

Chapter XLVII

Mr Ralph Nickleby has some confidential Intercourse with another old Friend. They concert between them a Project, which promises well for both

'There go the three-quarters past!' muttered Newman Noggs, listening to the chimes of some neighbouring church 'and my dinner time's two. He does it on purpose. He makes a point of it. It's just like him.'

It was in his own little den of an office and on the top of his official stool that Newman thus soliloquised; and the soliloquy referred, as Newman's grumbling soliloquies usually did, to Ralph Nickleby.

'I don't believe he ever had an appetite,' said Newman, 'except for pounds, shillings, and pence, and with them he's as greedy as a wolf. I should like to have him compelled to swallow one of every English coin. The penny would be an awkward morsel - but the crown - ha! ha!'

His good-humour being in some degree restored by the vision of Ralph Nickleby swallowing, perforce, a five-shilling piece, Newman slowly brought forth from his desk one of those portable bottles, currently known as pocket-pistols, and shaking the same close to his ear so as to produce a rippling sound very cool and pleasant to listen to, suffered his features to relax, and took a gurgling drink, which relaxed them still more. Replacing the cork, he smacked his lips twice or thrice with an air of great relish, and, the taste of the liquor having by this time evaporated, recurred to his grievance again.

'Five minutes to three,' growled Newman; 'it can't want more by this time; and I had my breakfast at eight o'clock, and SUCH a breakfast! and my right dinner-time two! And I might have a nice little bit of hot roast meat spoiling at home all this time - how does HE know I haven't? 'Don't go till I come back,' 'Don't go till I come back,' day after day. What do you always go out at my dinner-time for then - eh? Don't you know it's nothing but aggravation - eh?'

These words, though uttered in a very loud key, were addressed to nothing but empty air. The recital of his wrongs, however, seemed to have the effect of making Newman Noggs desperate; for he flattened his old hat upon his head, and drawing on the everlasting gloves, declared with great vehemence, that come what might, he would go to dinner that very minute.

Carrying this resolution into instant effect, he had advanced as far as the passage, when the sound of the latch-key in the street door caused him to make a precipitate retreat into his own office again.

'Here he is,' growled Newman, 'and somebody with him. Now it'll be 'Stop till this gentleman's gone.' But I won't. That's flat.'

So saying, Newman slipped into a tall empty closet which opened with two half doors, and shut himself up; intending to slip out directly Ralph was safe inside his own room.

'Noggs!' cried Ralph, 'where is that fellow, Noggs?'

But not a word said Newman.

'The dog has gone to his dinner, though I told him not,' muttered Ralph, looking into the office, and pulling out his watch. 'Humph!' You had better come in here, Gride. My man's out, and the sun is hot upon my room. This is cool and in the shade, if you don't mind roughing it.'

'Not at all, Mr Nickleby, oh not at all! All places are alike to me, sir. Ah! very nice indeed. Oh! very nice!'

The parson who made this reply was a little old man, of about seventy or seventy-five years of age, of a very lean figure, much bent and slightly twisted. He wore a grey coat with a very narrow collar, an old-fashioned waistcoat of ribbed black silk, and such scanty trousers as displayed his shrunken spindle-shanks in their full ugliness. The only articles of display or ornament in his dress were a steel watch-chain to which were attached some large gold seals; and a black ribbon into which, in compliance with an old fashion scarcely ever observed in these days, his grey hair was gathered behind. His nose and chin were sharp and prominent, his jaws had fallen inwards from loss of teeth, his face was shrivelled and yellow, save where the cheeks were streaked with the colour of a dry winter apple; and where his beard had been, there lingered yet a few grey tufts which seemed, like the ragged eyebrows, to denote the badness of the soil from which they sprung. The whole air and attitude of the form was one of stealthy cat-like obsequiousness; the whole expression of the face was concentrated in a wrinkled leer, compounded of cunning, lecherousness, slyness, and avarice.

Such was old Arthur Gride, in whose face there was not a wrinkle, in whose dress there was not one spare fold or plait, but expressed the most covetous and griping penury, and sufficiently indicated his belonging to that class of which Ralph Nickleby was a member. Such was old Arthur Gride, as he sat in a low chair looking up into the face of Ralph Nickleby, who, lounging upon the tall office stool, with his arms upon his knees, looked down into his; a match for him on whatever errand he had come.

'And how have you been?' said Gride, feigning great interest in Ralph's state of health. 'I haven't seen you for - oh! not for - '

'Not for a long time,' said Ralph, with a peculiar smile, importing that he very well knew it was not on a mere visit of compliment that his friend had come. 'It was a narrow chance that you saw me now, for I had only just come up to the door as you turned the corner.'

'I am very lucky,' observed Gride.

'So men say,' replied Ralph, drily.

The older money-lender wagged his chin and smiled, but he originated no new remark, and they sat for some little time without speaking. Each was looking out to take the other at a disadvantage.

'Come, Gride,' said Ralph, at length; 'what's in the wind today?'

'Aha! you're a bold man, Mr Nickleby,' cried the other, apparently very much relieved by Ralph's leading the way to business. 'Oh dear, dear, what a bold man you are!'

'Why, you have a sleek and slinking way with you that makes me seem so by contrast,' returned Ralph. 'I don't know but that yours may answer better, but I want the patience for it.'

'You were born a genius, Mr Nickleby,' said old Arthur. 'Deep, deep, deep. Ah!'

'Deep enough,' retorted Ralph, 'to know that I shall need all the depth I have, when men like you begin to compliment. You know I have stood by when you fawned and flattered other people, and I remember pretty well what THAT always led to.'

'Ha, ha, ha!' rejoined Arthur, rubbing his hands. 'So you do, so you do, no doubt. Not a man knows it better. Well, it's a pleasant thing now to think that you remember old times. Oh dear!'

'Now then,' said Ralph, composedly; 'what's in the wind, I ask again? What is it?'

'See that now!' cried the other. 'He can't even keep from business while we're chatting over bygones. Oh dear, dear, what a man it is!'

'WHICH of the bygones do you want to revive?' said Ralph. 'One of them, I know, or you wouldn't talk about them.'

'He suspects even me!' cried old Arthur, holding up his hands. 'Even me! Oh dear, even me. What a man it is! Ha, ha, ha! What a man it is! Mr Nickleby against all the world. There's nobody like him. A giant among pigmies, a giant, a giant!'

Ralph looked at the old dog with a quiet smile as he chuckled on in this strain, and Newman Noggs in the closet felt his heart sink within him as the prospect of dinner grew fainter and fainter.

'I must humour him though,' cried old Arthur; 'he must have his way - a wilful man, as the Scotch say - well, well, they're a wise people, the Scotch. He will talk about business, and won't give away his time for nothing. He's very right. Time is money, time is money.'

'He was one of us who made that saying, I should think,' said Ralph. 'Time is money, and very good money too, to those who reckon interest by it. Time IS money! Yes, and time costs money; it's rather an expensive article to some people we could name, or I forget my trade.'

In rejoinder to this sally, old Arthur again raised his hands, again chuckled, and again ejaculated 'What a man it is!' which done, he dragged the low chair a little nearer to Ralph's high stool, and looking upwards into his immovable face, said,

'What would you say to me, if I was to tell you that I was - that I was - going to be married?'

'I should tell you,' replied Ralph, looking coldly down upon him, 'that for some purpose of your own you told a lie, and that it wasn't the first time and wouldn't be the last; that I wasn't surprised and wasn't to be taken in.'

'Then I tell you seriously that I am,' said old Arthur.

'And I tell you seriously,' rejoined Ralph, 'what I told you this minute. Stay. Let me look at you. There's a liquorish devilry in your face. What is this?'

'I wouldn't deceive YOU, you know,' whined Arthur Gride; 'I couldn't do it, I should be mad to try. I, I, to deceive Mr Nickleby! The pigmy to impose upon the giant. I ask again - he, he, he! - what should you say to me if I was to tell you that I was going to be married?'

'To some old hag?' said Ralph.

'No, No,' cried Arthur, interrupting him, and rubbing his hands in an ecstasy. 'Wrong, wrong again. Mr Nickleby for once at fault; out, quite

out! To a young and beautiful girl; fresh, lovely, bewitching, and not nineteen. Dark eyes, long eyelashes, ripe and ruddy lips that to look at is to long to kiss, beautiful clustering hair that one's fingers itch to play with, such a waist as might make a man clasp the air involuntarily, thinking of twining his arm about it, little feet that tread so lightly they hardly seem to walk upon the ground - to marry all this, sir, this - hey, hey!

'This is something more than common drivelling,' said Ralph, after listening with a curled lip to the old sinner's raptures. 'The girl's name?'

'Oh deep, deep! See now how deep that is!' exclaimed old Arthur. 'He knows I want his help, he knows he can give it me, he knows it must all turn to his advantage, he sees the thing already. Her name - is there nobody within hearing?'

'Why, who the devil should there be?' retorted Ralph, testily.

'I didn't know but that perhaps somebody might be passing up or down the stairs,' said Arthur Gride, after looking out at the door and carefully reclosing it; 'or but that your man might have come back and might have been listening outside. Clerks and servants have a trick of listening, and I should have been very uncomfortable if Mr Noggs - '

'Curse Mr Noggs,' said Ralph, sharply, 'and go on with what you have to say.'

'Curse Mr Noggs, by all means,' rejoined old Arthur; 'I am sure I have not the least objection to that. Her name is - '

'Well,' said Ralph, rendered very irritable by old Arthur's pausing again 'what is it?'

'Madeline Bray.'

Whatever reasons there might have been - and Arthur Gride appeared to have anticipated some - for the mention of this name producing an effect upon Ralph, or whatever effect it really did produce upon him, he permitted none to manifest itself, but calmly repeated the name several times, as if reflecting when and where he had heard it before.

'Bray,' said Ralph. 'Bray - there was young Bray of - no, he never had a daughter.'

'You remember Bray?' rejoined Arthur Gride.

'No,' said Ralph, looking vacantly at him.

'Not Walter Bray! The dashing man, who used his handsome wife so ill?'

'If you seek to recall any particular dashing man to my recollection by such a trait as that,' said Ralph, shrugging his shoulders, 'I shall confound him with nine-tenths of the dashing men I have ever known.'

'Tut, tut. That Bray who is now in the Rules of the Bench,' said old Arthur. 'You can't have forgotten Bray. Both of us did business with him. Why, he owes you money!'

'Oh HIM!' rejoined Ralph. 'Ay, ay. Now you speak. Oh! It's HIS daughter, is it?'

Naturally as this was said, it was not said so naturally but that a kindred spirit like old Arthur Gride might have discerned a design upon the part of Ralph to lead him on to much more explicit statements and explanations than he would have volunteered, or that Ralph could in all likelihood have obtained by any other means. Old Arthur, however, was so intent upon his own designs, that he suffered himself to be overreached, and had no suspicion but that his good friend was in earnest.

'I knew you couldn't forget him, when you came to think for a moment,' he said.

'You were right,' answered Ralph. 'But old Arthur Gride and matrimony is a most anomalous conjunction of words; old Arthur Gride and dark eyes and eyelashes, and lips that to look at is to long to kiss, and clustering hair that he wants to play with, and waists that he wants to span, and little feet that don't tread upon anything - old Arthur Gride and such things as these is more monstrous still; but old Arthur Gride marrying the daughter of a ruined 'dashing man' in the Rules of the Bench, is the most monstrous and incredible of all. Plainly, friend Arthur Gride, if you want any help from me in this business (which of course you do, or you would not be here), speak out, and to the purpose. And, above all, don't talk to me of its turning to my advantage, for I know it must turn to yours also, and to a good round tune too, or you would have no finger in such a pie as this.'

There was enough acerbity and sarcasm not only in the matter of Ralph's speech, but in the tone of voice in which he uttered it, and the looks with which he eked it out, to have fired even the ancient usurer's cold blood and flushed even his withered cheek. But he gave vent to no demonstration of anger, contenting himself with exclaiming as before, 'What a man it is!' and rolling his head from side to side, as if in unrestrained enjoyment of his freedom and drollery. Clearly

observing, however, from the expression in Ralph's features, that he had best come to the point as speedily as might be, he composed himself for more serious business, and entered upon the pith and marrow of his negotiation.

First, he dwelt upon the fact that Madeline Bray was devoted to the support and maintenance, and was a slave to every wish, of her only parent, who had no other friend on earth; to which Ralph rejoined that he had heard something of the kind before, and that if she had known a little more of the world, she wouldn't have been such a fool.

Secondly, he enlarged upon the character of her father, arguing, that even taking it for granted that he loved her in return with the utmost affection of which he was capable, yet he loved himself a great deal better; which Ralph said it was quite unnecessary to say anything more about, as that was very natural, and probable enough.

And, thirdly, old Arthur premised that the girl was a delicate and beautiful creature, and that he had really a hankering to have her for his wife. To this Ralph deigned no other rejoinder than a harsh smile, and a glance at the shrivelled old creature before him, which were, however, sufficiently expressive.

'Now,' said Gride, 'for the little plan I have in my mind to bring this about; because, I haven't offered myself even to the father yet, I should have told you. But that you have gathered already? Ah! oh dear, oh dear, what an edged tool you are!'

'Don't play with me then,' said Ralph impatiently. 'You know the proverb.'

'A reply always on the tip of his tongue!' cried old Arthur, raising his hands and eyes in admiration. 'He is always prepared! Oh dear, what a blessing to have such a ready wit, and so much ready money to back it!' Then, suddenly changing his tone, he went on: 'I have been backwards and forwards to Bray's lodgings several times within the last six months. It is just half a year since I first saw this delicate morsel, and, oh dear, what a delicate morsel it is! But that is neither here nor there. I am his detaining creditor for seventeen hundred pounds!'

'You talk as if you were the only detaining creditor,' said Ralph, pulling out his pocket-book. 'I am another for nine hundred and seventy-five pounds four and threepence.'

'The only other, Mr Nickleby,' said old Arthur, eagerly. 'The only other. Nobody else went to the expense of lodging a detainer, trusting to our holding him fast enough, I warrant you. We both fell into the same

snare; oh dear, what a pitfall it was; it almost ruined me! And lent him our money upon bills, with only one name besides his own, which to be sure everybody supposed to be a good one, and was as negotiable as money, but which turned out you know how. Just as we should have come upon him, he died insolvent. Ah! it went very nigh to ruin me, that loss did!

'Go on with your scheme,' said Ralph. 'It's of no use raising the cry of our trade just now; there's nobody to hear us!'

'It's always as well to talk that way,' returned old Arthur, with a chuckle, 'whether there's anybody to hear us or not. Practice makes perfect, you know. Now, if I offer myself to Bray as his son-in-law, upon one simple condition that the moment I am fast married he shall be quietly released, and have an allowance to live just t'other side the water like a gentleman (he can't live long, for I have asked his doctor, and he declares that his complaint is one of the Heart and it is impossible), and if all the advantages of this condition are properly stated and dwelt upon to him, do you think he could resist me? And if he could not resist ME, do you think his daughter could resist HIM? Shouldn't I have her Mrs Arthur Gride - pretty Mrs Arthur Gride - a tit-bit - a dainty chick - shouldn't I have her Mrs Arthur Gride in a week, a month, a day - any time I chose to name?'

'Go on,' said Ralph, nodding his head deliberately, and speaking in a tone whose studied coldness presented a strange contrast to the rapturous squeak to which his friend had gradually mounted. 'Go on. You didn't come here to ask me that.'

'Oh dear, how you talk!' cried old Arthur, edging himself closer still to Ralph. 'Of course I didn't, I don't pretend I did! I came to ask what you would take from me, if I prospered with the father, for this debt of yours. Five shillings in the pound, six and-eightpence, ten shillings? I WOULD go as far as ten for such a friend as you, we have always been on such good terms, but you won't be so hard upon me as that, I know. Now, will you?'

'There's something more to be told,' said Ralph, as stony and immovable as ever.

'Yes, yes, there is, but you won't give me time,' returned Arthur Gride. 'I want a backer in this matter; one who can talk, and urge, and press a point, which you can do as no man can. I can't do that, for I am a poor, timid, nervous creature. Now, if you get a good composition for this debt, which you long ago gave up for lost, you'll stand my friend, and help me. Won't you?'

'There's something more,' said Ralph.

'No, no, indeed,' cried Arthur Gride.

'Yes, yes, indeed. I tell you yes,' said Ralph.

'Oh!' returned old Arthur feigning to be suddenly enlightened. 'You mean something more, as concerns myself and my intention. Ay, surely, surely. Shall I mention that?'

'I think you had better,' rejoined Ralph, drily.

'I didn't like to trouble you with that, because I supposed your interest would cease with your own concern in the affair,' said Arthur Gride. 'That's kind of you to ask. Oh dear, how very kind of you! Why, supposing I had a knowledge of some property - some little property - very little - to which this pretty chick was entitled; which nobody does or can know of at this time, but which her husband could sweep into his pouch, if he knew as much as I do, would that account for - '

'For the whole proceeding,' rejoined Ralph, abruptly. 'Now, let me turn this matter over, and consider what I ought to have if I should help you to success.'

'But don't be hard,' cried old Arthur, raising his hands with an imploring gesture, and speaking, in a tremulous voice. 'Don't be too hard upon me. It's a very small property, it is indeed. Say the ten shillings, and we'll close the bargain. It's more than I ought to give, but you're so kind - shall we say the ten? Do now, do.'

Ralph took no notice of these supplications, but sat for three or four minutes in a brown study, looking thoughtfully at the person from whom they proceeded. After sufficient cogitation he broke silence, and it certainly could not be objected that he used any needless circumlocution, or failed to speak directly to the purpose.

'If you married this girl without me,' said Ralph, 'you must pay my debt in full, because you couldn't set her father free otherwise. It's plain, then, that I must have the whole amount, clear of all deduction or incumbrance, or I should lose from being honoured with your confidence, instead of gaining by it. That's the first article of the treaty. For the second, I shall stipulate that for my trouble in negotiation and persuasion, and helping you to this fortune, I have five hundred pounds. That's very little, because you have the ripe lips, and the clustering hair, and what not, all to yourself. For the third and last article, I require that you execute a bond to me, this day, binding yourself in the payment of these two sums, before noon of the day of your marriage with Madeline Bray. You have told me I can urge and press a point. I press this one, and will take nothing less than

these terms. Accept them if you like. If not, marry her without me if you can. I shall still get my debt.'

To all entreaties, protestations, and offers of compromise between his own proposals and those which Arthur Gride had first suggested, Ralph was deaf as an adder. He would enter into no further discussion of the subject, and while old Arthur dilated upon the enormity of his demands and proposed modifications of them, approaching by degrees nearer and nearer to the terms he resisted, sat perfectly mute, looking with an air of quiet abstraction over the entries and papers in his pocket-book. Finding that it was impossible to make any impression upon his staunch friend, Arthur Gride, who had prepared himself for some such result before he came, consented with a heavy heart to the proposed treaty, and upon the spot filled up the bond required (Ralph kept such instruments handy), after exacting the condition that Mr Nickleby should accompany him to Bray's lodgings that very hour, and open the negotiation at once, should circumstances appear auspicious and favourable to their designs.

In pursuance of this last understanding the worthy gentlemen went out together shortly afterwards, and Newman Noggs emerged, bottle in hand, from the cupboard, out of the upper door of which, at the imminent risk of detection, he had more than once thrust his red nose when such parts of the subject were under discussion as interested him most.

'I have no appetite now,' said Newman, putting the flask in his pocket. 'I've had MY dinner.'

Having delivered this observation in a very grievous and doleful tone, Newman reached the door in one long limp, and came back again in another.

'I don't know who she may be, or what she may be,' he said: 'but I pity her with all my heart and soul; and I can't help her, nor can I any of the people against whom a hundred tricks, but none so vile as this, are plotted every day! Well, that adds to my pain, but not to theirs. The thing is no worse because I know it, and it tortures me as well as them. Gride and Nickleby! Good pair for a curriple. Oh roguery! roguery! roguery!'

With these reflections, and a very hard knock on the crown of his unfortunate hat at each repetition of the last word, Newman Noggs, whose brain was a little muddled by so much of the contents of the pocket-pistol as had found their way there during his recent concealment, went forth to seek such consolation as might be derivable from the beef and greens of some cheap eating-house.

Meanwhile the two plotters had betaken themselves to the same house whither Nicholas had repaired for the first time but a few mornings before, and having obtained access to Mr Bray, and found his daughter from home, had by a train of the most masterly approaches that Ralph's utmost skill could frame, at length laid open the real object of their visit.

'There he sits, Mr Bray,' said Ralph, as the invalid, not yet recovered from his surprise, reclined in his chair, looking alternately at him and Arthur Gride. 'What if he has had the ill-fortune to be one cause of your detention in this place? I have been another; men must live; you are too much a man of the world not to see that in its true light. We offer the best reparation in our power. Reparation! Here is an offer of marriage, that many a titled father would leap at, for his child. Mr Arthur Gride, with the fortune of a prince. Think what a haul it is!'

'My daughter, sir,' returned Bray, haughtily, 'as I have brought her up, would be a rich recompense for the largest fortune that a man could bestow in exchange for her hand.'

'Precisely what I told you,' said the artful Ralph, turning to his friend, old Arthur. 'Precisely what made me consider the thing so fair and easy. There is no obligation on either side. You have money, and Miss Madeline has beauty and worth. She has youth, you have money. She has not money, you have not youth. Tit for tat, quits, a match of Heaven's own making!'

'Matches are made in Heaven, they say,' added Arthur Gride, leering hideously at the father-in-law he wanted. 'If we are married, it will be destiny, according to that.'

'Then think, Mr Bray,' said Ralph, hastily substituting for this argument considerations more nearly allied to earth, 'think what a stake is involved in the acceptance or rejection of these proposals of my friend.'

'How can I accept or reject,' interrupted Mr Bray, with an irritable consciousness that it really rested with him to decide. 'It is for my daughter to accept or reject; it is for my daughter. You know that.'

'True,' said Ralph, emphatically; 'but you have still the power to advise; to state the reasons for and against; to hint a wish.'

'To hint a wish, sir!' returned the debtor, proud and mean by turns, and selfish at all times. 'I am her father, am I not? Why should I hint, and beat about the bush? Do you suppose, like her mother's friends and my enemies - a curse upon them all! - that there is anything in what she has done for me but duty, sir, but duty? Or do you think

that my having been unfortunate is a sufficient reason why our relative positions should be changed, and that she should command and I should obey? Hint a wish, too! Perhaps you think, because you see me in this place and scarcely able to leave this chair without assistance, that I am some broken-spirited dependent creature, without the courage or power to do what I may think best for my own child. Still the power to hint a wish! I hope so!

'Pardon me,' returned Ralph, who thoroughly knew his man, and had taken his ground accordingly; 'you do not hear me out. I was about to say that your hinting a wish, even hinting a wish, would surely be equivalent to commanding.'

'Why, of course it would,' retorted Mr Bray, in an exasperated tone. 'If you don't happen to have heard of the time, sir, I tell you that there was a time, when I carried every point in triumph against her mother's whole family, although they had power and wealth on their side, by my will alone.'

'Still,' rejoined Ralph, as mildly as his nature would allow him, 'you have not heard me out. You are a man yet qualified to shine in society, with many years of life before you; that is, if you lived in freer air, and under brighter skies, and chose your own companions. Gaiety is your element, you have shone in it before. Fashion and freedom for you. France, and an annuity that would support you there in luxury, would give you a new lease of life, would transfer you to a new existence. The town rang with your expensive pleasures once, and you could blaze up on a new scene again, profiting by experience, and living a little at others' cost, instead of letting others live at yours. What is there on the reverse side of the picture? What is there? I don't know which is the nearest churchyard, but a gravestone there, wherever it is, and a date, perhaps two years hence, perhaps twenty. That's all.'

Mr Bray rested his elbow on the arm of his chair, and shaded his face with his hand.

'I speak plainly,' said Ralph, sitting down beside him, 'because I feel strongly. It's my interest that you should marry your daughter to my friend Gride, because then he sees me paid - in part, that is. I don't disguise it. I acknowledge it openly. But what interest have you in recommending her to such a step? Keep that in view. She might object, remonstrate, shed tears, talk of his being too old, and plead that her life would be rendered miserable. But what is it now?'

Several slight gestures on the part of the invalid showed that these arguments were no more lost upon him, than the smallest iota of his demeanour was upon Ralph.

'What is it now, I say,' pursued the wily usurer, 'or what has it a chance of being? If you died, indeed, the people you hate would make her happy. But can you bear the thought of that?'

'No!' returned Bray, urged by a vindictive impulse he could not repress.

'I should imagine not, indeed!' said Ralph, quietly. 'If she profits by anybody's death,' this was said in a lower tone, 'let it be by her husband's. Don't let her have to look back to yours, as the event from which to date a happier life. Where is the objection? Let me hear it stated. What is it? That her suitor is an old man? Why, how often do men of family and fortune, who haven't your excuse, but have all the means and superfluities of life within their reach, how often do they marry their daughters to old men, or (worse still) to young men without heads or hearts, to tickle some idle vanity, strengthen some family interest, or secure some seat in Parliament! Judge for her, sir, judge for her. You must know best, and she will live to thank you.'

'Hush! hush!' cried Mr Bray, suddenly starting up, and covering Ralph's mouth with his trembling hand. 'I hear her at the door!'

There was a gleam of conscience in the shame and terror of this hasty action, which, in one short moment, tore the thin covering of sophistry from the cruel design, and laid it bare in all its meanness and heartless deformity. The father fell into his chair pale and trembling; Arthur Gride plucked and fumbled at his hat, and durst not raise his eyes from the floor; even Ralph crouched for the moment like a beaten hound, cowed by the presence of one young innocent girl!

The effect was almost as brief as sudden. Ralph was the first to recover himself, and observing Madeline's looks of alarm, entreated the poor girl to be composed, assuring her that there was no cause for fear.

'A sudden spasm,' said Ralph, glancing at Mr Bray. 'He is quite well now.'

It might have moved a very hard and worldly heart to see the young and beautiful creature, whose certain misery they had been contriving but a minute before, throw her arms about her father's neck, and pour forth words of tender sympathy and love, the sweetest a father's ear can know, or child's lips form. But Ralph looked coldly on; and Arthur Gride, whose bleared eyes gloated only over the outward beauties, and were blind to the spirit which reigned within, evinced - a fantastic kind of warmth certainly, but not exactly that kind of warmth of feeling which the contemplation of virtue usually inspires.

'Madeline,' said her father, gently disengaging himself, 'it was nothing.'

'But you had that spasm yesterday, and it is terrible to see you in such pain. Can I do nothing for you?'

'Nothing just now. Here are two gentlemen, Madeline, one of whom you have seen before. She used to say,' added Mr Bray, addressing Arthur Gride, 'that the sight of you always made me worse. That was natural, knowing what she did, and only what she did, of our connection and its results. Well, well. Perhaps she may change her mind on that point; girls have leave to change their minds, you know. You are very tired, my dear.'

'I am not, indeed.'

'Indeed you are. You do too much.'

'I wish I could do more.'

'I know you do, but you overtask your strength. This wretched life, my love, of daily labour and fatigue, is more than you can bear, I am sure it is. Poor Madeline!'

With these and many more kind words, Mr Bray drew his daughter to him and kissed her cheek affectionately. Ralph, watching him sharply and closely in the meantime, made his way towards the door, and signed to Gride to follow him.

'You will communicate with us again?' said Ralph.

'Yes, yes,' returned Mr Bray, hastily thrusting his daughter aside. 'In a week. Give me a week.'

'One week,' said Ralph, turning to his companion, 'from today. Good-morning. Miss Madeline, I kiss your hand.'

'We will shake hands, Gride,' said Mr Bray, extending his, as old Arthur bowed. 'You mean well, no doubt. I am bound to say so now. If I owed you money, that was not your fault. Madeline, my love, your hand here.'

'Oh dear! If the young lady would condescent! Only the tips of her fingers,' said Arthur, hesitating and half retreating.

Madeline shrunk involuntarily from the goblin figure, but she placed the tips of her fingers in his hand and instantly withdrew them. After an ineffectual clutch, intended to detain and carry them to his lips, old Arthur gave his own fingers a mumbling kiss, and with many

amorous distortions of visage went in pursuit of his friend, who was by this time in the street.

'What does he say, what does he say? What does the giant say to the pigmy?' inquired Arthur Gride, hobbling up to Ralph.

'What does the pigmy say to the giant?' rejoined Ralph, elevating his eyebrows and looking down upon his questioner.

'He doesn't know what to say,' replied Arthur Gride. 'He hopes and fears. But is she not a dainty morsel?'

'I have no great taste for beauty,' growled Ralph.

'But I have,' rejoined Arthur, rubbing his hands. 'Oh dear! How handsome her eyes looked when she was stooping over him! Such long lashes, such delicate fringe! She - she - looked at me so soft.'

'Not over-lovingly, I think,' said Ralph. 'Did she?'

'No, you think not?' replied old Arthur. 'But don't you think it can be brought about? Don't you think it can?'

Ralph looked at him with a contemptuous frown, and replied with a sneer, and between his teeth:

'Did you mark his telling her she was tired and did too much, and overtasked her strength?'

'Ay, ay. What of it?'

'When do you think he ever told her that before? The life is more than she can bear. Yes, yes. He'll change it for her.'

'D'ye think it's done?' inquired old Arthur, peering into his companion's face with half-closed eyes.

'I am sure it's done,' said Ralph. 'He is trying to deceive himself, even before our eyes, already. He is making believe that he thinks of her good and not his own. He is acting a virtuous part, and so considerate and affectionate, sir, that the daughter scarcely knew him. I saw a tear of surprise in her eye. There'll be a few more tears of surprise there before long, though of a different kind. Oh! we may wait with confidence for this day week.'