

Chapter XLVIII

Being for the Benefit of Mr Vincent Crummles, and positively his last Appearance on this Stage

It was with a very sad and heavy heart, oppressed by many painful ideas, that Nicholas retraced his steps eastward and betook himself to the counting-house of Cheeryble Brothers. Whatever the idle hopes he had suffered himself to entertain, whatever the pleasant visions which had sprung up in his mind and grouped themselves round the fair image of Madeline Bray, they were now dispelled, and not a vestige of their gaiety and brightness remained.

It would be a poor compliment to Nicholas's better nature, and one which he was very far from deserving, to insinuate that the solution, and such a solution, of the mystery which had seemed to surround Madeline Bray, when he was ignorant even of her name, had damped his ardour or cooled the fervour of his admiration. If he had regarded her before, with such a passion as young men attracted by mere beauty and elegance may entertain, he was now conscious of much deeper and stronger feelings. But, reverence for the truth and purity of her heart, respect for the helplessness and loneliness of her situation, sympathy with the trials of one so young and fair and admiration of her great and noble spirit, all seemed to raise her far above his reach, and, while they imparted new depth and dignity to his love, to whisper that it was hopeless.

'I will keep my word, as I have pledged it to her,' said Nicholas, manfully. 'This is no common trust that I have to discharge, and I will perform the double duty that is imposed upon me most scrupulously and strictly. My secret feelings deserve no consideration in such a case as this, and they shall have none.'

Still, there were the secret feelings in existence just the same, and in secret Nicholas rather encouraged them than otherwise; reasoning (if he reasoned at all) that there they could do no harm to anybody but himself, and that if he kept them to himself from a sense of duty, he had an additional right to entertain himself with them as a reward for his heroism.

All these thoughts, coupled with what he had seen that morning and the anticipation of his next visit, rendered him a very dull and abstracted companion; so much so, indeed, that Tim Linkinwater suspected he must have made the mistake of a figure somewhere, which was preying upon his mind, and seriously conjured him, if such were the case, to make a clean breast and scratch it out, rather than have his whole life embittered by the tortures of remorse.

But in reply to these considerate representations, and many others both from Tim and Mr Frank, Nicholas could only be brought to state that he was never merrier in his life; and so went on all day, and so went towards home at night, still turning over and over again the same subjects, thinking over and over again the same things, and arriving over and over again at the same conclusions.

In this pensive, wayward, and uncertain state, people are apt to lounge and loiter without knowing why, to read placards on the walls with great attention and without the smallest idea of one word of their contents, and to stare most earnestly through shop-windows at things which they don't see. It was thus that Nicholas found himself poring with the utmost interest over a large play-bill hanging outside a Minor Theatre which he had to pass on his way home, and reading a list of the actors and actresses who had promised to do honour to some approaching benefit, with as much gravity as if it had been a catalogue of the names of those ladies and gentlemen who stood highest upon the Book of Fate, and he had been looking anxiously for his own. He glanced at the top of the bill, with a smile at his own dulness, as he prepared to resume his walk, and there saw announced, in large letters with a large space between each of them, 'Positively the last appearance of Mr Vincent Crummles of Provincial Celebrity!!!'

'Nonsense!' said Nicholas, turning back again. 'It can't be.'

But there it was. In one line by itself was an announcement of the first night of a new melodrama; in another line by itself was an announcement of the last six nights of an old one; a third line was devoted to the re-engagement of the unrivalled African Knife-swallower, who had kindly suffered himself to be prevailed upon to forego his country engagements for one week longer; a fourth line announced that Mr Snittle Timberry, having recovered from his late severe indisposition, would have the honour of appearing that evening; a fifth line said that there were 'Cheers, Tears, and Laughter!' every night; a sixth, that that was positively the last appearance of Mr Vincent Crummles of Provincial Celebrity.

'Surely it must be the same man,' thought Nicholas. 'There can't be two Vincent Crummleses.'

The better to settle this question he referred to the bill again, and finding that there was a Baron in the first piece, and that Roberto (his son) was enacted by one Master Crummles, and Spaletro (his nephew) by one Master Percy Crummles - THEIR last appearances - and that, incidental to the piece, was a characteristic dance by the characters, and a castanet pas seul by the Infant Phenomenon - HER last appearance - he no longer entertained any doubt; and presenting

himself at the stage-door, and sending in a scrap of paper with 'Mr Johnson' written thereon in pencil, was presently conducted by a Robber, with a very large belt and buckle round his waist, and very large leather gauntlets on his hands, into the presence of his former manager.

Mr Crummles was unfeignedly glad to see him, and starting up from before a small dressing-glass, with one very bushy eyebrow stuck on crooked over his left eye, and the fellow eyebrow and the calf of one of his legs in his hand, embraced him cordially; at the same time observing, that it would do Mrs Crummles's heart good to bid him goodbye before they went.

'You were always a favourite of hers, Johnson,' said Crummles, 'always were from the first. I was quite easy in my mind about you from that first day you dined with us. One that Mrs Crummles took a fancy to, was sure to turn out right. Ah! Johnson, what a woman that is!'

'I am sincerely obliged to her for her kindness in this and all other respects,' said Nicholas. 'But where are you going,' that you talk about bidding goodbye?'

'Haven't you seen it in the papers?' said Crummles, with some dignity.

'No,' replied Nicholas.

'I wonder at that,' said the manager. 'It was among the varieties. I had the paragraph here somewhere - but I don't know - oh, yes, here it is.'

So saying, Mr Crummles, after pretending that he thought he must have lost it, produced a square inch of newspaper from the pocket of the pantaloons he wore in private life (which, together with the plain clothes of several other gentlemen, lay scattered about on a kind of dresser in the room), and gave it to Nicholas to read:

'The talented Vincent Crummles, long favourably known to fame as a country manager and actor of no ordinary pretensions, is about to cross the Atlantic on a histrionic expedition. Crummles is to be accompanied, we hear, by his lady and gifted family. We know no man superior to Crummles in his particular line of character, or one who, whether as a public or private individual, could carry with him the best wishes of a larger circle of friends. Crummles is certain to succeed.'

'Here's another bit,' said Mr Crummles, handing over a still smaller scrap. 'This is from the notices to correspondents, this one.'

Nicholas read it aloud. 'Philo-Dramaticus. Crummles, the country manager and actor, cannot be more than forty-three, or forty-four years of age. Crummles is NOT a Prussian, having been born at Chelsea.' 'Humph!' said Nicholas, 'that's an odd paragraph.'

'Very,' returned Crummles, scratching the side of his nose, and looking at Nicholas with an assumption of great unconcern. 'I can't think who puts these things in. I didn't.'

Still keeping his eye on Nicholas, Mr Crummles shook his head twice or thrice with profound gravity, and remarking, that he could not for the life of him imagine how the newspapers found out the things they did, folded up the extracts and put them in his pocket again.

'I am astonished to hear this news,' said Nicholas. 'Going to America! You had no such thing in contemplation when I was with you.'

'No,' replied Crummles, 'I hadn't then. The fact is that Mrs Crummles - most extraordinary woman, Johnson.' Here he broke off and whispered something in his ear.

'Oh!' said Nicholas, smiling. 'The prospect of an addition to your family?'

'The seventh addition, Johnson,' returned Mr Crummles, solemnly. 'I thought such a child as the Phenomenon must have been a closer; but it seems we are to have another. She is a very remarkable woman.'

'I congratulate you,' said Nicholas, 'and I hope this may prove a phenomenon too.'

'Why, it's pretty sure to be something uncommon, I suppose,' rejoined Mr Crummles. 'The talent of the other three is principally in combat and serious pantomime. I should like this one to have a turn for juvenile tragedy; I understand they want something of that sort in America very much. However, we must take it as it comes. Perhaps it may have a genius for the tight-rope. It may have any sort of genius, in short, if it takes after its mother, Johnson, for she is an universal genius; but, whatever its genius is, that genius shall be developed.'

Expressing himself after these terms, Mr Crummles put on his other eyebrow, and the calves of his legs, and then put on his legs, which were of a yellowish flesh-colour, and rather soiled about the knees, from frequent going down upon those joints, in curses, prayers, last struggles, and other strong passages.

While the ex-manager completed his toilet, he informed Nicholas that as he should have a fair start in America from the proceeds of a

tolerably good engagement which he had been fortunate enough to obtain, and as he and Mrs Crummles could scarcely hope to act for ever (not being immortal, except in the breath of Fame and in a figurative sense) he had made up his mind to settle there permanently, in the hope of acquiring some land of his own which would support them in their old age, and which they could afterwards bequeath to their children. Nicholas, having highly commended the resolution, Mr Crummles went on to impart such further intelligence relative to their mutual friends as he thought might prove interesting; informing Nicholas, among other things, that Miss Snevellicci was happily married to an affluent young wax-chandler who had supplied the theatre with candles, and that Mr Lillyvick didn't dare to say his soul was his own, such was the tyrannical sway of Mrs Lillyvick, who reigned paramount and supreme.

Nicholas responded to this confidence on the part of Mr Crummles, by confiding to him his own name, situation, and prospects, and informing him, in as few general words as he could, of the circumstances which had led to their first acquaintance. After congratulating him with great heartiness on the improved state of his fortunes, Mr Crummles gave him to understand that next morning he and his were to start for Liverpool, where the vessel lay which was to carry them from the shores of England, and that if Nicholas wished to take a last adieu of Mrs Crummles, he must repair with him that night to a farewell supper, given in honour of the family at a neighbouring tavern; at which Mr Snittle Timberry would preside, while the honours of the vice-chair would be sustained by the African Swallower.

The room being by this time very warm and somewhat crowded, in consequence of the influx of four gentlemen, who had just killed each other in the piece under representation, Nicholas accepted the invitation, and promised to return at the conclusion of the performances; preferring the cool air and twilight out of doors to the mingled perfume of gas, orange-peel, and gunpowder, which pervaded the hot and glaring theatre.

He availed himself of this interval to buy a silver snuff-box - the best his funds would afford - as a token of remembrance for Mr Crummles, and having purchased besides a pair of ear-rings for Mrs Crummles, a necklace for the Phenomenon, and a flaming shirt-pin for each of the young gentlemen, he refreshed himself with a walk, and returning a little after the appointed time, found the lights out, the theatre empty, the curtain raised for the night, and Mr Crummles walking up and down the stage expecting his arrival.

'Timberly won't be long,' said Mr Crummles. 'He played the audience out tonight. He does a faithful black in the last piece, and it takes him a little longer to wash himself.'

'A very unpleasant line of character, I should think?' said Nicholas.

'No, I don't know,' replied Mr Crummles; 'it comes off easily enough, and there's only the face and neck. We had a first-tragedy man in our company once, who, when he played Othello, used to black himself all over. But that's feeling a part and going into it as if you meant it; it isn't usual; more's the pity.'

Mr Snittle Timberly now appeared, arm-in-arm with the African Swallower, and, being introduced to Nicholas, raised his hat half a foot, and said he was proud to know him. The Swallower said the same, and looked and spoke remarkably like an Irishman.

'I see by the bills that you have been ill, sir,' said Nicholas to Mr Timberly. 'I hope you are none the worse for your exertions tonight?'

Mr Timberly, in reply, shook his head with a gloomy air, tapped his chest several times with great significancy, and drawing his cloak more closely about him, said, 'But no matter, no matter. Come!'

It is observable that when people upon the stage are in any strait involving the very last extremity of weakness and exhaustion, they invariably perform feats of strength requiring great ingenuity and muscular power. Thus, a wounded prince or bandit chief, who is bleeding to death and too faint to move, except to the softest music (and then only upon his hands and knees), shall be seen to approach a cottage door for aid in such a series of writhings and twistings, and with such curlings up of the legs, and such rollings over and over, and such gettings up and tumblings down again, as could never be achieved save by a very strong man skilled in posture-making. And so natural did this sort of performance come to Mr Snittle Timberly, that on their way out of the theatre and towards the tavern where the supper was to be holden, he testified the severity of his recent indisposition and its wasting effects upon the nervous system, by a series of gymnastic performances which were the admiration of all witnesses.

'Why this is indeed a joy I had not looked for!' said Mrs Crummles, when Nicholas was presented.

'Nor I,' replied Nicholas. 'It is by a mere chance that I have this opportunity of seeing you, although I would have made a great exertion to have availed myself of it.'

'Here is one whom you know,' said Mrs Crummles, thrusting forward the Phenomenon in a blue gauze frock, extensively flounced, and trousers of the same; 'and here another - and another,' presenting the Master Crummleses. 'And how is your friend, the faithful Digby?'

'Digby!' said Nicholas, forgetting at the instant that this had been Smike's theatrical name. 'Oh yes. He's quite - what am I saying? - he is very far from well.'

'How!' exclaimed Mrs Crummles, with a tragic recoil.

'I fear,' said Nicholas, shaking his head, and making an attempt to smile, 'that your better-half would be more struck with him now than ever.'

'What mean you?' rejoined Mrs Crummles, in her most popular manner. 'Whence comes this altered tone?'

'I mean that a dastardly enemy of mine has struck at me through him, and that while he thinks to torture me, he inflicts on him such agonies of terror and suspense as - You will excuse me, I am sure,' said Nicholas, checking himself. 'I should never speak of this, and never do, except to those who know the facts, but for a moment I forgot myself.'

With this hasty apology Nicholas stooped down to salute the Phenomenon, and changed the subject; inwardly cursing his precipitation, and very much wondering what Mrs Crummles must think of so sudden an explosion.

That lady seemed to think very little about it, for the supper being by this time on table, she gave her hand to Nicholas and repaired with a stately step to the left hand of Mr Snittle Timberry. Nicholas had the honour to support her, and Mr Crummles was placed upon the chairman's right; the Phenomenon and the Master Crummleses sustained the vice.

The company amounted in number to some twenty-five or thirty, being composed of such members of the theatrical profession, then engaged or disengaged in London, as were numbered among the most intimate friends of Mr and Mrs Crummles. The ladies and gentlemen were pretty equally balanced; the expenses of the entertainment being defrayed by the latter, each of whom had the privilege of inviting one of the former as his guest.

It was upon the whole a very distinguished party, for independently of the lesser theatrical lights who clustered on this occasion round Mr Snittle Timberry, there was a literary gentleman present who had

dramatised in his time two hundred and forty-seven novels as fast as they had come out - some of them faster than they had come out - and who WAS a literary gentleman in consequence.

This gentleman sat on the left hand of Nicholas, to whom he was introduced by his friend the African Swallower, from the bottom of the table, with a high eulogium upon his fame and reputation.

'I am happy to know a gentleman of such great distinction,' said Nicholas, politely.

'Sir,' replied the wit, 'you're very welcome, I'm sure. The honour is reciprocal, sir, as I usually say when I dramatise a book. Did you ever hear a definition of fame, sir?'

'I have heard several,' replied Nicholas, with a smile. 'What is yours?'

'When I dramatise a book, sir,' said the literary gentleman, 'THAT'S fame. For its author.'

'Oh, indeed!' rejoined Nicholas.

'That's fame, sir,' said the literary gentleman.

'So Richard Turpin, Tom King, and Jerry Abershaw have handed down to fame the names of those on whom they committed their most impudent robberies?' said Nicholas.

'I don't know anything about that, sir,' answered the literary gentleman.

'Shakespeare dramatised stories which had previously appeared in print, it is true,' observed Nicholas.

'Meaning Bill, sir?' said the literary gentleman. 'So he did. Bill was an adapter, certainly, so he was - and very well he adapted too - considering.'

'I was about to say,' rejoined Nicholas, 'that Shakespeare derived some of his plots from old tales and legends in general circulation; but it seems to me, that some of the gentlemen of your craft, at the present day, have shot very far beyond him - '

'You're quite right, sir,' interrupted the literary gentleman, leaning back in his chair and exercising his toothpick. 'Human intellect, sir, has progressed since his time, is progressing, will progress.'

'Shot beyond him, I mean,' resumed Nicholas, 'in quite another respect, for, whereas he brought within the magic circle of his genius, traditions peculiarly adapted for his purpose, and turned familiar things into constellations which should enlighten the world for ages, you drag within the magic circle of your dulness, subjects not at all adapted to the purposes of the stage, and debase as he exalted. For instance, you take the uncompleted books of living authors, fresh from their hands, wet from the press, cut, hack, and carve them to the powers and capacities of your actors, and the capability of your theatres, finish unfinished works, hastily and crudely vamp up ideas not yet worked out by their original projector, but which have doubtless cost him many thoughtful days and sleepless nights; by a comparison of incidents and dialogue, down to the very last word he may have written a fortnight before, do your utmost to anticipate his plot - all this without his permission, and against his will; and then, to crown the whole proceeding, publish in some mean pamphlet, an unmeaning farrago of garbled extracts from his work, to which your name as author, with the honourable distinction annexed, of having perpetrated a hundred other outrages of the same description. Now, show me the distinction between such pilfering as this, and picking a man's pocket in the street: unless, indeed, it be, that the legislature has a regard for pocket-handkerchiefs, and leaves men's brains, except when they are knocked out by violence, to take care of themselves.'

'Men must live, sir,' said the literary gentleman, shrugging his shoulders.

'That would be an equally fair plea in both cases,' replied Nicholas; 'but if you put it upon that ground, I have nothing more to say, than, that if I were a writer of books, and you a thirsty dramatist, I would rather pay your tavern score for six months, large as it might be, than have a niche in the Temple of Fame with you for the humblest corner of my pedestal, through six hundred generations.'

The conversation threatened to take a somewhat angry tone when it had arrived thus far, but Mrs Crummles opportunely interposed to prevent its leading to any violent outbreak, by making some inquiries of the literary gentleman relative to the plots of the six new pieces which he had written by contract to introduce the African Knife-swallower in his various unrivalled performances. This speedily engaged him in an animated conversation with that lady, in the interest of which, all recollection of his recent discussion with Nicholas very quickly evaporated.

The board being now clear of the more substantial articles of food, and punch, wine, and spirits being placed upon it and handed about, the guests, who had been previously conversing in little groups of three or

four, gradually fell off into a dead silence, while the majority of those present glanced from time to time at Mr Snittle Timberry, and the bolder spirits did not even hesitate to strike the table with their knuckles, and plainly intimate their expectations, by uttering such encouragements as 'Now, Tim,' 'Wake up, Mr Chairman,' 'All charged, sir, and waiting for a toast,' and so forth.

To these remonstrances Mr Timberry deigned no other rejoinder than striking his chest and gasping for breath, and giving many other indications of being still the victim of indisposition - for a man must not make himself too cheap either on the stage or off - while Mr Crummles, who knew full well that he would be the subject of the forthcoming toast, sat gracefully in his chair with his arm thrown carelessly over the back, and now and then lifted his glass to his mouth and drank a little punch, with the same air with which he was accustomed to take long draughts of nothing, out of the pasteboard goblets in banquet scenes.

At length Mr Snittle Timberry rose in the most approved attitude, with one hand in the breast of his waistcoat and the other on the nearest snuff-box, and having been received with great enthusiasm, proposed, with abundance of quotations, his friend Mr Vincent Crummles: ending a pretty long speech by extending his right hand on one side and his left on the other, and severally calling upon Mr and Mrs Crummles to grasp the same. This done, Mr Vincent Crummles returned thanks, and that done, the African Swallower proposed Mrs Vincent Crummles, in affecting terms. Then were heard loud moans and sobs from Mrs Crummles and the ladies, despite of which that heroic woman insisted upon returning thanks herself, which she did, in a manner and in a speech which has never been surpassed and seldom equalled. It then became the duty of Mr Snittle Timberry to give the young Crummleses, which he did; after which Mr Vincent Crummles, as their father, addressed the company in a supplementary speech, enlarging on their virtues, amiabilities, and excellences, and wishing that they were the sons and daughter of every lady and gentleman present. These solemnities having been succeeded by a decent interval, enlivened by musical and other entertainments, Mr Crummles proposed that ornament of the profession, the African Swallower, his very dear friend, if he would allow him to call him so; which liberty (there being no particular reason why he should not allow it) the African Swallower graciously permitted. The literary gentleman was then about to be drunk, but it being discovered that he had been drunk for some time in another acceptation of the term, and was then asleep on the stairs, the intention was abandoned, and the honour transferred to the ladies. Finally, after a very long sitting, Mr Snittle Timberry vacated the chair, and the company with many adieux and embraces dispersed.

Nicholas waited to the last to give his little presents. When he had said goodbye all round and came to Mr Crummles, he could not but mark the difference between their present separation and their parting at Portsmouth. Not a jot of his theatrical manner remained; he put out his hand with an air which, if he could have summoned it at will, would have made him the best actor of his day in homely parts, and when Nicholas shook it with the warmth he honestly felt, appeared thoroughly melted.

'We were a very happy little company, Johnson,' said poor Crummles. 'You and I never had a word. I shall be very glad tomorrow morning to think that I saw you again, but now I almost wish you hadn't come.'

Nicholas was about to return a cheerful reply, when he was greatly disconcerted by the sudden apparition of Mrs Grudden, who it seemed had declined to attend the supper in order that she might rise earlier in the morning, and who now burst out of an adjoining bedroom, habited in very extraordinary white robes; and throwing her arms about his neck, hugged him with great affection.

'What! Are you going too?' said Nicholas, submitting with as good a grace as if she had been the finest young creature in the world.

'Going?' returned Mrs Grudden. 'Lord ha' mercy, what do you think they'd do without me?'

Nicholas submitted to another hug with even a better grace than before, if that were possible, and waving his hat as cheerfully as he could, took farewell of the Vincent Crummleses.