

## Chapter LI

### **The Project of Mr Ralph Nickleby and his Friend approaching a successful Issue, becomes unexpectedly known to another Party, not admitted into their Confidence**

In an old house, dismal dark and dusty, which seemed to have withered, like himself, and to have grown yellow and shrivelled in hoarding him from the light of day, as he had in hoarding his money, lived Arthur Gride. Meagre old chairs and tables, of spare and bony make, and hard and cold as misers' hearts, were ranged, in grim array, against the gloomy walls; attenuated presses, grown lank and lantern-jawed in guarding the treasures they enclosed, and tottering, as though from constant fear and dread of thieves, shrunk up in dark corners, whence they cast no shadows on the ground, and seemed to hide and cower from observation. A tall grim clock upon the stairs, with long lean hands and famished face, ticked in cautious whispers; and when it struck the time, in thin and piping sounds, like an old man's voice, rattled, as if it were pinched with hunger.

No fireside couch was there, to invite repose and comfort. Elbow-chairs there were, but they looked uneasy in their minds, cocked their arms suspiciously and timidly, and kept upon their guard. Others, were fantastically grim and gaunt, as having drawn themselves up to their utmost height, and put on their fiercest looks to stare all comers out of countenance. Others, again, knocked up against their neighbours, or leant for support against the wall - somewhat ostentatiously, as if to call all men to witness that they were not worth the taking. The dark square lumbering bedsteads seemed built for restless dreams; the musty hangings seemed to creep in scanty folds together, whispering among themselves, when rustled by the wind, their trembling knowledge of the tempting wares that lurked within the dark and tight-locked closets.

From out the most spare and hungry room in all this spare and hungry house there came, one morning, the tremulous tones of old Gride's voice, as it feebly chirruped forth the fag end of some forgotten song, of which the burden ran:

Ta - ran - tan - too, Throw the old shoe, And may the wedding be lucky!

which he repeated, in the same shrill quavering notes, again and again, until a violent fit of coughing obliged him to desist, and to pursue in silence, the occupation upon which he was engaged.

This occupation was, to take down from the shelves of a worm-eaten wardrobe a quantity of frouzy garments, one by one; to subject each to

a careful and minute inspection by holding it up against the light, and after folding it with great exactness, to lay it on one or other of two little heaps beside him. He never took two articles of clothing out together, but always brought them forth, singly, and never failed to shut the wardrobe door, and turn the key, between each visit to its shelves.

'The snuff-coloured suit,' said Arthur Gride, surveying a threadbare coat. 'Did I look well in snuff-colour? Let me think.'

The result of his cogitations appeared to be unfavourable, for he folded the garment once more, laid it aside, and mounted on a chair to get down another, chirping while he did so:

Young, loving, and fair, Oh what happiness there! The wedding is sure to be lucky!

'They always put in 'young,'" said old Arthur, 'but songs are only written for the sake of rhyme, and this is a silly one that the poor country-people sang, when I was a little boy. Though stop - young is quite right too - it means the bride - yes. He, he, he! It means the bride. Oh dear, that's good. That's very good. And true besides, quite true!'

In the satisfaction of this discovery, he went over the verse again, with increased expression, and a shake or two here and there. He then resumed his employment.

'The bottle-green,' said old Arthur; 'the bottle-green was a famous suit to wear, and I bought it very cheap at a pawnbroker's, and there was - he, he, he! - a tarnished shilling in the waistcoat pocket. To think that the pawnbroker shouldn't have known there was a shilling in it! I knew it! I felt it when I was examining the quality. Oh, what a dull dog of a pawnbroker! It was a lucky suit too, this bottle-green. The very day I put it on first, old Lord Mallowford was burnt to death in his bed, and all the post-obits fell in. I'll be married in the bottle-green. Peg. Peg Sliderskew - I'll wear the bottle-green!'

This call, loudly repeated twice or thrice at the room-door, brought into the apartment a short, thin, weasen, blear-eyed old woman, palsy-stricken and hideously ugly, who, wiping her shrivelled face upon her dirty apron, inquired, in that subdued tone in which deaf people commonly speak:

'Was that you a calling, or only the clock a striking? My hearing gets so bad, I never know which is which; but when I hear a noise, I know it must be one of you, because nothing else never stirs in the house.'

'Me, Peg, me,' said Arthur Gride, tapping himself on the breast to render the reply more intelligible.

'You, eh?' returned Peg. 'And what do YOU want?'

'I'll be married in the bottle-green,' cried Arthur Gride.

'It's a deal too good to be married in, master,' rejoined Peg, after a short inspection of the suit. 'Haven't you got anything worse than this?'

'Nothing that'll do,' replied old Arthur.

'Why not do?' retorted Peg. 'Why don't you wear your every-day clothes, like a man - eh?'

'They an't becoming enough, Peg,' returned her master.

'Not what enough?' said Peg.

'Becoming.'

'Becoming what?' said Peg, sharply. 'Not becoming too old to wear?'

Arthur Gride muttered an imprecation on his housekeeper's deafness, as he roared in her ear:

'Not smart enough! I want to look as well as I can.'

'Look?' cried Peg. 'If she's as handsome as you say she is, she won't look much at you, master, take your oath of that; and as to how you look yourself - pepper-and-salt, bottle-green, sky-blue, or tartan-plaid will make no difference in you.'

With which consolatory assurance, Peg Sliderskew gathered up the chosen suit, and folding her skinny arms upon the bundle, stood, mouthing, and grinning, and blinking her watery eyes, like an uncouth figure in some monstrous piece of carving.

'You're in a funny humour, an't you, Peg?' said Arthur, with not the best possible grace.

'Why, isn't it enough to make me?' rejoined the old woman. 'I shall, soon enough, be put out, though, if anybody tries to domineer it over me: and so I give you notice, master. Nobody shall be put over Peg Sliderskew's head, after so many years; you know that, and so I needn't tell you! That won't do for me - no, no, nor for you. Try that once, and come to ruin - ruin - ruin!'

'Oh dear, dear, I shall never try it,' said Arthur Gride, appalled by the mention of the word, 'not for the world. It would be very easy to ruin me; we must be very careful; more saving than ever, with another mouth to feed. Only we - we mustn't let her lose her good looks, Peg, because I like to see 'em.'

'Take care you don't find good looks come expensive,' returned Peg, shaking her forefinger.

'But she can earn money herself, Peg,' said Arthur Gride, eagerly watching what effect his communication produced upon the old woman's countenance: 'she can draw, paint, work all manner of pretty things for ornamenting stools and chairs: slippers, Peg, watch-guards, hair-chains, and a thousand little dainty trifles that I couldn't give you half the names of. Then she can play the piano, (and, what's more, she's got one), and sing like a little bird. She'll be very cheap to dress and keep, Peg; don't you think she will?'

'If you don't let her make a fool of you, she may,' returned Peg.

'A fool of ME!' exclaimed Arthur. 'Trust your old master not to be fooled by pretty faces, Peg; no, no, no - nor by ugly ones neither, Mrs Sliderskew,' he softly added by way of soliloquy.

'You're a saying something you don't want me to hear,' said Peg; 'I know you are.'

'Oh dear! the devil's in this woman,' muttered Arthur; adding with an ugly leer, 'I said I trusted everything to you, Peg. That was all.'

'You do that, master, and all your cares are over,' said Peg approvingly.

'WHEN I do that, Peg Sliderskew,' thought Arthur Gride, 'they will be.'

Although he thought this very distinctly, he durst not move his lips lest the old woman should detect him. He even seemed half afraid that she might have read his thoughts; for he leered coaxingly upon her, as he said aloud:

'Take up all loose stitches in the bottle-green with the best black silk. Have a skein of the best, and some new buttons for the coat, and - this is a good idea, Peg, and one you'll like, I know - as I have never given her anything yet, and girls like such attentions, you shall polish up a sparking necklace that I have got upstairs, and I'll give it her upon the wedding morning - clasp it round her charming little neck myself - and take it away again next day. He, he, he! I'll lock it up for

her, Peg, and lose it. Who'll be made the fool of there, I wonder, to begin with - eh, Peg?'

Mrs Sliderskew appeared to approve highly of this ingenious scheme, and expressed her satisfaction by various rackings and twitchings of her head and body, which by no means enhanced her charms. These she prolonged until she had hobbled to the door, when she exchanged them for a sour malignant look, and twisting her under-jaw from side to side, muttered hearty curses upon the future Mrs Gride, as she crept slowly down the stairs, and paused for breath at nearly every one.

'She's half a witch, I think,' said Arthur Gride, when he found himself again alone. 'But she's very frugal, and she's very deaf. Her living costs me next to nothing; and it's no use her listening at keyholes; for she can't hear. She's a charming woman - for the purpose; a most discreet old housekeeper, and worth her weight in - copper.'

Having extolled the merits of his domestic in these high terms, old Arthur went back to the burden of his song. The suit destined to grace his approaching nuptials being now selected, he replaced the others with no less care than he had displayed in drawing them from the musty nooks where they had silently reposed for many years.

Startled by a ring at the door, he hastily concluded this operation, and locked the press; but there was no need for any particular hurry, as the discreet Peg seldom knew the bell was rung unless she happened to cast her dim eyes upwards, and to see it shaking against the kitchen ceiling. After a short delay, however, Peg tottered in, followed by Newman Noggs.

'Ah! Mr Noggs!' cried Arthur Gride, rubbing his hands. 'My good friend, Mr Noggs, what news do you bring for me?'

Newman, with a steadfast and immovable aspect, and his fixed eye very fixed indeed, replied, suiting the action to the word, 'A letter. From Mr Nickleby. Bearer waits.'

'Won't you take a - a - '

Newman looked up, and smacked his lips.

' - A chair?' said Arthur Gride.

'No,' replied Newman. 'Thankee.'

Arthur opened the letter with trembling hands, and devoured its contents with the utmost greediness; chuckling rapturously over it,

and reading it several times, before he could take it from before his eyes. So many times did he peruse and re-peruse it, that Newman considered it expedient to remind him of his presence.

'Answer,' said Newman. 'Bearer waits.'

'True,' replied old Arthur. 'Yes - yes; I almost forgot, I do declare.'

'I thought you were forgetting,' said Newman.

'Quite right to remind me, Mr Noggs. Oh, very right indeed,' said Arthur. 'Yes. I'll write a line. I'm - I'm - rather flurried, Mr Noggs. The news is - '

'Bad?' interrupted Newman.

'No, Mr Noggs, thank you; good, good. The very best of news. Sit down. I'll get the pen and ink, and write a line in answer. I'll not detain you long. I know you're a treasure to your master, Mr Noggs. He speaks of you in such terms, sometimes, that, oh dear! you'd be astonished. I may say that I do too, and always did. I always say the same of you.'

'That's 'Curse Mr Noggs with all my heart!' then, if you do,' thought Newman, as Gride hurried out.

The letter had fallen on the ground. Looking carefully about him for an instant, Newman, impelled by curiosity to know the result of the design he had overheard from his office closet, caught it up and rapidly read as follows:

'GRIDE.

'I saw Bray again this morning, and proposed the day after tomorrow (as you suggested) for the marriage. There is no objection on his part, and all days are alike to his daughter. We will go together, and you must be with me by seven in the morning. I need not tell you to be punctual.

'Make no further visits to the girl in the meantime. You have been there, of late, much oftener than you should. She does not languish for you, and it might have been dangerous. Restrain your youthful ardour for eight-and-forty hours, and leave her to the father. You only undo what he does, and does well.

'Yours,

'RALPH NICKLEBY.'

A footstep was heard without. Newman dropped the letter on the same spot again, pressed it with his foot to prevent its fluttering away, regained his seat in a single stride, and looked as vacant and unconscious as ever mortal looked. Arthur Gride, after peering nervously about him, spied it on the ground, picked it up, and sitting down to write, glanced at Newman Noggs, who was staring at the wall with an intensity so remarkable, that Arthur was quite alarmed.

'Do you see anything particular, Mr Noggs?' said Arthur, trying to follow the direction of Newman's eyes - which was an impossibility, and a thing no man had ever done.

'Only a cobweb,' replied Newman.

'Oh! is that all?'

'No,' said Newman. 'There's a fly in it.'

'There are a good many cobwebs here,' observed Arthur Gride.

'So there are in our place,' returned Newman; 'and flies too.'

Newman appeared to derive great entertainment from this repartee, and to the great discomposure of Arthur Gride's nerves, produced a series of sharp cracks from his finger-joints, resembling the noise of a distant discharge of small artillery. Arthur succeeded in finishing his reply to Ralph's note, nevertheless, and at length handed it over to the eccentric messenger for delivery.

'That's it, Mr Noggs,' said Gride.

Newman gave a nod, put it in his hat, and was shuffling away, when Gride, whose doting delight knew no bounds, beckoned him back again, and said, in a shrill whisper, and with a grin which puckered up his whole face, and almost obscured his eyes:

'Will you - will you take a little drop of something - just a taste?'

In good fellowship (if Arthur Gride had been capable of it) Newman would not have drunk with him one bubble of the richest wine that was ever made; but to see what he would be at, and to punish him as much as he could, he accepted the offer immediately.

Arthur Gride, therefore, again applied himself to the press, and from a shelf laden with tall Flemish drinking-glasses, and quaint bottles: some with necks like so many storks, and others with square Dutch-built bodies and short fat apoplectic throats: took down one dusty

bottle of promising appearance, and two glasses of curiously small size.

'You never tasted this,' said Arthur. 'It's EAU-D'OR - golden water. I like it on account of its name. It's a delicious name. Water of gold, golden water! O dear me, it seems quite a sin to drink it!'

As his courage appeared to be fast failing him, and he trifled with the stopper in a manner which threatened the dismissal of the bottle to its old place, Newman took up one of the little glasses, and clinked it, twice or thrice, against the bottle, as a gentle reminder that he had not been helped yet. With a deep sigh, Arthur Gride slowly filled it - though not to the brim - and then filled his own.

'Stop, stop; don't drink it yet,' he said, laying his hand on Newman's; 'it was given to me, twenty years ago, and when I take a little taste, which is ve - ry seldom, I like to think of it beforehand, and tease myself. We'll drink a toast. Shall we drink a toast, Mr Noggs?'

'Ah!' said Newman, eyeing his little glass impatiently. 'Look sharp. Bearer waits.'

'Why, then, I'll tell you what,' tittered Arthur, 'we'll drink - he, he, he! - we'll drink a lady.'

'THE ladies?' said Newman.

'No, no, Mr Noggs,' replied Gride, arresting his hand, 'A lady. You wonder to hear me say A lady. I know you do, I know you do. Here's little Madeline. That's the toast. Mr Noggs. Little Madeline!'

'Madeline!' said Newman; inwardly adding, 'and God help her!'

The rapidity and unconcern with which Newman dismissed his portion of the golden water, had a great effect upon the old man, who sat upright in his chair, and gazed at him, open-mouthed, as if the sight had taken away his breath. Quite unmoved, however, Newman left him to sip his own at leisure, or to pour it back again into the bottle, if he chose, and departed; after greatly outraging the dignity of Peg Sliderskew by brushing past her, in the passage, without a word of apology or recognition.

Mr Gride and his housekeeper, immediately on being left alone, resolved themselves into a committee of ways and means, and discussed the arrangements which should be made for the reception of the young bride. As they were, like some other committees, extremely dull and prolix in debate, this history may pursue the footsteps of Newman Noggs; thereby combining advantage with



necessity; for it would have been necessary to do so under any circumstances, and necessity has no law, as all the world knows.

'You've been a long time,' said Ralph, when Newman returned.

'HE was a long time,' replied Newman.

'Bah!' cried Ralph impatiently. 'Give me his note, if he gave you one: his message, if he didn't. And don't go away. I want a word with you, sir.'

Newman handed in the note, and looked very virtuous and innocent while his employer broke the seal, and glanced his eye over it.

'He'll be sure to come,' muttered Ralph, as he tore it to pieces; 'why of course, I know he'll be sure to come. What need to say that? Noggs! Pray, sir, what man was that, with whom I saw you in the street last night?'

'I don't know,' replied Newman.

'You had better refresh your memory, sir,' said Ralph, with a threatening look.

'I tell you,' returned Newman boldly, 'that I don't know. He came here twice, and asked for you. You were out. He came again. You packed him off, yourself. He gave the name of Brooker.'

'I know he did,' said Ralph; 'what then?'

'What then? Why, then he lurked about and dogged me in the street. He follows me, night after night, and urges me to bring him face to face with you; as he says he has been once, and not long ago either. He wants to see you face to face, he says, and you'll soon hear him out, he warrants.'

'And what say you to that?' inquired Ralph, looking keenly at his drudge.

'That it's no business of mine, and I won't. I told him he might catch you in the street, if that was all he wanted, but no! that wouldn't do. You wouldn't hear a word there, he said. He must have you alone in a room with the door locked, where he could speak without fear, and you'd soon change your tone, and hear him patiently.'

'An audacious dog!' Ralph muttered.

'That's all I know,' said Newman. 'I say again, I don't know what man he is. I don't believe he knows himself. You have seen him; perhaps YOU do.'

'I think I do,' replied Ralph.

'Well,' retorted Newman, sulkily, 'don't expect me to know him too; that's all. You'll ask me, next, why I never told you this before. What would you say, if I was to tell you all that people say of you? What do you call me when I sometimes do? 'Brute, ass!' and snap at me like a dragon.'

This was true enough; though the question which Newman anticipated, was, in fact, upon Ralph's lips at the moment.

'He is an idle ruffian,' said Ralph; 'a vagabond from beyond the sea where he travelled for his crimes; a felon let loose to run his neck into the halter; a swindler, who has the audacity to try his schemes on me who know him well. The next time he tampers with you, hand him over to the police, for attempting to extort money by lies and threats, - d'ye hear? - and leave the rest to me. He shall cool his heels in jail a little time, and I'll be bound he looks for other folks to fleece, when he comes out. You mind what I say, do you?'

'I hear,' said Newman.

'Do it then,' returned Ralph, 'and I'll reward you. Now, you may go.'

Newman readily availed himself of the permission, and, shutting himself up in his little office, remained there, in very serious cogitation, all day. When he was released at night, he proceeded, with all the expedition he could use, to the city, and took up his old position behind the pump, to watch for Nicholas. For Newman Noggs was proud in his way, and could not bear to appear as his friend, before the brothers Cheeryble, in the shabby and degraded state to which he was reduced.

He had not occupied this position many minutes, when he was rejoiced to see Nicholas approaching, and darted out from his ambush to meet him. Nicholas, on his part, was no less pleased to encounter his friend, whom he had not seen for some time; so, their greeting was a warm one.

'I was thinking of you, at that moment,' said Nicholas.

'That's right,' rejoined Newman, 'and I of you. I couldn't help coming up, tonight. I say, I think I am going to find out something.'

'And what may that be?' returned Nicholas, smiling at this odd communication.

'I don't know what it may be, I don't know what it may not be,' said Newman; 'it's some secret in which your uncle is concerned, but what, I've not yet been able to discover, although I have my strong suspicions. I'll not hint 'em now, in case you should be disappointed.'

'I disappointed!' cried Nicholas; 'am I interested?'

'I think you are,' replied Newman. 'I have a crotchet in my head that it must be so. I have found out a man, who plainly knows more than he cares to tell at once. And he has already dropped such hints to me as puzzle me - I say, as puzzle me,' said Newman, scratching his red nose into a state of violent inflammation, and staring at Nicholas with all his might and main meanwhile.

Admiring what could have wound his friend up to such a pitch of mystery, Nicholas endeavoured, by a series of questions, to elucidate the cause; but in vain. Newman could not be drawn into any more explicit statement than a repetition of the perplexities he had already thrown out, and a confused oration, showing, How it was necessary to use the utmost caution; how the lynx-eyed Ralph had already seen him in company with his unknown correspondent; and how he had baffled the said Ralph by extreme guardedness of manner and ingenuity of speech; having prepared himself for such a contingency from the first.

Remembering his companion's propensity, - of which his nose, indeed, perpetually warned all beholders like a beacon, - Nicholas had drawn him into a sequestered tavern. Here, they fell to reviewing the origin and progress of their acquaintance, as men sometimes do, and tracing out the little events by which it was most strongly marked, came at last to Miss Cecilia Bobster.

'And that reminds me,' said Newman, 'that you never told me the young lady's real name.'

'Madeline!' said Nicholas.

'Madeline!' cried Newman. 'What Madeline? Her other name. Say her other name.'

'Bray,' said Nicholas, in great astonishment.

'It's the same!' cried Newman. 'Sad story! Can you stand idly by, and let that unnatural marriage take place without one attempt to save her?'

'What do you mean?' exclaimed Nicholas, starting up; 'marriage! are you mad?'

'Are you? Is she? Are you blind, deaf, senseless, dead?' said Newman. 'Do you know that within one day, by means of your uncle Ralph, she will be married to a man as bad as he, and worse, if worse there is? Do you know that, within one day, she will be sacrificed, as sure as you stand there alive, to a hoary wretch - a devil born and bred, and grey in devils' ways?'

'Be careful what you say,' replied Nicholas. 'For Heaven's sake be careful! I am left here alone, and those who could stretch out a hand to rescue her are far away. What is it that you mean?'

'I never heard her name,' said Newman, choking with his energy. 'Why didn't you tell me? How was I to know? We might, at least, have had some time to think!'

'What is it that you mean?' cried Nicholas.

It was not an easy task to arrive at this information; but, after a great quantity of extraordinary pantomime, which in no way assisted it, Nicholas, who was almost as wild as Newman Noggs himself, forced the latter down upon his seat and held him down until he began his tale.

Rage, astonishment, indignation, and a storm of passions, rushed through the listener's heart, as the plot was laid bare. He no sooner understood it all, than with a face of ashy paleness, and trembling in every limb, he darted from the house.

'Stop him!' cried Newman, bolting out in pursuit. 'He'll be doing something desperate; he'll murder somebody. Hallo! there, stop him. Stop thief! stop thief!'