

Chapter LIV

The Crisis of the Project and its Result

There are not many men who lie abed too late, or oversleep themselves, on their wedding morning. A legend there is of somebody remarkable for absence of mind, who opened his eyes upon the day which was to give him a young wife, and forgetting all about the matter, rated his servants for providing him with such fine clothes as had been prepared for the festival. There is also a legend of a young gentleman, who, not having before his eyes the fear of the canons of the church for such cases made and provided, conceived a passion for his grandmother. Both cases are of a singular and special kind and it is very doubtful whether either can be considered as a precedent likely to be extensively followed by succeeding generations.

Arthur Gride had enrobed himself in his marriage garments of bottle-green, a full hour before Mrs Sliderskew, shaking off her more heavy slumbers, knocked at his chamber door; and he had hobbled downstairs in full array and smacked his lips over a scanty taste of his favourite cordial, ere that delicate piece of antiquity enlightened the kitchen with her presence.

'Faugh!' said Peg, grubbing, in the discharge of her domestic functions, among a scanty heap of ashes in the rusty grate. 'Wedding indeed! A precious wedding! He wants somebody better than his old Peg to take care of him, does he? And what has he said to me, many and many a time, to keep me content with short food, small wages, and little fire? 'My will, Peg! my will!' says he: 'I'm a bachelor - no friends - no relations, Peg.' Lies! And now he's to bring home a new mistress, a baby-faced chit of a girl! If he wanted a wife, the fool, why couldn't he have one suitable to his age, and that knew his ways? She won't come in MY way, he says. No, that she won't, but you little think why, Arthur boy!'

While Mrs Sliderskew, influenced possibly by some lingering feelings of disappointment and personal slight, occasioned by her old master's preference for another, was giving loose to these grumblings below stairs, Arthur Gride was cogitating in the parlour upon what had taken place last night.

'I can't think how he can have picked up what he knows,' said Arthur, 'unless I have committed myself - let something drop at Bray's, for instance - which has been overheard. Perhaps I may. I shouldn't be surprised if that was it. Mr Nickleby was often angry at my talking to him before we got outside the door. I mustn't tell him that part of the business, or he'll put me out of sorts, and make me nervous for the day.'

Ralph was universally looked up to, and recognised among his fellows as a superior genius, but upon Arthur Gride his stern unyielding character and consummate art had made so deep an impression, that he was actually afraid of him. Cringing and cowardly to the core by nature, Arthur Gride humbled himself in the dust before Ralph Nickleby, and, even when they had not this stake in common, would have licked his shoes and crawled upon the ground before him rather than venture to return him word for word, or retort upon him in any other spirit than one of the most slavish and abject sycophancy.

To Ralph Nickleby's, Arthur Gride now betook himself according to appointment; and to Ralph Nickleby he related how, last night, some young blustering blade, whom he had never seen, forced his way into his house, and tried to frighten him from the proposed nuptials. Told, in short, what Nicholas had said and done, with the slight reservation upon which he had determined.

'Well, and what then?' said Ralph.

'Oh! nothing more,' rejoined Gride.

'He tried to frighten you,' said Ralph, 'and you WERE frightened I suppose; is that it?'

'I frightened HIM by crying thieves and murder,' replied Gride. 'Once I was in earnest, I tell you that, for I had more than half a mind to swear he uttered threats, and demanded my life or my money.'

'Oho!' said Ralph, eyeing him askew. 'Jealous too!'

'Dear now, see that!' cried Arthur, rubbing his hands and affecting to laugh.

'Why do you make those grimaces, man?' said Ralph; 'you ARE jealous - and with good cause I think.'

'No, no, no; not with good cause, hey? You don't think with good cause, do you?' cried Arthur, faltering. 'Do you though, hey?'

'Why, how stands the fact?' returned Ralph. 'Here is an old man about to be forced in marriage upon a girl; and to this old man there comes a handsome young fellow - you said he was handsome, didn't you?'

'No!' snarled Arthur Gride. 'Oh!' rejoined Ralph, 'I thought you did. Well! Handsome or not handsome, to this old man there comes a young fellow who casts all manner of fierce defiances in his teeth - gums I should rather say - and tells him in plain terms that his mistress hates him. What does he do that for? Philanthropy's sake?'

'Not for love of the lady,' replied Gride, 'for he said that no word of love - his very words - had ever passed between 'em.'

'He said!' repeated Ralph, contemptuously. 'But I like him for one thing, and that is, his giving you this fair warning to keep your - what is it? - Tit-tit or dainty chick - which? - under lock and key. Be careful, Gride, be careful. It's a triumph, too, to tear her away from a gallant young rival: a great triumph for an old man! It only remains to keep her safe when you have her - that's all.'

'What a man it is!' cried Arthur Gride, affecting, in the extremity of his torture, to be highly amused. And then he added, anxiously, 'Yes; to keep her safe, that's all. And that isn't much, is it?'

'Much!' said Ralph, with a sneer. 'Why, everybody knows what easy things to understand and to control, women are. But come, it's very nearly time for you to be made happy. You'll pay the bond now, I suppose, to save us trouble afterwards.'

'Oh what a man you are!' croaked Arthur.

'Why not?' said Ralph. 'Nobody will pay you interest for the money, I suppose, between this and twelve o'clock; will they?'

'But nobody would pay you interest for it either, you know,' returned Arthur, leering at Ralph with all the cunning and slyness he could throw into his face.

'Besides which,' said Ralph, suffering his lip to curl into a smile, 'you haven't the money about you, and you weren't prepared for this, or you'd have brought it with you; and there's nobody you'd so much like to accommodate as me. I see. We trust each other in about an equal degree. Are you ready?'

Gride, who had done nothing but grin, and nod, and chatter, during this last speech of Ralph's, answered in the affirmative; and, producing from his hat a couple of large white favours, pinned one on his breast, and with considerable difficulty induced his friend to do the like. Thus accoutred, they got into a hired coach which Ralph had in waiting, and drove to the residence of the fair and most wretched bride.

Gride, whose spirits and courage had gradually failed him more and more as they approached nearer and nearer to the house, was utterly dismayed and cowed by the mournful silence which pervaded it. The face of the poor servant girl, the only person they saw, was disfigured with tears and want of sleep. There was nobody to receive or welcome

them; and they stole upstairs into the usual sitting-room, more like two burglars than the bridegroom and his friend.

'One would think,' said Ralph, speaking, in spite of himself, in a low and subdued voice, 'that there was a funeral going on here, and not a wedding.'

'He, he!' tittered his friend, 'you are so - so very funny!'

'I need be,' remarked Ralph, drily, 'for this is rather dull and chilling. Look a little brisker, man, and not so hangdog like!'

'Yes, yes, I will,' said Gride. 'But - but - you don't think she's coming just yet, do you?'

'Why, I suppose she'll not come till she is obliged,' returned Ralph, looking at his watch, 'and she has a good half-hour to spare yet. Curb your impatience.'

'I - I - am not impatient,' stammered Arthur. 'I wouldn't be hard with her for the world. Oh dear, dear, not on any account. Let her take her time - her own time. Her time shall be ours by all means.'

While Ralph bent upon his trembling friend a keen look, which showed that he perfectly understood the reason of this great consideration and regard, a footstep was heard upon the stairs, and Bray himself came into the room on tiptoe, and holding up his hand with a cautious gesture, as if there were some sick person near, who must not be disturbed.

'Hush!' he said, in a low voice. 'She was very ill last night. I thought she would have broken her heart. She is dressed, and crying bitterly in her own room; but she's better, and quite quiet. That's everything!'

'She is ready, is she?' said Ralph.

'Quite ready,' returned the father.

'And not likely to delay us by any young-lady weaknesses - fainting, or so forth?' said Ralph.

'She may be safely trusted now,' returned Bray. 'I have been talking to her this morning. Here! Come a little this way.'

He drew Ralph Nickleby to the further end of the room, and pointed towards Gride, who sat huddled together in a corner, fumbling nervously with the buttons of his coat, and exhibiting a face, of which

every skulking and base expression was sharpened and aggravated to the utmost by his anxiety and trepidation.

'Look at that man,' whispered Bray, emphatically. 'This seems a cruel thing, after all.'

'What seems a cruel thing?' inquired Ralph, with as much stolidity of face, as if he really were in utter ignorance of the other's meaning.

'This marriage,' answered Bray. 'Don't ask me what. You know as well as I do.'

Ralph shrugged his shoulders, in silent deprecation of Bray's impatience, and elevated his eyebrows, and pursed his lips, as men do when they are prepared with a sufficient answer to some remark, but wait for a more favourable opportunity of advancing it, or think it scarcely worth while to answer their adversary at all.

'Look at him. Does it not seem cruel?' said Bray.

'No!' replied Ralph, boldly.

'I say it does,' retorted Bray, with a show of much irritation. 'It is a cruel thing, by all that's bad and treacherous!'

When men are about to commit, or to sanction the commission of some injustice, it is not uncommon for them to express pity for the object either of that or some parallel proceeding, and to feel themselves, at the time, quite virtuous and moral, and immensely superior to those who express no pity at all. This is a kind of upholding of faith above works, and is very comfortable. To do Ralph Nickleby justice, he seldom practised this sort of dissimulation; but he understood those who did, and therefore suffered Bray to say, again and again, with great vehemence, that they were jointly doing a very cruel thing, before he again offered to interpose a word.

'You see what a dry, shrivelled, withered old chip it is,' returned Ralph, when the other was at length silent. 'If he were younger, it might be cruel, but as it is - harkee, Mr Bray, he'll die soon, and leave her a rich young widow! Miss Madeline consults your tastes this time; let her consult her own next.'

'True, true,' said Bray, biting his nails, and plainly very ill at ease. 'I couldn't do anything better for her than advise her to accept these proposals, could I? Now, I ask you, Nickleby, as a man of the world; could I?'

'Surely not,' answered Ralph. 'I tell you what, sir; there are a hundred fathers, within a circuit of five miles from this place; well off; good, rich, substantial men; who would gladly give their daughters, and their own ears with them, to that very man yonder, ape and mummy as he looks.'

'So there are!' exclaimed Bray, eagerly catching at anything which seemed a justification of himself. 'And so I told her, both last night and today.'

'You told her truth,' said Ralph, 'and did well to do so; though I must say, at the same time, that if I had a daughter, and my freedom, pleasure, nay, my very health and life, depended on her taking a husband whom I pointed out, I should hope it would not be necessary to advance any other arguments to induce her to consent to my wishes.'

Bray looked at Ralph as if to see whether he spoke in earnest, and having nodded twice or thrice in unqualified assent to what had fallen from him, said:

'I must go upstairs for a few minutes, to finish dressing. When I come down, I'll bring Madeline with me. Do you know, I had a very strange dream last night, which I have not remembered till this instant. I dreamt that it was this morning, and you and I had been talking as we have been this minute; that I went upstairs, for the very purpose for which I am going now; and that as I stretched out my hand to take Madeline's, and lead her down, the floor sunk with me, and after falling from such an indescribable and tremendous height as the imagination scarcely conceives, except in dreams, I alighted in a grave.'

'And you awoke, and found you were lying on your back, or with your head hanging over the bedside, or suffering some pain from indigestion?' said Ralph. 'Pshaw, Mr Bray! Do as I do (you will have the opportunity, now that a constant round of pleasure and enjoyment opens upon you), and, occupying yourself a little more by day, have no time to think of what you dream by night.'

Ralph followed him, with a steady look, to the door; and, turning to the bridegroom, when they were again alone, said,

'Mark my words, Gride, you won't have to pay HIS annuity very long. You have the devil's luck in bargains, always. If he is not booked to make the long voyage before many months are past and gone, I wear an orange for a head!'

To this prophecy, so agreeable to his ears, Arthur returned no answer than a cackle of great delight. Ralph, throwing himself into a chair, they both sat waiting in profound silence. Ralph was thinking, with a sneer upon his lips, on the altered manner of Bray that day, and how soon their fellowship in a bad design had lowered his pride and established a familiarity between them, when his attentive ear caught the rustling of a female dress upon the stairs, and the footstep of a man.

'Wake up,' he said, stamping his foot impatiently upon the ground, 'and be something like life, man, will you? They are here. Urge those dry old bones of yours this way. Quick, man, quick!'

Gride shambled forward, and stood, leering and bowing, close by Ralph's side, when the door opened and there entered in haste - not Bray and his daughter, but Nicholas and his sister Kate.

If some tremendous apparition from the world of shadows had suddenly presented itself before him, Ralph Nickleby could not have been more thunder-stricken than he was by this surprise. His hands fell powerless by his side, he reeled back; and with open mouth, and a face of ashy paleness, stood gazing at them in speechless rage: his eyes so prominent, and his face so convulsed and changed by the passions which raged within him, that it would have been difficult to recognise in him the same stern, composed, hard-featured man he had been not a minute ago.

'The man that came to me last night,' whispered Gride, plucking at his elbow. 'The man that came to me last night!'

'I see,' muttered Ralph, 'I know! I might have guessed as much before. Across my every path, at every turn, go where I will, do what I may, he comes!'

The absence of all colour from the face; the dilated nostril; the quivering of the lips which, though set firmly against each other, would not be still; showed what emotions were struggling for the mastery with Nicholas. But he kept them down, and gently pressing Kate's arm to reassure her, stood erect and undaunted, front to front with his unworthy relative.

As the brother and sister stood side by side, with a gallant bearing which became them well, a close likeness between them was apparent, which many, had they only seen them apart, might have failed to remark. The air, carriage, and very look and expression of the brother were all reflected in the sister, but softened and refined to the nicest limit of feminine delicacy and attraction. More striking still was some indefinable resemblance, in the face of Ralph, to both. While they had

never looked more handsome, nor he more ugly; while they had never held themselves more proudly, nor he shrunk half so low; there never had been a time when this resemblance was so perceptible, or when all the worst characteristics of a face rendered coarse and harsh by evil thoughts were half so manifest as now.

'Away!' was the first word he could utter as he literally gnashed his teeth. 'Away! What brings you here? Liar, scoundrel, dastard, thief!'

'I come here,' said Nicholas in a low deep voice, 'to save your victim if I can. Liar and scoundrel you are, in every action of your life; theft is your trade; and double dastard you must be, or you were not here today. Hard words will not move me, nor would hard blows. Here I stand, and will, till I have done my errand.'

'Girl!' said Ralph, 'retire! We can use force to him, but I would not hurt you if I could help it. Retire, you weak and silly wench, and leave this dog to be dealt with as he deserves.'

'I will not retire,' cried Kate, with flashing eyes and the red blood mantling in her cheeks. 'You will do him no hurt that he will not repay. You may use force with me; I think you will, for I AM a girl, and that would well become you. But if I have a girl's weakness, I have a woman's heart, and it is not you who in a cause like this can turn that from its purpose.'

'And what may your purpose be, most lofty lady?' said Ralph.

'To offer to the unhappy subject of your treachery, at this last moment,' replied Nicholas, 'a refuge and a home. If the near prospect of such a husband as you have provided will not prevail upon her, I hope she may be moved by the prayers and entreaties of one of her own sex. At all events they shall be tried. I myself, avowing to her father from whom I come and by whom I am commissioned, will render it an act of greater baseness, meanness, and cruelty in him if he still dares to force this marriage on. Here I wait to see him and his daughter. For this I came and brought my sister even into your presence. Our purpose is not to see or speak with you; therefore to you we stoop to say no more.'

'Indeed!' said Ralph. 'You persist in remaining here, ma'am, do you?'

His niece's bosom heaved with the indignant excitement into which he had lashed her, but she gave him no reply.

'Now, Gride, see here,' said Ralph. 'This fellow - I grieve to say my brother's son: a reprobate and profligate, stained with every mean and selfish crime - this fellow, coming here today to disturb a solemn

ceremony, and knowing that the consequence of his presenting himself in another man's house at such a time, and persisting in remaining there, must be his being kicked into the streets and dragged through them like the vagabond he is - this fellow, mark you, brings with him his sister as a protection, thinking we would not expose a silly girl to the degradation and indignity which is no novelty to him; and, even after I have warned her of what must ensue, he still keeps her by him, as you see, and clings to her apron-strings like a cowardly boy to his mother's. Is not this a pretty fellow to talk as big as you have heard him now?'

'And as I heard him last night,' said Arthur Gride; 'as I heard him last night when he sneaked into my house, and - he! he! he! - very soon sneaked out again, when I nearly frightened him to death. And HE wanting to marry Miss Madeline too! Oh dear! Is there anything else he'd like? Anything else we can do for him, besides giving her up? Would he like his debts paid and his house furnished, and a few bank notes for shaving paper if he shaves at all? He! he! he!'

'You will remain, girl, will you?' said Ralph, turning upon Kate again, 'to be hauled downstairs like a drunken drab, as I swear you shall if you stop here? No answer! Thank your brother for what follows. Gride, call down Bray - and not his daughter. Let them keep her above.'

'If you value your head,' said Nicholas, taking up a position before the door, and speaking in the same low voice in which he had spoken before, and with no more outward passion than he had before displayed; 'stay where you are!'

'Mind me, and not him, and call down Bray,' said Ralph.

'Mind yourself rather than either of us, and stay where you are!' said Nicholas.

'Will you call down Bray?' cried Ralph.

'Remember that you come near me at your peril,' said Nicholas.

Gride hesitated. Ralph being, by this time, as furious as a baffled tiger, made for the door, and, attempting to pass Kate, clasped her arm roughly with his hand. Nicholas, with his eyes darting fire, seized him by the collar. At that moment, a heavy body fell with great violence on the floor above, and, in an instant afterwards, was heard a most appalling and terrific scream.

They all stood still, and gazed upon each other. Scream succeeded scream; a heavy pattering of feet succeeded; and many shrill voices clamouring together were heard to cry, 'He is dead!'

'Stand off!' cried Nicholas, letting loose all the passion he had restrained till now; 'if this is what I scarcely dare to hope it is, you are caught, villains, in your own toils.'

He burst from the room, and, darting upstairs to the quarter from whence the noise proceeded, forced his way through a crowd of persons who quite filled a small bed-chamber, and found Bray lying on the floor quite dead; his daughter clinging to the body.

'How did this happen?' he cried, looking wildly about him.

Several voices answered together, that he had been observed, through the half-opened door, reclining in a strange and uneasy position upon a chair; that he had been spoken to several times, and not answering, was supposed to be asleep, until some person going in and shaking him by the arm, he fell heavily to the ground and was discovered to be dead.

'Who is the owner of this house?' said Nicholas, hastily.

An elderly woman was pointed out to him; and to her he said, as he knelt down and gently unwound Madeline's arms from the lifeless mass round which they were entwined: 'I represent this lady's nearest friends, as her servant here knows, and must remove her from this dreadful scene. This is my sister to whose charge you confide her. My name and address are upon that card, and you shall receive from me all necessary directions for the arrangements that must be made. Stand aside, every one of you, and give me room and air for God's sake!'

The people fell back, scarce wondering more at what had just occurred, than at the excitement and impetuosity of him who spoke. Nicholas, taking the insensible girl in his arms, bore her from the chamber and downstairs into the room he had just quitted, followed by his sister and the faithful servant, whom he charged to procure a coach directly, while he and Kate bent over their beautiful charge and endeavoured, but in vain, to restore her to animation. The girl performed her office with such expedition, that in a very few minutes the coach was ready.

Ralph Nickleby and Gride, stunned and paralysed by the awful event which had so suddenly overthrown their schemes (it would not otherwise, perhaps, have made much impression on them), and carried away by the extraordinary energy and precipitation of Nicholas, which bore down all before him, looked on at these proceedings like men in a dream or trance. It was not until every preparation was made for Madeline's immediate removal that Ralph broke silence by declaring she should not be taken away.

'Who says so?' cried Nicholas, rising from his knee and confronting them, but still retaining Madeline's lifeless hand in his.

'I!' answered Ralph, hoarsely.

'Hush, hush!' cried the terrified Gride, catching him by the arm again. 'Hear what he says.'

'Ay!' said Nicholas, extending his disengaged hand in the air, 'hear what he says. That both your debts are paid in the one great debt of nature. That the bond, due today at twelve, is now waste paper. That your contemplated fraud shall be discovered yet. That your schemes are known to man, and overthrown by Heaven. Wretches, that he defies you both to do your worst.'

'This man,' said Ralph, in a voice scarcely intelligible, 'this man claims his wife, and he shall have her.'

'That man claims what is not his, and he should not have her if he were fifty men, with fifty more to back him,' said Nicholas.

'Who shall prevent him?'

'I will.'

'By what right I should like to know,' said Ralph. 'By what right I ask?'

'By this right. That, knowing what I do, you dare not tempt me further,' said Nicholas, 'and by this better right; that those I serve, and with whom you would have done me base wrong and injury, are her nearest and her dearest friends. In their name I bear her hence. Give way!'

'One word!' cried Ralph, foaming at the mouth.

'Not one,' replied Nicholas, 'I will not hear of one - save this. Look to yourself, and heed this warning that I give you! Your day is past, and night is comin' on.'

'My curse, my bitter, deadly curse, upon you, boy!'

'Whence will curses come at your command? Or what avails a curse or blessing from a man like you? I tell you, that misfortune and discovery are thickening about your head; that the structures you have raised, through all your ill-spent life, are crumbling into dust; that your path is beset with spies; that this very day, ten thousand pounds of your hoarded wealth have gone in one great crash!'

"Tis false!" cried Ralph, shrinking back.

"Tis true, and you shall find it so. I have no more words to waste. Stand from the door. Kate, do you go first. Lay not a hand on her, or on that woman, or on me, or so much a brush their garments as they pass you by! - You let them pass, and he blocks the door again!"

Arthur Gride happened to be in the doorway, but whether intentionally or from confusion was not quite apparent. Nicholas swung him away, with such violence as to cause him to spin round the room until he was caught by a sharp angle of the wall, and there knocked down; and then taking his beautiful burden in his arms rushed out. No one cared to stop him, if any were so disposed. Making his way through a mob of people, whom a report of the circumstances had attracted round the house, and carrying Madeline, in his excitement, as easily as if she were an infant, he reached the coach in which Kate and the girl were already waiting, and, confiding his charge to them, jumped up beside the coachman and bade him drive away.