

Chapter XLIX

Chronicles the further Proceedings of the Nickleby Family, and the Sequel of the Adventure of the Gentleman in the Small-clothes

While Nicholas, absorbed in the one engrossing subject of interest which had recently opened upon him, occupied his leisure hours with thoughts of Madeline Bray, and in execution of the commissions which the anxiety of brother Charles in her behalf imposed upon him, saw her again and again, and each time with greater danger to his peace of mind and a more weakening effect upon the lofty resolutions he had formed, Mrs Nickleby and Kate continued to live in peace and quiet, agitated by no other cares than those which were connected with certain harassing proceedings taken by Mr Snawley for the recovery of his son, and their anxiety for Smike himself, whose health, long upon the wane, began to be so much affected by apprehension and uncertainty as sometimes to occasion both them and Nicholas considerable uneasiness, and even alarm.

It was no complaint or murmur on the part of the poor fellow himself that thus disturbed them. Ever eager to be employed in such slight services as he could render, and always anxious to repay his benefactors with cheerful and happy looks, less friendly eyes might have seen in him no cause for any misgiving. But there were times, and often too, when the sunken eye was too bright, the hollow cheek too flushed, the breath too thick and heavy in its course, the frame too feeble and exhausted, to escape their regard and notice.

There is a dread disease which so prepares its victim, as it were, for death; which so refines it of its grosser aspect, and throws around familiar looks unearthly indications of the coming change; a dread disease, in which the struggle between soul and body is so gradual, quiet, and solemn, and the result so sure, that day by day, and grain by grain, the mortal part wastes and withers away, so that the spirit grows light and sanguine with its lightening load, and, feeling immortality at hand, deems it but a new term of mortal life; a disease in which death and life are so strangely blended, that death takes the glow and hue of life, and life the gaunt and grisly form of death; a disease which medicine never cured, wealth never warded off, or poverty could boast exemption from; which sometimes moves in giant strides, and sometimes at a tardy sluggish pace, but, slow or quick, is ever sure and certain.

It was with some faint reference in his own mind to this disorder, though he would by no means admit it, even to himself, that Nicholas had already carried his faithful companion to a physician of great repute. There was no cause for immediate alarm, he said. There were

no present symptoms which could be deemed conclusive. The constitution had been greatly tried and injured in childhood, but still it MIGHT not be - and that was all.

But he seemed to grow no worse, and, as it was not difficult to find a reason for these symptoms of illness in the shock and agitation he had recently undergone, Nicholas comforted himself with the hope that his poor friend would soon recover. This hope his mother and sister shared with him; and as the object of their joint solicitude seemed to have no uneasiness or despondency for himself, but each day answered with a quiet smile that he felt better than he had upon the day before, their fears abated, and the general happiness was by degrees restored.

Many and many a time in after years did Nicholas look back to this period of his life, and tread again the humble quiet homely scenes that rose up as of old before him. Many and many a time, in the twilight of a summer evening, or beside the flickering winter's fire - but not so often or so sadly then - would his thoughts wander back to these old days, and dwell with a pleasant sorrow upon every slight remembrance which they brought crowding home. The little room in which they had so often sat long after it was dark, figuring such happy futures; Kate's cheerful voice and merry laugh; how, if she were from home, they used to sit and watch for her return scarcely breaking silence but to say how dull it seemed without her; the glee with which poor Smike would start from the darkened corner where he used to sit, and hurry to admit her, and the tears they often saw upon his face, half wondering to see them too, and he so pleased and happy; every little incident, and even slight words and looks of those old days little heeded then, but well remembered when busy cares and trials were quite forgotten, came fresh and thick before him many and many a time, and, rustling above the dusty growth of years, came back green boughs of yesterday.

But there were other persons associated with these recollections, and many changes came about before they had being. A necessary reflection for the purposes of these adventures, which at once subside into their accustomed train, and shunning all flighty anticipations or wayward wanderings, pursue their steady and decorous course.

If the brothers Cheeryble, as they found Nicholas worthy of trust and confidence, bestowed upon him every day some new and substantial mark of kindness, they were not less mindful of those who depended on him. Various little presents to Mrs Nickleby, always of the very things they most required, tended in no slight degree to the improvement and embellishment of the cottage. Kate's little store of trinkets became quite dazzling; and for company! If brother Charles and brother Ned failed to look in for at least a few minutes every

Sunday, or one evening in the week, there was Mr Tim Linkinwater (who had never made half-a-dozen other acquaintances in all his life, and who took such delight in his new friends as no words can express) constantly coming and going in his evening walks, and stopping to rest; while Mr Frank Cheeryble happened, by some strange conjunction of circumstances, to be passing the door on some business or other at least three nights in the week.

'He is the most attentive young man I ever saw, Kate,' said Mrs Nickleby to her daughter one evening, when this last-named gentleman had been the subject of the worthy lady's eulogium for some time, and Kate had sat perfectly silent.

'Attentive, mama!' rejoined Kate.

'Bless my heart, Kate!' cried Mrs Nickleby, with her wonted suddenness, 'what a colour you have got; why, you're quite flushed!'

'Oh, mama! what strange things you fancy!'

'It wasn't fancy, Kate, my dear, I'm certain of that,' returned her mother. 'However, it's gone now at any rate, so it don't much matter whether it was or not. What was it we were talking about? Oh! Mr Frank. I never saw such attention in MY life, never.'

'Surely you are not serious,' returned Kate, colouring again; and this time beyond all dispute.

'Not serious!' returned Mrs Nickleby; 'why shouldn't I be serious? I'm sure I never was more serious. I will say that his politeness and attention to me is one of the most becoming, gratifying, pleasant things I have seen for a very long time. You don't often meet with such behaviour in young men, and it strikes one more when one does meet with it.'

'Oh! attention to YOU, mama,' rejoined Kate quickly - 'oh yes.'

'Dear me, Kate,' retorted Mrs Nickleby, 'what an extraordinary girl you are! Was it likely I should be talking of his attention to anybody else? I declare I'm quite sorry to think he should be in love with a German lady, that I am.'

'He said very positively that it was no such thing, mama,' returned Kate. 'Don't you remember his saying so that very first night he came here? Besides,' she added, in a more gentle tone, 'why should WE be sorry if it is the case? What is it to us, mama?'

'Nothing to US, Kate, perhaps,' said Mrs Nickleby, emphatically; 'but something to ME, I confess. I like English people to be thorough English people, and not half English and half I don't know what. I shall tell him point-blank next time he comes, that I wish he would marry one of his own country-women; and see what he says to that.'

'Pray don't think of such a thing, mama,' returned Kate, hastily; 'not for the world. Consider. How very - '

'Well, my dear, how very what?' said Mrs Nickleby, opening her eyes in great astonishment.

Before Kate had returned any reply, a queer little double knock announced that Miss La Creevy had called to see them; and when Miss La Creevy presented herself, Mrs Nickleby, though strongly disposed to be argumentative on the previous question, forgot all about it in a gush of supposes about the coach she had come by; supposing that the man who drove must have been either the man in the shirt-sleeves or the man with the black eye; that whoever he was, he hadn't found that parasol she left inside last week; that no doubt they had stopped a long while at the Halfway House, coming down; or that perhaps being full, they had come straight on; and, lastly, that they, surely, must have passed Nicholas on the road.

'I saw nothing of him,' answered Miss La Creevy; 'but I saw that dear old soul Mr Linkinwater.'

'Taking his evening walk, and coming on to rest here, before he turns back to the city, I'll be bound!' said Mrs Nickleby.

'I should think he was,' returned Miss La Creevy; 'especially as young Mr Cheeryble was with him.'

'Surely that is no reason why Mr Linkinwater should be coming here,' said Kate.

'Why I think it is, my dear,' said Miss La Creevy. 'For a young man, Mr Frank is not a very great walker; and I observe that he generally falls tired, and requires a good long rest, when he has come as far as this. But where is my friend?' said the little woman, looking about, after having glanced slyly at Kate. 'He has not been run away with again, has he?'

'Ah! where is Mr Smike?' said Mrs Nickleby; 'he was here this instant.'

Upon further inquiry, it turned out, to the good lady's unbounded astonishment, that Smike had, that moment, gone upstairs to bed.

'Well now,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'he is the strangest creature! Last Tuesday - was it Tuesday? Yes, to be sure it was; you recollect, Kate, my dear, the very last time young Mr Cheeryble was here - last Tuesday night he went off in just the same strange way, at the very moment the knock came to the door. It cannot be that he don't like company, because he is always fond of people who are fond of Nicholas, and I am sure young Mr Cheeryble is. And the strangest thing is, that he does not go to bed; therefore it cannot be because he is tired. I know he doesn't go to bed, because my room is the next one, and when I went upstairs last Tuesday, hours after him, I found that he had not even taken his shoes off; and he had no candle, so he must have sat moping in the dark all the time. Now, upon my word,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'when I come to think of it, that's very extraordinary!'

As the hearers did not echo this sentiment, but remained profoundly silent, either as not knowing what to say, or as being unwilling to interrupt, Mrs Nickleby pursued the thread of her discourse after her own fashion.

'I hope,' said that lady, 'that this unaccountable conduct may not be the beginning of his taking to his bed and living there all his life, like the Thirsty Woman of Tutbury, or the Cock-lane Ghost, or some of those extraordinary creatures. One of them had some connection with our family. I forget, without looking back to some old letters I have upstairs, whether it was my great-grandfather who went to school with the Cock-lane Ghost, or the Thirsty Woman of Tutbury who went to school with my grandmother. Miss La Creevy, you know, of course. Which was it that didn't mind what the clergyman said? The Cock-lane Ghost or the Thirsty Woman of Tutbury?'

'The Cock-lane Ghost, I believe.'

'Then I have no doubt,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'that it was with him my great-grandfather went to school; for I know the master of his school was a dissenter, and that would, in a great measure, account for the Cock-lane Ghost's behaving in such an improper manner to the clergyman when he grew up. Ah! Train up a Ghost - child, I mean - '

Any further reflections on this fruitful theme were abruptly cut short by the arrival of Tim Linkinwater and Mr Frank Cheeryble; in the hurry of receiving whom, Mrs Nickleby speedily lost sight of everything else.

'I am so sorry Nicholas is not at home,' said Mrs Nickleby. 'Kate, my dear, you must be both Nicholas and yourself.'

'Miss Nickleby need be but herself,' said Frank. 'I - if I may venture to say so - oppose all change in her.'

'Then at all events she shall press you to stay,' returned Mrs Nickleby. 'Mr Linkinwater says ten minutes, but I cannot let you go so soon; Nicholas would be very much vexed, I am sure. Kate, my dear!'

In obedience to a great number of nods, and winks, and frowns of extra significance, Kate added her entreaties that the visitors would remain; but it was observable that she addressed them exclusively to Tim Linkinwater; and there was, besides, a certain embarrassment in her manner, which, although it was as far from impairing its graceful character as the tinge it communicated to her cheek was from diminishing her beauty, was obvious at a glance even to Mrs Nickleby. Not being of a very speculative character, however, save under circumstances when her speculations could be put into words and uttered aloud, that discreet matron attributed the emotion to the circumstance of her daughter's not happening to have her best frock on: 'though I never saw her look better, certainly,' she reflected at the same time. Having settled the question in this way, and being most complacently satisfied that in this, and in all other instances, her conjecture could not fail to be the right one, Mrs Nickleby dismissed it from her thoughts, and inwardly congratulated herself on being so shrewd and knowing.

Nicholas did not come home nor did Smike reappear; but neither circumstance, to say the truth, had any great effect upon the little party, who were all in the best humour possible. Indeed, there sprung up quite a flirtation between Miss La Creevy and Tim Linkinwater, who said a thousand jocose and facetious things, and became, by degrees, quite gallant, not to say tender. Little Miss La Creevy, on her part, was in high spirits, and rallied Tim on having remained a bachelor all his life with so much success, that Tim was actually induced to declare, that if he could get anybody to have him, he didn't know but what he might change his condition even yet. Miss La Creevy earnestly recommended a lady she knew, who would exactly suit Mr Linkinwater, and had a very comfortable property of her own; but this latter qualification had very little effect upon Tim, who manfully protested that fortune would be no object with him, but that true worth and cheerfulness of disposition were what a man should look for in a wife, and that if he had these, he could find money enough for the moderate wants of both. This avowal was considered so honourable to Tim, that neither Mrs Nickleby nor Miss La Creevy could sufficiently extol it; and stimulated by their praises, Tim launched out into several other declarations also manifesting the disinterestedness of his heart, and a great devotion to the fair sex: which were received with no less approbation. This was done and said

with a comical mixture of jest and earnest, and, leading to a great amount of laughter, made them very merry indeed.

Kate was commonly the life and soul of the conversation at home; but she was more silent than usual upon this occasion (perhaps because Tim and Miss La Creevy engrossed so much of it), and, keeping aloof from the talkers, sat at the window watching the shadows as the evening closed in, and enjoying the quiet beauty of the night, which seemed to have scarcely less attractions to Frank, who first lingered near, and then sat down beside, her. No doubt, there are a great many things to be said appropriate to a summer evening, and no doubt they are best said in a low voice, as being most suitable to the peace and serenity of the hour; long pauses, too, at times, and then an earnest word or so, and then another interval of silence which, somehow, does not seem like silence either, and perhaps now and then a hasty turning away of the head, or drooping of the eyes towards the ground, all these minor circumstances, with a disinclination to have candles introduced and a tendency to confuse hours with minutes, are doubtless mere influences of the time, as many lovely lips can clearly testify. Neither is there the slightest reason why Mrs Nickleby should have expressed surprise when, candles being at length brought in, Kate's bright eyes were unable to bear the light which obliged her to avert her face, and even to leave the room for some short time; because, when one has sat in the dark so long, candles ARE dazzling, and nothing can be more strictly natural than that such results should be produced, as all well-informed young people know. For that matter, old people know it too, or did know it once, but they forget these things sometimes, and more's the pity.

The good lady's surprise, however, did not end here. It was greatly increased when it was discovered that Kate had not the least appetite for supper: a discovery so alarming that there is no knowing in what unaccountable efforts of oratory Mrs Nickleby's apprehensions might have been vented, if the general attention had not been attracted, at the moment, by a very strange and uncommon noise, proceeding, as the pale and trembling servant girl affirmed, and as everybody's sense of hearing seemed to affirm also, 'right down' the chimney of the adjoining room.

It being quite plain to the comprehension of all present that, however extraordinary and improbable it might appear, the noise did nevertheless proceed from the chimney in question; and the noise (which was a strange compound of various shuffling, sliding, rumbling, and struggling sounds, all muffled by the chimney) still continuing, Frank Cheeryble caught up a candle, and Tim Linkinwater the tongs, and they would have very quickly ascertained the cause of this disturbance if Mrs Nickleby had not been taken very faint, and declined being left behind, on any account. This produced a short

remonstrance, which terminated in their all proceeding to the troubled chamber in a body, excepting only Miss La Creevy, who, as the servant girl volunteered a confession of having been subject to fits in her infancy, remained with her to give the alarm and apply restoratives, in case of extremity.

Advancing to the door of the mysterious apartment, they were not a little surprised to hear a human voice, chanting with a highly elaborated expression of melancholy, and in tones of suffocation which a human voice might have produced from under five or six feather-beds of the best quality, the once popular air of 'Has she then failed in her truth, the beautiful maid I adore?' Nor, on bursting into the room without demanding a parley, was their astonishment lessened by the discovery that these romantic sounds certainly proceeded from the throat of some man up the chimney, of whom nothing was visible but a pair of legs, which were dangling above the grate; apparently feeling, with extreme anxiety, for the top bar whereon to effect a landing.

A sight so unusual and unbusiness-like as this, completely paralysed Tim Linkinwater, who, after one or two gentle pinches at the stranger's ankles, which were productive of no effect, stood clapping the tongs together, as if he were sharpening them for another assault, and did nothing else.

'This must be some drunken fellow,' said Frank. 'No thief would announce his presence thus.'

As he said this, with great indignation, he raised the candle to obtain a better view of the legs, and was darting forward to pull them down with very little ceremony, when Mrs Nickleby, clasping her hands, uttered a sharp sound, something between a scream and an exclamation, and demanded to know whether the mysterious limbs were not clad in small-clothes and grey worsted stockings, or whether her eyes had deceived her.

'Yes,' cried Frank, looking a little closer. 'Small-clothes certainly, and - and - rough grey stockings, too. Do you know him, ma'am?'

'Kate, my dear,' said Mrs Nickleby, deliberately sitting herself down in a chair with that sort of desperate resignation which seemed to imply that now matters had come to a crisis, and all disguise was useless, 'you will have the goodness, my love, to explain precisely how this matter stands. I have given him no encouragement - none whatever - not the least in the world. You know that, my dear, perfectly well. He was very respectful, exceedingly respectful, when he declared, as you were a witness to; still at the same time, if I am to be persecuted in this way, if vegetable what's-his-names and all kinds of garden-stuff

are to strew my path out of doors, and gentlemen are to come choking up our chimneys at home, I really don't know - upon my word I do NOT know - what is to become of me. It's a very hard case - harder than anything I was ever exposed to, before I married your poor dear papa, though I suffered a good deal of annoyance then - but that, of course, I expected, and made up my mind for. When I was not nearly so old as you, my dear, there was a young gentleman who sat next us at church, who used, almost every Sunday, to cut my name in large letters in the front of his pew while the sermon was going on. It was gratifying, of course, naturally so, but still it was an annoyance, because the pew was in a very conspicuous place, and he was several times publicly taken out by the beadle for doing it. But that was nothing to this. This is a great deal worse, and a great deal more embarrassing. I would rather, Kate, my dear,' said Mrs Nickleby, with great solemnity, and an effusion of tears: 'I would rather, I declare, have been a pig-faced lady, than be exposed to such a life as this!'

Frank Cheeryble and Tim Linkinwater looked, in irrepressible astonishment, first at each other and then at Kate, who felt that some explanation was necessary, but who, between her terror at the apparition of the legs, her fear lest their owner should be smothered, and her anxiety to give the least ridiculous solution of the mystery that it was capable of bearing, was quite unable to utter a single word.

'He gives me great pain,' continued Mrs Nickleby, drying her eyes, 'great pain; but don't hurt a hair of his head, I beg. On no account hurt a hair of his head.'

It would not, under existing circumstances, have been quite so easy to hurt a hair of the gentleman's head as Mrs Nickleby seemed to imagine, inasmuch as that part of his person was some feet up the chimney, which was by no means a wide one. But, as all this time he had never left off singing about the bankruptcy of the beautiful maid in respect of truth, and now began not only to croak very feebly, but to kick with great violence as if respiration became a task of difficulty, Frank Cheeryble, without further hesitation, pulled at the shorts and worsteds with such heartiness as to bring him floundering into the room with greater precipitation than he had quite calculated upon.

'Oh! yes, yes,' said Kate, directly the whole figure of this singular visitor appeared in this abrupt manner. 'I know who it is. Pray don't be rough with him. Is he hurt? I hope not. Oh, pray see if he is hurt.'

'He is not, I assure you,' replied Frank, handling the object of his surprise, after this appeal, with sudden tenderness and respect. 'He is not hurt in the least.'

'Don't let him come any nearer,' said Kate, retiring as far as she could.

'Oh, no, he shall not,' rejoined Frank. 'You see I have him secure here. But may I ask you what this means, and whether you expected, this old gentleman?'

'Oh, no,' said Kate, 'of course not; but he - mama does not think so, I believe - but he is a mad gentleman who has escaped from the next house, and must have found an opportunity of secreting himself here.'

'Kate,' interposed Mrs Nickleby with severe dignity, 'I am surprised at you.'

'Dear mama,' Kate gently remonstrated.

'I am surprised at you,' repeated Mrs Nickleby; 'upon my word, Kate, I am quite astonished that you should join the persecutors of this unfortunate gentleman, when you know very well that they have the basest designs upon his property, and that that is the whole secret of it. It would be much kinder of you, Kate, to ask Mr Linkinwater or Mr Cheeryble to interfere in his behalf, and see him righted. You ought not to allow your feelings to influence you; it's not right, very far from it. What should my feelings be, do you suppose? If anybody ought to be indignant, who is it? I, of course, and very properly so. Still, at the same time, I wouldn't commit such an injustice for the world. No,' continued Mrs Nickleby, drawing herself up, and looking another way with a kind of bashful stateliness; 'this gentleman will understand me when I tell him that I repeat the answer I gave him the other day; that I always will repeat it, though I do believe him to be sincere when I find him placing himself in such dreadful situations on my account; and that I request him to have the goodness to go away directly, or it will be impossible to keep his behaviour a secret from my son Nicholas. I am obliged to him, very much obliged to him, but I cannot listen to his addresses for a moment. It's quite impossible.'

While this address was in course of delivery, the old gentleman, with his nose and cheeks embellished with large patches of soot, sat upon the ground with his arms folded, eyeing the spectators in profound silence, and with a very majestic demeanour. He did not appear to take the smallest notice of what Mrs Nickleby said, but when she ceased to speak he honoured her with a long stare, and inquired if she had quite finished.

'I have nothing more to say,' replied that lady modestly. 'I really cannot say anything more.'

'Very good,' said the old gentleman, raising his voice, 'then bring in the bottled lightning, a clean tumbler, and a corkscrew.'

Nobody executing this order, the old gentleman, after a short pause, raised his voice again and demanded a thunder sandwich. This article not being forthcoming either, he requested to be served with a fricassee of boot-tops and goldfish sauce, and then laughing heartily, gratified his hearers with a very long, very loud, and most melodious bellow.

But still Mrs Nickleby, in reply to the significant looks of all about her, shook her head as though to assure them that she saw nothing whatever in all this, unless, indeed, it were a slight degree of eccentricity. She might have remained impressed with these opinions down to the latest moment of her life, but for a slight train of circumstances, which, trivial as they were, altered the whole complexion of the case.

It happened that Miss La Creevy, finding her patient in no very threatening condition, and being strongly impelled by curiosity to see what was going forward, bustled into the room while the old gentleman was in the very act of bellowing. It happened, too, that the instant the old gentleman saw her, he stopped short, skipped suddenly on his feet, and fell to kissing his hand violently: a change of demeanour which almost terrified the little portrait painter out of her senses, and caused her to retreat behind Tim Linkinwater with the utmost expedition.

'Aha!' cried the old gentleman, folding his hands, and squeezing them with great force against each other. 'I see her now; I see her now! My love, my life, my bride, my peerless beauty. She is come at last - at last - and all is gas and gaiters!'

Mrs Nickleby looked rather disconcerted for a moment, but immediately recovering, nodded to Miss La Creevy and the other spectators several times, and frowned, and smiled gravely, giving them to understand that she saw where the mistake was, and would set it all to rights in a minute or two.

'She is come!' said the old gentleman, laying his hand upon his heart. 'Cormoran and Blunderbore! She is come! All the wealth I have is hers if she will take me for her slave. Where are grace, beauty, and blandishments, like those? In the Empress of Madagascar? No. In the Queen of Diamonds? No. In Mrs Rowland, who every morning bathes in Kalydor for nothing? No. Melt all these down into one, with the three Graces, the nine Muses, and fourteen biscuit-bakers' daughters from Oxford Street, and make a woman half as lovely. Pho! I defy you.'

After uttering this rhapsody, the old gentleman snapped his fingers twenty or thirty times, and then subsided into an ecstatic contemplation of Miss La Creevy's charms. This affording Mrs

Nickleby a favourable opportunity of explanation, she went about it straight.

'I am sure,' said the worthy lady, with a prefatory cough, 'that it's a great relief, under such trying circumstances as these, to have anybody else mistaken for me - a very great relief; and it's a circumstance that never occurred before, although I have several times been mistaken for my daughter Kate. I have no doubt the people were very foolish, and perhaps ought to have known better, but still they did take me for her, and of course that was no fault of mine, and it would be very hard indeed if I was to be made responsible for it. However, in this instance, of course, I must feel that I should do exceedingly wrong if I suffered anybody - especially anybody that I am under great obligations to - to be made uncomfortable on my account. And therefore I think it my duty to tell that gentleman that he is mistaken, that I am the lady who he was told by some impertinent person was niece to the Council of Paving-stones, and that I do beg and entreat of him to go quietly away, if it's only for,' here Mrs Nickleby simpered and hesitated, 'for MY sake.'

It might have been expected that the old gentleman would have been penetrated to the heart by the delicacy and condescension of this appeal, and that he would at least have returned a courteous and suitable reply. What, then, was the shock which Mrs Nickleby received, when, accosting HER in the most unmistakable manner, he replied in a loud and sonorous voice: 'Avaunt! Cat!'

'Sir!' cried Mrs Nickleby, in a faint tone.

'Cat!' repeated the old gentleman. 'Puss, Kit, Tit, Grimalkin, Tabby, Brindle! Whoosh!' with which last sound, uttered in a hissing manner between his teeth, the old gentleman swung his arms violently round and round, and at the same time alternately advanced on Mrs Nickleby, and retreated from her, in that species of savage dance with which boys on market-days may be seen to frighten pigs, sheep, and other animals, when they give out obstinate indications of turning down a wrong street.

Mrs Nickleby wasted no words, but uttered an exclamation of horror and surprise, and immediately fainted away.

'I'll attend to mama,' said Kate, hastily; 'I am not at all frightened. But pray take him away: pray take him away!'

Frank was not at all confident of his power of complying with this request, until he bethought himself of the stratagem of sending Miss La Creevy on a few paces in advance, and urging the old gentleman to follow her. It succeeded to a miracle; and he went away in a rapture of

admiration, strongly guarded by Tim Linkinwater on one side, and Frank himself on the other.

'Kate,' murmured Mrs Nickleby, reviving when the coast was clear, 'is he gone?'

She was assured that he was.

'I shall never forgive myself, Kate,' said Mrs Nickleby. 'Never! That gentleman has lost his senses, and I am the unhappy cause.'

'YOU the cause!' said Kate, greatly astonished.

'I, my love,' replied Mrs Nickleby, with a desperate calmness. 'You saw what he was the other day; you see what he is now. I told your brother, weeks and weeks ago, Kate, that I hoped a disappointment might not be too much for him. You see what a wreck he is. Making allowance for his being a little flighty, you know how rationally, and sensibly, and honourably he talked, when we saw him in the garden. You have heard the dreadful nonsense he has been guilty of this night, and the manner in which he has gone on with that poor unfortunate little old maid. Can anybody doubt how all this has been brought about?'

'I should scarcely think they could,' said Kate mildly.

'I should scarcely think so, either,' rejoined her mother. 'Well! if I am the unfortunate cause of this, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I am not to blame. I told Nicholas, I said to him, 'Nicholas, my dear, we should be very careful how we proceed.' He would scarcely hear me. If the matter had only been properly taken up at first, as I wished it to be! But you are both of you so like your poor papa. However, I have MY consolation, and that should be enough for me!'

Washing her hands, thus, of all responsibility under this head, past, present, or to come, Mrs Nickleby kindly added that she hoped her children might never have greater cause to reproach themselves than she had, and prepared herself to receive the escort, who soon returned with the intelligence that the old gentleman was safely housed, and that they found his custodians, who had been making merry with some friends, wholly ignorant of his absence.

Quiet being again restored, a delicious half-hour - so Frank called it, in the course of subsequent conversation with Tim Linkinwater as they were walking home - was spent in conversation, and Tim's watch at length apprising him that it was high time to depart, the ladies were left alone, though not without many offers on the part of Frank to remain until Nicholas arrived, no matter what hour of the night it

might be, if, after the late neighbourly irruption, they entertained the least fear of being left to themselves. As their freedom from all further apprehension, however, left no pretext for his insisting on mounting guard, he was obliged to abandon the citadel, and to retire with the trusty Tim.

Nearly three hours of silence passed away. Kate blushed to find, when Nicholas returned, how long she had been sitting alone, occupied with her own thoughts.

'I really thought it had not been half an hour,' she said.

'They must have been pleasant thoughts, Kate,' rejoined Nicholas gaily, 'to make time pass away like that. What were they now?'

Kate was confused; she toyed with some trifle on the table, looked up and smiled, looked down and dropped a tear.

'Why, Kate,' said Nicholas, drawing his sister towards him and kissing her, 'let me see your face. No? Ah! that was but a glimpse; that's scarcely fair. A longer look than that, Kate. Come - and I'll read your thoughts for you.'

There was something in this proposition, albeit it was said without the slightest consciousness or application, which so alarmed his sister, that Nicholas laughingly changed the subject to domestic matters, and thus gathered, by degrees, as they left the room and went upstairs together, how lonely Smike had been all night - and by very slow degrees, too; for on this subject also, Kate seemed to speak with some reluctance.

'Poor fellow,' said Nicholas, tapping gently at his door, 'what can be the cause of all this?'

Kate was hanging on her brother's arm. The door being quickly opened, she had not time to disengage herself, before Smike, very pale and haggard, and completely dressed, confronted them.

'And have you not been to bed?' said Nicholas.

'N - n - no,' was the reply.

Nicholas gently detained his sister, who made an effort to retire; and asked, 'Why not?'

'I could not sleep,' said Smike, grasping the hand which his friend extended to him.

'You are not well?' rejoined Nicholas.

'I am better, indeed. A great deal better,' said Smike quickly.

'Then why do you give way to these fits of melancholy?' inquired Nicholas, in his kindest manner; 'or why not tell us the cause? You grow a different creature, Smike.'

'I do; I know I do,' he replied. 'I will tell you the reason one day, but not now. I hate myself for this; you are all so good and kind. But I cannot help it. My heart is very full; you do not know how full it is.'

He wrung Nicholas's hand before he released it; and glancing, for a moment, at the brother and sister as they stood together, as if there were something in their strong affection which touched him very deeply, withdrew into his chamber, and was soon the only watcher under that quiet roof.