Nicholas was delighted to find that the old gentleman spoke so warmly, and in the hope that he might say something more to the same purpose, made no reply.

'The same mistake presents itself to me, in one shape or other, at every turn,' said brother Charles. 'Parents who never showed their love, complain of want of natural affection in their children; children who never showed their duty, complain of want of natural feeling in their parents; law-makers who find both so miserable that their affections have never had enough of life's sun to develop them, are

loud in their moralisings over parents and children too, and cry that the very ties of nature are disregarded. Natural affections and instincts, my dear sir, are the most beautiful of the Almighty's works, but like other beautiful works of His, they must be reared and fostered, or it is as natural that they should be wholly obscured, and that new feelings should usurp their place, as it is that the sweetest productions of the earth, left untended, should be choked with weeds and briers. I wish we could be brought to consider this, and remembering natural obligations a little more at the right time, talk about them a little less at the wrong one.'

After this, brother Charles, who had talked himself into a great heat, stopped to cool a little, and then continued:

'I dare say you are surprised, my dear sir, that I have listened to your recital with so little astonishment. That is easily explained. Your uncle has been here this morning.'

Nicholas coloured, and drew back a step or two.

'Yes,' said the old gentleman, tapping his desk emphatically, 'here, in this room. He would listen neither to reason, feeling, nor justice. But brother Ned was hard upon him; brother Ned, sir, might have melted a paving-stone.'

'He came to - ' said Nicholas.

'To complain of you,' returned brother Charles, 'to poison our ears with calumnies and falsehoods; but he came on a fruitless errand, and went away with some wholesome truths in his ear besides. Brother Ned, my dear My Nickleby - brother Ned, sir, is a perfect lion. So is Tim Linkinwater; Tim is quite a lion. We had Tim in to face him at first, and Tim was at him, sir, before you could say 'Jack Robinson.'

'How can I ever thank you for all the deep obligations you impose upon me every day?' said Nicholas.

'By keeping silence upon the subject, my dear sir,' returned brother Charles. 'You shall be righted. At least you shall not be wronged. Nobody belonging to you shall be wronged. They shall not hurt a hair of your head, or the boy's head, or your mother's head, or your sister's head. I have said it, brother Ned has said it, Tim Linkinwater has said it. We have all said it, and we'll all do it. I have seen the father - if he is the father - and I suppose he must be. He is a barbarian and a hypocrite, Mr Nickleby. I told him, 'You are a barbarian, sir.' I did. I said, 'You're a barbarian, sir.' And I'm glad of it, I am VERY glad I told him he was a barbarian, very glad indeed!'

By this time brother Charles was in such a very warm state of indignation, that Nicholas thought he might venture to put in a word, but the moment he essayed to do so, Mr Cheeryble laid his hand softly upon his arm, and pointed to a chair.

'The subject is at an end for the present,' said the old gentleman, wiping his face. 'Don't revive it by a single word. I am going to speak upon another subject, a confidential subject, Mr Nickleby. We must be cool again, we must be cool.'

After two or three turns across the room he resumed his seat, and drawing his chair nearer to that on which Nicholas was seated, said:

'I am about to employ you, my dear sir, on a confidential and delicate mission.'

'You might employ many a more able messenger, sir,' said Nicholas, 'but a more trustworthy or zealous one, I may be bold to say, you could not find.'

'Of that I am well assured,' returned brother Charles, 'well assured. You will give me credit for thinking so, when I tell you that the object of this mission is a young lady.'

'A young lady, sir!' cried Nicholas, quite trembling for the moment with his eagerness to hear more.

'A very beautiful young lady,' said Mr Cheeryble, gravely.

'Pray go on, sir,' returned Nicholas.

'I am thinking how to do so,' said brother Charles; sadly, as it seemed to his young friend, and with an expression allied to pain. 'You accidentally saw a young lady in this room one morning, my dear sir, in a fainting fit. Do you remember? Perhaps you have forgotten.'

'Oh no,' replied Nicholas, hurriedly. 'I - I - remember it very well indeed.'

'SHE is the lady I speak of,' said brother Charles. Like the famous parrot, Nicholas thought a great deal, but was unable to utter a word.

'She is the daughter,' said Mr Cheeryble, 'of a lady who, when she was a beautiful girl herself, and I was very many years younger, I - it seems a strange word for me to utter now - I loved very dearly. You will smile, perhaps, to hear a grey-headed man talk about such things. You will not offend me, for when I was as young as you, I dare say I should have done the same.'

'I have no such inclination, indeed,' said Nicholas.

'My dear brother Ned,' continued Mr Cheeryble, 'was to have married her sister, but she died. She is dead too now, and has been for many years. She married her choice; and I wish I could add that her after-life was as happy as God knows I ever prayed it might be!'

A short silence intervened, which Nicholas made no effort to break.

'If trial and calamity had fallen as lightly on his head, as in the deepest truth of my own heart I ever hoped (for her sake) it would, his life would have been one of peace and happiness,' said the old gentleman calmly. 'It will be enough to say that this was not the case; that she was not happy; that they fell into complicated distresses and difficulties; that she came, twelve months before her death, to appeal to my old friendship; sadly changed, sadly altered, broken-spirited from suffering and ill-usage, and almost broken-hearted. He readily availed himself of the money which, to give her but one hour's peace of mind, I would have poured out as freely as water - nay, he often sent her back for more - and yet even while he squandered it, he made the very success of these, her applications to me, the groundwork of cruel taunts and jeers, protesting that he knew she thought with bitter remorse of the choice she had made, that she had married him from motives of interest and vanity (he was a gay young man with great friends about him when she chose him for her husband), and venting in short upon her, by every unjust and unkind means, the bitterness of that ruin and disappointment which had been brought about by his profligacy alone. In those times this young lady was a mere child. I never saw her again until that morning when you saw her also, but my nephew, Frank - '

Nicholas started, and indistinctly apologising for the interruption, begged his patron to proceed.

' - My nephew, Frank, I say,' resumed Mr Cheeryble, 'encountered her by accident, and lost sight of her almost in a minute afterwards, within two days after he returned to England. Her father lay in some secret place to avoid his creditors, reduced, between sickness and poverty, to the verge of death, and she, a child, - we might almost think, if we did not know the wisdom of all Heaven's decrees - who should have blessed a better man, was steadily braving privation, degradation, and everything most terrible to such a young and delicate creature's heart, for the purpose of supporting him. She was attended, sir,' said brother Charles, 'in these reverses, by one faithful creature, who had been, in old times, a poor kitchen wench in the family, who was then their solitary servant, but who might have been, for the truth and fidelity of her heart - who might have been - ah! the wife of Tim Linkinwater himself, sir!'

Pursuing this encomium upon the poor follower with such energy and relish as no words can describe, brother Charles leant back in his chair, and delivered the remainder of his relation with greater composure.

It was in substance this: That proudly resisting all offers of permanent aid and support from her late mother's friends, because they were made conditional upon her quitting the wretched man, her father, who had no friends left, and shrinking with instinctive delicacy from appealing in their behalf to that true and noble heart which he hated, and had, through its greatest and purest goodness, deeply wronged by misconstruction and ill report, this young girl had struggled alone and unassisted to maintain him by the labour of her hands. That through the utmost depths of poverty and affliction she had toiled, never turning aside for an instant from her task, never wearied by the petulant gloom of a sick man sustained by no consoling recollections of the past or hopes of the future; never repining for the comforts she had rejected, or bewailing the hard lot she had voluntarily incurred. That every little accomplishment she had acquired in happier days had been put into requisition for this purpose, and directed to this one end. That for two long years, toiling by day and often too by night, working at the needle, the pencil, and the pen, and submitting, as a daily governess, to such caprices and indignities as women (with daughters too) too often love to inflict upon their own sex when they serve in such capacities, as though in jealousy of the superior intelligence which they are necessitated to employ, - indignities, in ninety-nine cases out of every hundred, heaped upon persons immeasurably and incalculably their betters, but outweighing in comparison any that the most heartless blackleg would put upon his groom - that for two long years, by dint of labouring in all these capacities and wearying in none, she had not succeeded in the sole aim and object of her life, but that, overwhelmed by accumulated difficulties and disappointments, she had been compelled to seek out her mother's old friend, and, with a bursting heart, to confide in him at last.

'If I had been poor,' said brother Charles, with sparkling eyes; 'if I had been poor, Mr Nickleby, my dear sir, which thank God I am not, I would have denied myself (of course anybody would under such circumstances) the commonest necessaries of life, to help her. As it is, the task is a difficult one. If her father were dead, nothing could be easier, for then she should share and cheer the happiest home that brother Ned and I could have, as if she were our child or sister. But he is still alive. Nobody can help him; that has been tried a thousand times; he was not abandoned by all without good cause, I know.'

'Cannot she be persuaded to - ' Nicholas hesitated when he had got thus far.

'To leave him?' said brother Charles. 'Who could entreat a child to desert her parent? Such entreaties, limited to her seeing him occasionally, have been urged upon her - not by me - but always with the same result.'

'Is he kind to her?' said Nicholas. 'Does he requite her affection?'

'True kindness, considerate self-denying kindness, is not in his nature,' returned Mr Cheeryble. 'Such kindness as he knows, he regards her with, I believe. The mother was a gentle, loving, confiding creature, and although he wounded her from their marriage till her death as cruelly and wantonly as ever man did, she never ceased to love him. She commended him on her death-bed to her child's care. Her child has never forgotten it, and never will.'

'Have you no influence over him?' asked Nicholas.

'I, my dear sir! The last man in the world. Such are his jealousy and hatred of me, that if he knew his daughter had opened her heart to me, he would render her life miserable with his reproaches; although - this is the inconsistency and selfishness of his character - although if he knew that every penny she had came from me, he would not relinquish one personal desire that the most reckless expenditure of her scanty stock could gratify.'

'An unnatural scoundrel!' said Nicholas, indignantly.

'We will use no harsh terms,' said brother Charles, in a gentle voice; 'but accommodate ourselves to the circumstances in which this young lady is placed. Such assistance as I have prevailed upon her to accept, I have been obliged, at her own earnest request, to dole out in the smallest portions, lest he, finding how easily money was procured, should squander it even more lightly than he is accustomed to do. She has come to and fro, to and fro, secretly and by night, to take even this; and I cannot bear that things should go on in this way, Mr Nickleby, I really cannot bear it.'

Then it came out by little and little, how that the twins had been revolving in their good old heads manifold plans and schemes for helping this young lady in the most delicate and considerate way, and so that her father should not suspect the source whence the aid was derived; and how they had at last come to the conclusion, that the best course would be to make a feint of purchasing her little drawings and ornamental work at a high price, and keeping up a constant demand for the same. For the furtherance of which end and object it was necessary that somebody should represent the dealer in such commodities, and after great deliberation they had pitched upon Nicholas to support this character.

'He knows me,' said brother Charles, 'and he knows my brother Ned. Neither of us would do. Frank is a very good fellow - a very fine fellow - but we are afraid that he might be a little flighty and thoughtless in such a delicate matter, and that he might, perhaps - that he might, in short, be too susceptible (for she is a beautiful creature, sir; just what her poor mother was), and falling in love with her before he knew well his own mind, carry pain and sorrow into that innocent breast, which we would be the humble instruments of gradually making happy. He took an extraordinary interest in her fortunes when he first happened to encounter her; and we gather from the inquiries we have made of him, that it was she in whose behalf he made that turmoil which led to your first acquaintance.'

Nicholas stammered out that he had before suspected the possibility of such a thing; and in explanation of its having occurred to him, described when and where he had seen the young lady himself.

'Well; then you see,' continued brother Charles, 'that HE wouldn't do. Tim Linkinwater is out of the question; for Tim, sir, is such a tremendous fellow, that he could never contain himself, but would go to loggerheads with the father before he had been in the place five minutes. You don't know what Tim is, sir, when he is aroused by anything that appeals to his feelings very strongly; then he is terrific, sir, is Tim Linkinwater, absolutely terrific. Now, in you we can repose the strictest confidence; in you we have seen - or at least I have seen, and that's the same thing, for there's no difference between me and my brother Ned, except that he is the finest creature that ever lived, and that there is not, and never will be, anybody like him in all the world - in you we have seen domestic virtues and affections, and delicacy of feeling, which exactly qualify you for such an office. And you are the man, sir.'

'The young lady, sir,' said Nicholas, who felt so embarrassed that he had no small difficulty in saying anything at all - 'Does - is - is she a party to this innocent deceit?'

'Yes, yes,' returned Mr Cheeryble; 'at least she knows you come from us; she does NOT know, however, but that we shall dispose of these little productions that you'll purchase from time to time; and, perhaps, if you did it very well (that is, VERY well indeed), perhaps she might be brought to believe that we - that we made a profit of them. Eh? Eh?'

In this guileless and most kind simplicity, brother Charles was so happy, and in this possibility of the young lady being led to think that she was under no obligation to him, he evidently felt so sanguine and had so much delight, that Nicholas would not breathe a doubt upon the subject.

All this time, however, there hovered upon the tip of his tongue a confession that the very same objections which Mr Cheeryble had stated to the employment of his nephew in this commission applied with at least equal force and validity to himself, and a hundred times had he been upon the point of avowing the real state of his feelings, and entreating to be released from it. But as often, treading upon the heels of this impulse, came another which urged him to refrain, and to keep his secret to his own breast. 'Why should I,' thought Nicholas, 'why should I throw difficulties in the way of this benevolent and high-minded design? What if I do love and reverence this good and lovely creature. Should I not appear a most arrogant and shallow coxcomb if I gravely represented that there was any danger of her falling in love with me? Besides, have I no confidence in myself? Am I not now bound in honour to repress these thoughts? Has not this excellent man a right to my best and heartiest services, and should any considerations of self deter me from rendering them?'

Asking himself such questions as these, Nicholas mentally answered with great emphasis 'No!' and persuading himself that he was a most conscientious and glorious martyr, nobly resolved to do what, if he had examined his own heart a little more carefully, he would have found he could not resist. Such is the sleight of hand by which we juggle with ourselves, and change our very weaknesses into stanch and most magnanimous virtues!

Mr Cheeryble, being of course wholly unsuspecting that such reflections were presenting themselves to his young friend, proceeded to give him the needful credentials and directions for his first visit, which was to be made next morning; and all preliminaries being arranged, and the strictest secrecy enjoined, Nicholas walked home for the night very thoughtfully indeed.

The place to which Mr Cheeryble had directed him was a row of mean and not over-cleanly houses, situated within 'the Rules' of the King's Bench Prison, and not many hundred paces distant from the obelisk in St George's Fields. The Rules are a certain liberty adjoining the prison, and comprising some dozen streets in which debtors who can raise money to pay large fees, from which their creditors do NOT derive any benefit, are permitted to reside by the wise provisions of the same enlightened laws which leave the debtor who can raise no money to starve in jail, without the food, clothing, lodging, or warmth, which are provided for felons convicted of the most atrocious crimes that can disgrace humanity. There are many pleasant fictions of the law in constant operation, but there is not one so pleasant or practically humorous as that which supposes every man to be of equal value in its impartial eye, and the benefits of all laws to be equally attainable by all men, without the smallest reference to the furniture of their pockets.

To the row of houses indicated to him by Mr Charles Cheeryble, Nicholas directed his steps, without much troubling his head with such matters as these; and at this row of houses - after traversing a very dirty and dusty suburb, of which minor theatricals, shell-fish, ginger-beer, spring vans, greengrocery, and brokers' shops, appeared to compose the main and most prominent features - he at length arrived with a palpitating heart. There were small gardens in front which, being wholly neglected in all other respects, served as little pens for the dust to collect in, until the wind came round the corner and blew it down the road. Opening the rickety gate which, dangling on its broken hinges before one of these, half admitted and half repulsed the visitor, Nicholas knocked at the street door with a faltering hand.

It was in truth a shabby house outside, with very dim parlour windows and very small show of blinds, and very dirty muslin curtains dangling across the lower panes on very loose and limp strings. Neither, when the door was opened, did the inside appear to belie the outward promise, as there was faded carpeting on the stairs and faded oil-cloth in the passage; in addition to which discomforts a gentleman Ruler was smoking hard in the front parlour (though it was not yet noon), while the lady of the house was busily engaged in turpentineing the disjointed fragments of a tent-bedstead at the door of the back parlour, as if in preparation for the reception of some new lodger who had been fortunate enough to engage it.

Nicholas had ample time to make these observations while the little boy, who went on errands for the lodgers, clattered down the kitchen stairs and was heard to scream, as in some remote cellar, for Miss Bray's servant, who, presently appearing and requesting him to follow her, caused him to evince greater symptoms of nervousness and disorder than so natural a consequence of his having inquired for that young lady would seem calculated to occasion.

Upstairs he went, however, and into a front room he was shown, and there, seated at a little table by the window, on which were drawing materials with which she was occupied, sat the beautiful girl who had so engrossed his thoughts, and who, surrounded by all the new and strong interest which Nicholas attached to her story, seemed now, in his eyes, a thousand times more beautiful than he had ever yet supposed her.

But how the graces and elegancies which she had dispersed about the poorly-furnished room went to the heart of Nicholas! Flowers, plants, birds, the harp, the old piano whose notes had sounded so much sweeter in bygone times; how many struggles had it cost her to keep these two last links of that broken chain which bound her yet to home! With every slender ornament, the occupation of her leisure

hours, replete with that graceful charm which lingers in every little tasteful work of woman's hands, how much patient endurance and how many gentle affections were entwined! He felt as though the smile of Heaven were on the little chamber; as though the beautiful devotion of so young and weak a creature had shed a ray of its own on the inanimate things around, and made them beautiful as itself; as though the halo with which old painters surround the bright angels of a sinless world played about a being akin in spirit to them, and its light were visibly before him.

And yet Nicholas was in the Rules of the King's Bench Prison! If he had been in Italy indeed, and the time had been sunset, and the scene a stately terrace! But, there is one broad sky over all the world, and whether it be blue or cloudy, the same heaven beyond it; so, perhaps, he had no need of compunction for thinking as he did.

It is not to be supposed that he took in everything at one glance, for he had as yet been unconscious of the presence of a sick man propped up with pillows in an easy-chair, who, moving restlessly and impatiently in his seat, attracted his attention.

He was scarce fifty, perhaps, but so emaciated as to appear much older. His features presented the remains of a handsome countenance, but one in which the embers of strong and impetuous passions were easier to be traced than any expression which would have rendered a far plainer face much more prepossessing. His looks were very haggard, and his limbs and body literally worn to the bone, but there was something of the old fire in the large sunken eye notwithstanding, and it seemed to kindle afresh as he struck a thick stick, with which he seemed to have supported himself in his seat, impatiently on the floor twice or thrice, and called his daughter by her name.

'Madeline, who is this? What does anybody want here? Who told a stranger we could be seen? What is it?'

'I believe - ' the young lady began, as she inclined her head with an air of some confusion, in reply to the salutation of Nicholas.

'You always believe,' returned her father, petulantly. 'What is it?'

By this time Nicholas had recovered sufficient presence of mind to speak for himself, so he said (as it had been agreed he should say) that he had called about a pair of hand-screens, and some painted velvet for an ottoman, both of which were required to be of the most elegant design possible, neither time nor expense being of the smallest consideration. He had also to pay for the two drawings, with many

thanks, and, advancing to the little table, he laid upon it a bank note, folded in an envelope and sealed.

'See that the money is right, Madeline,' said the father. 'Open the paper, my dear.'

'It's quite right, papa, I'm sure.'

'Here!' said Mr Bray, putting out his hand, and opening and shutting his bony fingers with irritable impatience. 'Let me see. What are you talking about, Madeline? You're sure? How can you be sure of any such thing? Five pounds - well, is THAT right?'

'Quite,' said Madeline, bending over him. She was so busily employed in arranging the pillows that Nicholas could not see her face, but as she stooped he thought he saw a tear fall.

'Ring the bell, ring the bell,' said the sick man, with the same nervous eagerness, and motioning towards it with such a quivering hand that the bank note rustled in the air. 'Tell her to get it changed, to get me a newspaper, to buy me some grapes, another bottle of the wine that I had last week - and - and - I forget half I want just now, but she can go out again. Let her get those first, those first. Now, Madeline, my love, quick, quick! Good God, how slow you are!'

'He remembers nothing that SHE wants!' thought Nicholas. Perhaps something of what he thought was expressed in his countenance, for the sick man, turning towards him with great asperity, demanded to know if he waited for a receipt.

'It is no matter at all,' said Nicholas.

'No matter! what do you mean, sir?' was the tart rejoinder. 'No matter! Do you think you bring your paltry money here as a favour or a gift; or as a matter of business, and in return for value received? D - n you, sir, because you can't appreciate the time and taste which are bestowed upon the goods you deal in, do you think you give your money away? Do you know that you are talking to a gentleman, sir, who at one time could have bought up fifty such men as you and all you have? What do you mean?'

'I merely mean that as I shall have many dealings with this lady, if she will kindly allow me, I will not trouble her with such forms,' said Nicholas.

'Then I mean, if you please, that we'll have as many forms as we can, returned the father. 'My daughter, sir, requires no kindness from you or anybody else. Have the goodness to confine your dealings strictly to

trade and business, and not to travel beyond it. Every petty tradesman is to begin to pity her now, is he? Upon my soul! Very pretty. Madeline, my dear, give him a receipt; and mind you always do so.'

While she was feigning to write it, and Nicholas was ruminating upon the extraordinary but by no means uncommon character thus presented to his observation, the invalid, who appeared at times to suffer great bodily pain, sank back in his chair and moaned out a feeble complaint that the girl had been gone an hour, and that everybody conspired to goad him.

'When,' said Nicholas, as he took the piece of paper, 'when shall I call again?'

This was addressed to the daughter, but the father answered immediately.

'When you're requested to call, sir, and not before. Don't worry and persecute. Madeline, my dear, when is this person to call again?'

'Oh, not for a long time, not for three or four weeks; it is not necessary, indeed; I can do without,' said the young lady, with great eagerness.

'Why, how are we to do without?' urged her father, not speaking above his breath. 'Three or four weeks, Madeline! Three or four weeks!'

'Then sooner, sooner, if you please,' said the young lady, turning to Nicholas.

'Three or four weeks!' muttered the father. 'Madeline, what on earth - do nothing for three or four weeks!'

'It is a long time, ma'am,' said Nicholas.

'YOU think so, do you?' retorted the father, angrily. 'If I chose to beg, sir, and stoop to ask assistance from people I despise, three or four months would not be a long time; three or four years would not be a long time. Understand, sir, that is if I chose to be dependent; but as I don't, you may call in a week.'

Nicholas bowed low to the young lady and retired, pondering upon Mr Bray's ideas of independence, and devoutly hoping that there might be few such independent spirits as he mingling with the baser clay of humanity.

He heard a light footstep above him as he descended the stairs, and looking round saw that the young lady was standing there, and glancing timidly towards him, seemed to hesitate whether she should call him back or no. The best way of settling the question was to turn back at once, which Nicholas did.

'I don't know whether I do right in asking you, sir,' said Madeline, hurriedly, 'but pray, pray, do not mention to my poor mother's dear friends what has passed here today. He has suffered much, and is worse this morning. I beg you, sir, as a boon, a favour to myself.'

'You have but to hint a wish,' returned Nicholas fervently, 'and I would hazard my life to gratify it.'

'You speak hastily, sir.'

'Truly and sincerely,' rejoined Nicholas, his lips trembling as he formed the words, 'if ever man spoke truly yet. I am not skilled in disguising my feelings, and if I were, I could not hide my heart from you. Dear madam, as I know your history, and feel as men and angels must who hear and see such things, I do entreat you to believe that I would die to serve you.'

The young lady turned away her head, and was plainly weeping.

'Forgive me,' said Nicholas, with respectful earnestness, 'if I seem to say too much, or to presume upon the confidence which has been intrusted to me. But I could not leave you as if my interest and sympathy expired with the commission of the day. I am your faithful servant, humbly devoted to you from this hour, devoted in strict truth and honour to him who sent me here, and in pure integrity of heart, and distant respect for you. If I meant more or less than this, I should be unworthy his regard, and false to the very nature that prompts the honest words I utter.'

She waved her hand, entreating him to be gone, but answered not a word. Nicholas could say no more, and silently withdrew. And thus ended his first interview with Madeline Bray.