

Chapter XLIII

Containing the further Progress of the Plot contrived by Mr Ralph Nickleby and Mr Arthur Gride

With that settled resolution, and steadiness of purpose to which extreme circumstances so often give birth, acting upon far less excitable and more sluggish temperaments than that which was the lot of Madeline Bray's admirer, Nicholas started, at dawn of day, from the restless couch which no sleep had visited on the previous night, and prepared to make that last appeal, by whose slight and fragile thread her only remaining hope of escape depended.

Although, to restless and ardent minds, morning may be the fitting season for exertion and activity, it is not always at that time that hope is strongest or the spirit most sanguine and buoyant. In trying and doubtful positions, youth, custom, a steady contemplation of the difficulties which surround us, and a familiarity with them, imperceptibly diminish our apprehensions and beget comparative indifference, if not a vague and reckless confidence in some relief, the means or nature of which we care not to foresee. But when we come, fresh, upon such things in the morning, with that dark and silent gap between us and yesterday; with every link in the brittle chain of hope, to rivet afresh; our hot enthusiasm subdued, and cool calm reason substituted in its stead; doubt and misgiving revive. As the traveller sees farthest by day, and becomes aware of rugged mountains and trackless plains which the friendly darkness had shrouded from his sight and mind together, so, the wayfarer in the toilsome path of human life sees, with each returning sun, some new obstacle to surmount, some new height to be attained. Distances stretch out before him which, last night, were scarcely taken into account, and the light which gilds all nature with its cheerful beams, seems but to shine upon the weary obstacles that yet lie strewn between him and the grave.

So thought Nicholas, when, with the impatience natural to a situation like his, he softly left the house, and, feeling as though to remain in bed were to lose most precious time, and to be up and stirring were in some way to promote the end he had in view, wandered into London; perfectly well knowing that for hours to come he could not obtain speech with Madeline, and could do nothing but wish the intervening time away.

And, even now, as he paced the streets, and listlessly looked round on the gradually increasing bustle and preparation for the day, everything appeared to yield him some new occasion for despondency. Last night, the sacrifice of a young, affectionate, and beautiful creature, to such a wretch, and in such a cause, had seemed a thing

too monstrous to succeed; and the warmer he grew, the more confident he felt that some interposition must save her from his clutches. But now, when he thought how regularly things went on, from day to day, in the same unvarying round; how youth and beauty died, and ugly griping age lived tottering on; how crafty avarice grew rich, and manly honest hearts were poor and sad; how few they were who tenanted the stately houses, and how many of those who lay in noisome pens, or rose each day and laid them down each night, and lived and died, father and son, mother and child, race upon race, and generation upon generation, without a home to shelter them or the energies of one single man directed to their aid; how, in seeking, not a luxurious and splendid life, but the bare means of a most wretched and inadequate subsistence, there were women and children in that one town, divided into classes, numbered and estimated as regularly as the noble families and folks of great degree, and reared from infancy to drive most criminal and dreadful trades; how ignorance was punished and never taught; how jail-doors gaped, and gallows loomed, for thousands urged towards them by circumstances darkly curtaining their very cradles' heads, and but for which they might have earned their honest bread and lived in peace; how many died in soul, and had no chance of life; how many who could scarcely go astray, be they vicious as they would, turned haughtily from the crushed and stricken wretch who could scarce do otherwise, and who would have been a greater wonder had he or she done well, than even they had they done ill; how much injustice, misery, and wrong, there was, and yet how the world rolled on, from year to year, alike careless and indifferent, and no man seeking to remedy or redress it; when he thought of all this, and selected from the mass the one slight case on which his thoughts were bent, he felt, indeed, that there was little ground for hope, and little reason why it should not form an atom in the huge aggregate of distress and sorrow, and add one small and unimportant unit to swell the great amount.

But youth is not prone to contemplate the darkest side of a picture it can shift at will. By dint of reflecting on what he had to do, and reviving the train of thought which night had interrupted, Nicholas gradually summoned up his utmost energy, and when the morning was sufficiently advanced for his purpose, had no thought but that of using it to the best advantage. A hasty breakfast taken, and such affairs of business as required prompt attention disposed of, he directed his steps to the residence of Madeline Bray: whither he lost no time in arriving.

It had occurred to him that, very possibly, the young lady might be denied, although to him she never had been; and he was still pondering upon the surest method of obtaining access to her in that case, when, coming to the door of the house, he found it had been left ajar - probably by the last person who had gone out. The occasion was

not one upon which to observe the nicest ceremony; therefore, availing himself of this advantage, Nicholas walked gently upstairs and knocked at the door of the room into which he had been accustomed to be shown. Receiving permission to enter, from some person on the other side, he opened the door and walked in.

Bray and his daughter were sitting there alone. It was nearly three weeks since he had seen her last, but there was a change in the lovely girl before him which told Nicholas, in startling terms, how much mental suffering had been compressed into that short time. There are no words which can express, nothing with which can be compared, the perfect pallor, the clear transparent whiteness, of the beautiful face which turned towards him when he entered. Her hair was a rich deep brown, but shading that face, and straying upon a neck that rivalled it in whiteness, it seemed by the strong contrast raven black. Something of wildness and restlessness there was in the dark eye, but there was the same patient look, the same expression of gentle mournfulness which he well remembered, and no trace of a single tear. Most beautiful - more beautiful, perhaps, than ever - there was something in her face which quite unmanned him, and appeared far more touching than the wildest agony of grief. It was not merely calm and composed, but fixed and rigid, as though the violent effort which had summoned that composure beneath her father's eye, while it mastered all other thoughts, had prevented even the momentary expression they had communicated to the features from subsiding, and had fastened it there, as an evidence of its triumph.

The father sat opposite to her; not looking directly in her face, but glancing at her, as he talked with a gay air which ill disguised the anxiety of his thoughts. The drawing materials were not on their accustomed table, nor were any of the other tokens of her usual occupations to be seen. The little vases which Nicholas had always seen filled with fresh flowers were empty, or supplied only with a few withered stalks and leaves. The bird was silent. The cloth that covered his cage at night was not removed. His mistress had forgotten him.

There are times when, the mind being painfully alive to receive impressions, a great deal may be noted at a glance. This was one, for Nicholas had but glanced round him when he was recognised by Mr Bray, who said impatiently:

'Now, sir, what do you want? Name your errand here, quickly, if you please, for my daughter and I are busily engaged with other and more important matters than those you come about. Come, sir, address yourself to your business at once.'

Nicholas could very well discern that the irritability and impatience of this speech were assumed, and that Bray, in his heart, was rejoiced at

any interruption which promised to engage the attention of his daughter. He bent his eyes involuntarily upon the father as he spoke, and marked his uneasiness; for he coloured and turned his head away.

The device, however, so far as it was a device for causing Madeline to interfere, was successful. She rose, and advancing towards Nicholas paused half-way, and stretched out her hand as expecting a letter.

'Madeline,' said her father impatiently, 'my love, what are you doing?'

'Miss Bray expects an inclosure perhaps,' said Nicholas, speaking very distinctly, and with an emphasis she could scarcely misunderstand. 'My employer is absent from England, or I should have brought a letter with me. I hope she will give me time - a little time. I ask a very little time.'

'If that is all you come about, sir,' said Mr Bray, 'you may make yourself easy on that head. Madeline, my dear, I didn't know this person was in your debt?'

'A - a trifle, I believe,' returned Madeline, faintly.

'I suppose you think now,' said Bray, wheeling his chair round and confronting Nicholas, 'that, but for such pitiful sums as you bring here, because my daughter has chosen to employ her time as she has, we should starve?'

'I have not thought about it,' returned Nicholas.

'You have not thought about it!' sneered the invalid. 'You know you HAVE thought about it, and have thought that, and think so every time you come here. Do you suppose, young man, that I don't know what little purse-proud tradesmen are, when, through some fortunate circumstances, they get the upper hand for a brief day - or think they get the upper hand - of a gentleman?'

'My business,' said Nicholas respectfully, 'is with a lady.'

'With a gentleman's daughter, sir,' returned the sick man, 'and the pettifogging spirit is the same. But perhaps you bring ORDERS, eh? Have you any fresh ORDERS for my daughter, sir?'

Nicholas understood the tone of triumph in which this interrogatory was put; but remembering the necessity of supporting his assumed character, produced a scrap of paper purporting to contain a list of some subjects for drawings which his employer desired to have

executed; and with which he had prepared himself in case of any such contingency.

'Oh!' said Mr Bray. 'These are the orders, are they?'

'Since you insist upon the term, sir, yes,' replied Nicholas.

'Then you may tell your master,' said Bray, tossing the paper back again, with an exulting smile, 'that my daughter, Miss Madeline Bray, condescends to employ herself no longer in such labours as these; that she is not at his beck and call, as he supposes her to be; that we don't live upon his money, as he flatters himself we do; that he may give whatever he owes us, to the first beggar that passes his shop, or add it to his own profits next time he calculates them; and that he may go to the devil for me. That's my acknowledgment of his orders, sir!'

'And this is the independence of a man who sells his daughter as he has sold that weeping girl!' thought Nicholas.

The father was too much absorbed with his own exultation to mark the look of scorn which, for an instant, Nicholas could not have suppressed had he been upon the rack. 'There,' he continued, after a short silence, 'you have your message and can retire - unless you have any further - ha! - any further orders.'

'I have none,' said Nicholas; 'nor, in the consideration of the station you once held, have I used that or any other word which, however harmless in itself, could be supposed to imply authority on my part or dependence on yours. I have no orders, but I have fears - fears that I will express, chafe as you may - fears that you may be consigning that young lady to something worse than supporting you by the labour of her hands, had she worked herself dead. These are my fears, and these fears I found upon your own demeanour. Your conscience will tell you, sir, whether I construe it well or not.'

'For Heaven's sake!' cried Madeline, interposing in alarm between them. 'Remember, sir, he is ill.'

'Ill!' cried the invalid, gasping and catching for breath. 'Ill! Ill! I am bearded and bullied by a shop-boy, and she beseeches him to pity me and remember I am ill!'

He fell into a paroxysm of his disorder, so violent that for a few moments Nicholas was alarmed for his life; but finding that he began to recover, he withdrew, after signifying by a gesture to the young lady that he had something important to communicate, and would wait for her outside the room. He could hear that the sick man came

gradually, but slowly, to himself, and that without any reference to what had just occurred, as though he had no distinct recollection of it as yet, he requested to be left alone.

'Oh!' thought Nicholas, 'that this slender chance might not be lost, and that I might prevail, if it were but for one week's time and reconsideration!'

'You are charged with some commission to me, sir,' said Madeline, presenting herself in great agitation. 'Do not press it now, I beg and pray you. The day after tomorrow; come here then.'

'It will be too late - too late for what I have to say,' rejoined Nicholas, 'and you will not be here. Oh, madam, if you have but one thought of him who sent me here, but one last lingering care for your own peace of mind and heart, I do for God's sake urge you to give me a hearing.'

She attempted to pass him, but Nicholas gently detained her.

'A hearing,' said Nicholas. 'I ask you but to hear me: not me alone, but him for whom I speak, who is far away and does not know your danger. In the name of Heaven hear me!'

The poor attendant, with her eyes swollen and red with weeping, stood by; and to her Nicholas appealed in such passionate terms that she opened a side-door, and, supporting her mistress into an adjoining room, beckoned Nicholas to follow them.

'Leave me, sir, pray,' said the young lady.

'I cannot, will not leave you thus,' returned Nicholas. 'I have a duty to discharge; and, either here, or in the room from which we have just now come, at whatever risk or hazard to Mr Bray, I must beseech you to contemplate again the fearful course to which you have been impelled.'

'What course is this you speak of, and impelled by whom, sir?' demanded the young lady, with an effort to speak proudly.

'I speak of this marriage,' returned Nicholas, 'of this marriage, fixed for tomorrow, by one who never faltered in a bad purpose, or lent his aid to any good design; of this marriage, the history of which is known to me, better, far better, than it is to you. I know what web is wound about you. I know what men they are from whom these schemes have come. You are betrayed and sold for money; for gold, whose every coin is rusted with tears, if not red with the blood of ruined men, who have fallen desperately by their own mad hands.'

'You say you have a duty to discharge,' said Madeline, 'and so have I. And with the help of Heaven I will perform it.'

'Say rather with the help of devils,' replied Nicholas, 'with the help of men, one of them your destined husband, who are - '

'I must not hear this,' cried the young lady, striving to repress a shudder, occasioned, as it seemed, even by this slight allusion to Arthur Gride. 'This evil, if evil it be, has been of my own seeking. I am impelled to this course by no one, but follow it of my own free will. You see I am not constrained or forced. Report this,' said Madeline, 'to my dear friend and benefactor, and, taking with you my prayers and thanks for him and for yourself, leave me for ever!'

'Not until I have besought you, with all the earnestness and fervour by which I am animated,' cried Nicholas, 'to postpone this marriage for one short week. Not until I have besought you to think more deeply than you can have done, influenced as you are, upon the step you are about to take. Although you cannot be fully conscious of the villainy of this man to whom you are about to give your hand, some of his deeds you know. You have heard him speak, and have looked upon his face. Reflect, reflect, before it is too late, on the mockery of plighting to him at the altar, faith in which your heart can have no share - of uttering solemn words, against which nature and reason must rebel - of the degradation of yourself in your own esteem, which must ensue, and must be aggravated every day, as his detested character opens upon you more and more. Shrink from the loathsome companionship of this wretch as you would from corruption and disease. Suffer toil and labour if you will, but shun him, shun him, and be happy. For, believe me, I speak the truth; the most abject poverty, the most wretched condition of human life, with a pure and upright mind, would be happiness to that which you must undergo as the wife of such a man as this!'

Long before Nicholas ceased to speak, the young lady buried her face in her hands, and gave her tears free way. In a voice at first inarticulate with emotion, but gradually recovering strength as she proceeded, she answered him:

'I will not disguise from you, sir - though perhaps I ought - that I have undergone great pain of mind, and have been nearly broken-hearted since I saw you last. I do NOT love this gentleman. The difference between our ages, tastes, and habits, forbids it. This he knows, and knowing, still offers me his hand. By accepting it, and by that step alone, I can release my father who is dying in this place; prolong his life, perhaps, for many years; restore him to comfort - I may almost call it affluence; and relieve a generous man from the burden of assisting one, by whom, I grieve to say, his noble heart is little

understood. Do not think so poorly of me as to believe that I feign a love I do not feel. Do not report so ill of me, for THAT I could not bear. If I cannot, in reason or in nature, love the man who pays this price for my poor hand, I can discharge the duties of a wife: I can be all he seeks in me, and will. He is content to take me as I am. I have passed my word, and should rejoice, not weep, that it is so. I do. The interest you take in one so friendless and forlorn as I, the delicacy with which you have discharged your trust, the faith you have kept with me, have my warmest thanks: and, while I make this last feeble acknowledgment, move me to tears, as you see. But I do not repent, nor am I unhappy. I am happy in the prospect of all I can achieve so easily. I shall be more so when I look back upon it, and all is done, I know.'

'Your tears fall faster as you talk of happiness,' said Nicholas, 'and you shun the contemplation of that dark future which must be laden with so much misery to you. Defer this marriage for a week. For but one week!'

'He was talking, when you came upon us just now, with such smiles as I remember to have seen of old, and have not seen for many and many a day, of the freedom that was to come tomorrow,' said Madeline, with momentary firmness, 'of the welcome change, the fresh air: all the new scenes and objects that would bring fresh life to his exhausted frame. His eye grew bright, and his face lightened at the thought. I will not defer it for an hour.'

'These are but tricks and wiles to urge you on,' cried Nicholas.

'I'll hear no more,' said Madeline, hurriedly; 'I have heard too much - more than I should - already. What I have said to you, sir, I have said as to that dear friend to whom I trust in you honourably to repeat it. Some time hence, when I am more composed and reconciled to my new mode of life, if I should live so long, I will write to him. Meantime, all holy angels shower blessings on his head, and prosper and preserve him.'

She was hurrying past Nicholas, when he threw himself before her, and implored her to think, but once again, upon the fate to which she was precipitately hastening.

'There is no retreat,' said Nicholas, in an agony of supplication; 'no withdrawing! All regret will be unavailing, and deep and bitter it must be. What can I say, that will induce you to pause at this last moment? What can I do to save you?'

'Nothing,' she incoherently replied. 'This is the hardest trial I have had. Have mercy on me, sir, I beseech, and do not pierce my heart

with such appeals as these. I - I hear him calling. I - I - must not, will not, remain here for another instant.'

'If this were a plot,' said Nicholas, with the same violent rapidity with which she spoke, 'a plot, not yet laid bare by me, but which, with time, I might unravel; if you were (not knowing it) entitled to fortune of your own, which, being recovered, would do all that this marriage can accomplish, would you not retract?'

'No, no, no! It is impossible; it is a child's tale. Time would bring his death. He is calling again!'

'It may be the last time we shall ever meet on earth,' said Nicholas, 'it may be better for me that we should never meet more.'

'For both, for both,' replied Madeline, not heeding what she said. 'The time will come when to recall the memory of this one interview might drive me mad. Be sure to tell them, that you left me calm and happy. And God be with you, sir, and my grateful heart and blessing!'

She was gone. Nicholas, staggering from the house, thought of the hurried scene which had just closed upon him, as if it were the phantom of some wild, unquiet dream. The day wore on; at night, having been enabled in some measure to collect his thoughts, he issued forth again.

That night, being the last of Arthur Gride's bachelorship, found him in tiptop spirits and great glee. The bottle-green suit had been brushed, ready for the morrow. Peg Sliderskew had rendered the accounts of her past housekeeping; the eighteen-pence had been rigidly accounted for (she was never trusted with a larger sum at once, and the accounts were not usually balanced more than twice a day); every preparation had been made for the coming festival; and Arthur might have sat down and contemplated his approaching happiness, but that he preferred sitting down and contemplating the entries in a dirty old vellum-book with rusty clasps.

'Well-a-day!' he chuckled, as sinking on his knees before a strong chest screwed down to the floor, he thrust in his arm nearly up to the shoulder, and slowly drew forth this greasy volume. 'Well-a-day now, this is all my library, but it's one of the most entertaining books that were ever written! It's a delightful book, and all true and real - that's the best of it - true as the Bank of England, and real as its gold and silver. Written by Arthur Gride. He, he, he! None of your storybook writers will ever make as good a book as this, I warrant me. It's composed for private circulation, for my own particular reading, and nobody else's. He, he, he!'

Muttering this soliloquy, Arthur carried his precious volume to the table, and, adjusting it upon a dusty desk, put on his spectacles, and began to pore among the leaves.

'It's a large sum to Mr Nickleby,' he said, in a dolorous voice. 'Debt to be paid in full, nine hundred and seventy-five, four, three. Additional sum as per bond, five hundred pound. One thousand, four hundred and seventy-five pounds, four shillings, and threepence, tomorrow at twelve o'clock. On the other side, though, there's the PER CONTRA, by means of this pretty chick. But, again, there's the question whether I mightn't have brought all this about, myself. 'Faint heart never won fair lady.' Why was my heart so faint? Why didn't I boldly open it to Bray myself, and save one thousand four hundred and seventy-five, four, three?'

These reflections depressed the old usurer so much, as to wring a feeble groan or two from his breast, and cause him to declare, with uplifted hands, that he would die in a workhouse. Remembering on further cogitation, however, that under any circumstances he must have paid, or handsomely compounded for, Ralph's debt, and being by no means confident that he would have succeeded had he undertaken his enterprise alone, he regained his equanimity, and chattered and mowed over more satisfactory items, until the entrance of Peg Sliderskew interrupted him.

'Aha, Peg!' said Arthur, 'what is it? What is it now, Peg?'

'It's the fowl,' replied Peg, holding up a plate containing a little, a very little one. Quite a phenomenon of a fowl. So very small and skinny.

'A beautiful bird!' said Arthur, after inquiring the price, and finding it proportionate to the size. 'With a rasher of ham, and an egg made into sauce, and potatoes, and greens, and an apple pudding, Peg, and a little bit of cheese, we shall have a dinner for an emperor. There'll only be she and me - and you, Peg, when we've done.'

'Don't you complain of the expense afterwards,' said Mrs Sliderskew, sulkily.

'I am afraid we must live expensively for the first week,' returned Arthur, with a groan, 'and then we must make up for it. I won't eat more than I can help, and I know you love your old master too much to eat more than YOU can help, don't you, Peg?'

'Don't I what?' said Peg.

'Love your old master too much - '

'No, not a bit too much,' said Peg.

'Oh, dear, I wish the devil had this woman!' cried Arthur: 'love him too much to eat more than you can help at his expense.'

'At his what?' said Peg.

'Oh dear! she can never hear the most important word, and hears all the others!' whined Gride. 'At his expense - you catamaran!'

The last-mentioned tribute to the charms of Mrs Sliderskew being uttered in a whisper, that lady assented to the general proposition by a harsh growl, which was accompanied by a ring at the street-door.

'There's the bell,' said Arthur.

'Ay, ay; I know that,' rejoined Peg.

'Then why don't you go?' bawled Arthur.

'Go where?' retorted Peg. 'I ain't doing any harm here, am I?'

Arthur Gride in reply repeated the word 'bell' as loud as he could roar; and, his meaning being rendered further intelligible to Mrs Sliderskew's dull sense of hearing by pantomime expressive of ringing at a street-door, Peg hobbled out, after sharply demanding why he hadn't said there was a ring before, instead of talking about all manner of things that had nothing to do with it, and keeping her half-pint of beer waiting on the steps.

'There's a change come over you, Mrs Peg,' said Arthur, following her out with his eyes. 'What it means I don't quite know; but, if it lasts, we shan't agree together long I see. You are turning crazy, I think. If you are, you must take yourself off, Mrs Peg - or be taken off. All's one to me.' Turning over the leaves of his book as he muttered this, he soon lighted upon something which attracted his attention, and forgot Peg Sliderskew and everything else in the engrossing interest of its pages.

The room had no other light than that which it derived from a dim and dirt-clogged lamp, whose lazy wick, being still further obscured by a dark shade, cast its feeble rays over a very little space, and left all beyond in heavy shadow. This lamp the money-lender had drawn so close to him, that there was only room between it and himself for the book over which he bent; and as he sat, with his elbows on the desk, and his sharp cheek-bones resting on his hands, it only served to bring out his ugly features in strong relief, together with the little table at which he sat, and to shroud all the rest of the chamber in a deep sullen gloom. Raising his eyes, and looking vacantly into this gloom as

he made some mental calculation, Arthur Gride suddenly met the fixed gaze of a man.

'Thieves! thieves!' shrieked the usurer, starting up and folding his book to his breast. 'Robbers! Murder!'

'What is the matter?' said the form, advancing.

'Keep off!' cried the trembling wretch. 'Is it a man or a - a - '

'For what do you take me, if not for a man?' was the inquiry.

'Yes, yes,' cried Arthur Gride, shading his eyes with his hand, 'it is a man, and not a spirit. It is a man. Robbers! robbers!'

'For what are these cries raised? Unless indeed you know me, and have some purpose in your brain?' said the stranger, coming close up to him. 'I am no thief.'

'What then, and how come you here?' cried Gride, somewhat reassured, but still retreating from his visitor: 'what is your name, and what do you want?'

'My name you need not know,' was the reply. 'I came here, because I was shown the way by your servant. I have addressed you twice or thrice, but you were too profoundly engaged with your book to hear me, and I have been silently waiting until you should be less abstracted. What I want I will tell you, when you can summon up courage enough to hear and understand me.'

Arthur Gride, venturing to regard his visitor more attentively, and perceiving that he was a young man of good mien and bearing, returned to his seat, and muttering that there were bad characters about, and that this, with former attempts upon his house, had made him nervous, requested his visitor to sit down. This, however, he declined.

'Good God! I don't stand up to have you at an advantage,' said Nicholas (for Nicholas it was), as he observed a gesture of alarm on the part of Gride. 'Listen to me. You are to be married tomorrow morning.'

'N - n - no,' rejoined Gride. 'Who said I was? How do you know that?'

'No matter how,' replied Nicholas, 'I know it. The young lady who is to give you her hand hates and despises you. Her blood runs cold at the mention of your name; the vulture and the lamb, the rat and the dove, could not be worse matched than you and she. You see I know her.'

Gride looked at him as if he were petrified with astonishment, but did not speak; perhaps lacking the power.

'You and another man, Ralph Nickleby by name, have hatched this plot between you,' pursued Nicholas. 'You pay him for his share in bringing about this sale of Madeline Bray. You do. A lie is trembling on your lips, I see.'

He paused; but, Arthur making no reply, resumed again.

'You pay yourself by defrauding her. How or by what means - for I scorn to sully her cause by falsehood or deceit - I do not know; at present I do not know, but I am not alone or single-handed in this business. If the energy of man can compass the discovery of your fraud and treachery before your death; if wealth, revenge, and just hatred, can hunt and track you through your windings; you will yet be called to a dear account for this. We are on the scent already; judge you, who know what we do not, when we shall have you down!'

He paused again, and still Arthur Gride glared upon him in silence.

'If you were a man to whom I could appeal with any hope of touching his compassion or humanity,' said Nicholas, 'I would urge upon you to remember the helplessness, the innocence, the youth, of this lady; her worth and beauty, her filial excellence, and last, and more than all, as concerning you more nearly, the appeal she has made to your mercy and your manly feeling. But, I take the only ground that can be taken with men like you, and ask what money will buy you off. Remember the danger to which you are exposed. You see I know enough to know much more with very little help. Bate some expected gain for the risk you save, and say what is your price.'

Old Arthur Gride moved his lips, but they only formed an ugly smile and were motionless again.

'You think,' said Nicholas, 'that the price would not be paid. Miss Bray has wealthy friends who would coin their very hearts to save her in such a strait as this. Name your price, defer these nuptials for but a few days, and see whether those I speak of, shrink from the payment. Do you hear me?'

When Nicholas began, Arthur Gride's impression was, that Ralph Nickleby had betrayed him; but, as he proceeded, he felt convinced that however he had come by the knowledge he possessed, the part he acted was a genuine one, and that with Ralph he had no concern. All he seemed to know, for certain, was, that he, Gride, paid Ralph's debt; but that, to anybody who knew the circumstances of Bray's detention - even to Bray himself, on Ralph's own statement - must be perfectly

notorious. As to the fraud on Madeline herself, his visitor knew so little about its nature or extent, that it might be a lucky guess, or a hap-hazard accusation. Whether or no, he had clearly no key to the mystery, and could not hurt him who kept it close within his own breast. The allusion to friends, and the offer of money, Gride held to be mere empty vapouring, for purposes of delay. 'And even if money were to be had,' thought Arthur Gride, as he glanced at Nicholas, and trembled with passion at his boldness and audacity, 'I'd have that dainty chick for my wife, and cheat YOU of her, young smooth-face!'

Long habit of weighing and noting well what clients said, and nicely balancing chances in his mind and calculating odds to their faces, without the least appearance of being so engaged, had rendered Gride quick in forming conclusions, and arriving, from puzzling, intricate, and often contradictory premises, at very cunning deductions. Hence it was that, as Nicholas went on, he followed him closely with his own constructions, and, when he ceased to speak, was as well prepared as if he had deliberated for a fortnight.

'I hear you,' he cried, starting from his seat, casting back the fastenings of the window-shutters, and throwing up the sash. 'Help here! Help! Help!'

'What are you doing?' said Nicholas, seizing him by the arm.

'I'll cry robbers, thieves, murder, alarm the neighbourhood, struggle with you, let loose some blood, and swear you came to rob me, if you don't quit my house,' replied Gride, drawing in his head with a frightful grin, 'I will!'

'Wretch!' cried Nicholas.

'YOU'LL bring your threats here, will you?' said Gride, whom jealousy of Nicholas and a sense of his own triumph had converted into a perfect fiend. 'You, the disappointed lover? Oh dear! He! he! he! But you shan't have her, nor she you. She's my wife, my doting little wife. Do you think she'll miss you? Do you think she'll weep? I shall like to see her weep, I shan't mind it. She looks prettier in tears.'

'Villain!' said Nicholas, choking with his rage.

'One minute more,' cried Arthur Gride, 'and I'll rouse the street with such screams, as, if they were raised by anybody else, should wake me even in the arms of pretty Madeline.'

'You hound!' said Nicholas. 'If you were but a younger man - '

'Oh yes!' sneered Arthur Gride, 'If I was but a younger man it wouldn't be so bad; but for me, so old and ugly! To be jilted by little Madeline for me!'

'Hear me,' said Nicholas, 'and be thankful I have enough command over myself not to fling you into the street, which no aid could prevent my doing if I once grappled with you. I have been no lover of this lady's. No contract or engagement, no word of love, has ever passed between us. She does not even know my name.'

'I'll ask it for all that. I'll beg it of her with kisses,' said Arthur Gride. 'Yes, and she'll tell me, and pay them back, and we'll laugh together, and hug ourselves, and be very merry, when we think of the poor youth that wanted to have her, but couldn't because she was bespoke by me!'

This taunt brought such an expression into the face of Nicholas, that Arthur Gride plainly apprehended it to be the forerunner of his putting his threat of throwing him into the street in immediate execution; for he thrust his head out of the window, and holding tight on with both hands, raised a pretty brisk alarm. Not thinking it necessary to abide the issue of the noise, Nicholas gave vent to an indignant defiance, and stalked from the room and from the house. Arthur Gride watched him across the street, and then, drawing in his head, fastened the window as before, and sat down to take breath.

'If she ever turns pettish or ill-humoured, I'll taunt her with that spark,' he said, when he had recovered. 'She'll little think I know about him; and, if I manage it well, I can break her spirit by this means and have her under my thumb. I'm glad nobody came. I didn't call too loud. The audacity to enter my house, and open upon me! But I shall have a very good triumph tomorrow, and he'll be gnawing his fingers off: perhaps drown himself or cut his throat! I shouldn't wonder! That would make it quite complete, that would: quite.'

When he had become restored to his usual condition by these and other comments on his approaching triumph, Arthur Gride put away his book, and, having locked the chest with great caution, descended into the kitchen to warn Peg Sliderskew to bed, and scold her for having afforded such ready admission to a stranger.

The unconscious Peg, however, not being able to comprehend the offence of which she had been guilty, he summoned her to hold the light, while he made a tour of the fastenings, and secured the street-door with his own hands.

'Top bolt,' muttered Arthur, fastening as he spoke, 'bottom bolt, chain, bar, double lock, and key out to put under my pillow! So, if any more

rejected admirers come, they may come through the keyhole. And now I'll go to sleep till half-past five, when I must get up to be married, Peg!

With that, he jocularly tapped Mrs Sliderskew under the chin, and appeared, for the moment, inclined to celebrate the close of his bachelor days by imprinting a kiss on her shrivelled lips. Thinking better of it, however, he gave her chin another tap, in lieu of that warmer familiarity, and stole away to bed.