

Chapter LV

Of Family Matters, Cares, Hopes, Disappointments, and Sorrows

Although Mrs Nickleby had been made acquainted by her son and daughter with every circumstance of Madeline Bray's history which was known to them; although the responsible situation in which Nicholas stood had been carefully explained to her, and she had been prepared, even for the possible contingency of having to receive the young lady in her own house, improbable as such a result had appeared only a few minutes before it came about, still, Mrs Nickleby, from the moment when this confidence was first reposed in her, late on the previous evening, had remained in an unsatisfactory and profoundly mystified state, from which no explanations or arguments could relieve her, and which every fresh soliloquy and reflection only aggravated more and more.

'Bless my heart, Kate!' so the good lady argued; 'if the Mr Cheerybles don't want this young lady to be married, why don't they file a bill against the Lord Chancellor, make her a Chancery ward, and shut her up in the Fleet prison for safety? - I have read of such things in the newspapers a hundred times. Or, if they are so very fond of her as Nicholas says they are, why don't they marry her themselves - one of them I mean? And even supposing they don't want her to be married, and don't want to marry her themselves, why in the name of wonder should Nicholas go about the world, forbidding people's banns?'

'I don't think you quite understand,' said Kate, gently.

'Well I am sure, Kate, my dear, you're very polite!' replied Mrs Nickleby. 'I have been married myself I hope, and I have seen other people married. Not understand, indeed!'

'I know you have had great experience, dear mama,' said Kate; 'I mean that perhaps you don't quite understand all the circumstances in this instance. We have stated them awkwardly, I dare say.'

'That I dare say you have,' retorted her mother, briskly. 'That's very likely. I am not to be held accountable for that; though, at the same time, as the circumstances speak for themselves, I shall take the liberty, my love, of saying that I do understand them, and perfectly well too; whatever you and Nicholas may choose to think to the contrary. Why is such a great fuss made because this Miss Magdalen is going to marry somebody who is older than herself? Your poor papa was older than I was, four years and a half older. Jane Dibabs - the Dibabses lived in the beautiful little thatched white house one story high, covered all over with ivy and creeping plants, with an exquisite little porch with twining honysuckles and all sorts of things: where the

earwigs used to fall into one's tea on a summer evening, and always fell upon their backs and kicked dreadfully, and where the frogs used to get into the rushlight shades when one stopped all night, and sit up and look through the little holes like Christians - Jane Dibabs, SHE married a man who was a great deal older than herself, and WOULD marry him, notwithstanding all that could be said to the contrary, and she was so fond of him that nothing was ever equal to it. There was no fuss made about Jane Dibabs, and her husband was a most honourable and excellent man, and everybody spoke well of him. Then why should there be any fuss about this Magdalen?'

'Her husband is much older; he is not her own choice; his character is the very reverse of that which you have just described. Don't you see a broad distinction between the two cases?' said Kate.

To this, Mrs Nickleby only replied that she durst say she was very stupid, indeed she had no doubt she was, for her own children almost as much as told her so, every day of her life; to be sure she was a little older than they, and perhaps some foolish people might think she ought reasonably to know best. However, no doubt she was wrong; of course she was; she always was, she couldn't be right, she couldn't be expected to be; so she had better not expose herself any more; and to all Kate's conciliations and concessions for an hour ensuing, the good lady gave no other replies than Oh, certainly, why did they ask HER?, HER opinion was of no consequence, it didn't matter what SHE said, with many other rejoinders of the same class.

In this frame of mind (expressed, when she had become too resigned for speech, by nods of the head, upliftings of the eyes, and little beginnings of groans, converted, as they attracted attention, into short coughs), Mrs Nickleby remained until Nicholas and Kate returned with the object of their solicitude; when, having by this time asserted her own importance, and becoming besides interested in the trials of one so young and beautiful, she not only displayed the utmost zeal and solicitude, but took great credit to herself for recommending the course of procedure which her son had adopted: frequently declaring, with an expressive look, that it was very fortunate things were AS they were: and hinting, that but for great encouragement and wisdom on her own part, they never could have been brought to that pass.

Not to strain the question whether Mrs Nickleby had or had not any great hand in bringing matters about, it is unquestionable that she had strong ground for exultation. The brothers, on their return, bestowed such commendations on Nicholas for the part he had taken, and evinced so much joy at the altered state of events and the recovery of their young friend from trials so great and dangers so threatening, that, as she more than once informed her daughter, she now considered the fortunes of the family 'as good as' made. Mr

Charles Cheeryble, indeed, Mrs Nickleby positively asserted, had, in the first transports of his surprise and delight, 'as good as' said so. Without precisely explaining what this qualification meant, she subsided, whenever she mentioned the subject, into such a mysterious and important state, and had such visions of wealth and dignity in perspective, that (vague and clouded though they were) she was, at such times, almost as happy as if she had really been permanently provided for, on a scale of great splendour.

The sudden and terrible shock she had received, combined with the great affliction and anxiety of mind which she had, for a long time, endured, proved too much for Madeline's strength. Recovering from the state of stupefaction into which the sudden death of her father happily plunged her, she only exchanged that condition for one of dangerous and active illness. When the delicate physical powers which have been sustained by an unnatural strain upon the mental energies and a resolute determination not to yield, at last give way, their degree of prostration is usually proportionate to the strength of the effort which has previously upheld them. Thus it was that the illness which fell on Madeline was of no slight or temporary nature, but one which, for a time, threatened her reason, and - scarcely worse - her life itself.

Who, slowly recovering from a disorder so severe and dangerous, could be insensible to the unremitting attentions of such a nurse as gentle, tender, earnest Kate? On whom could the sweet soft voice, the light step, the delicate hand, the quiet, cheerful, noiseless discharge of those thousand little offices of kindness and relief which we feel so deeply when we are ill, and forget so lightly when we are well - on whom could they make so deep an impression as on a young heart stored with every pure and true affection that women cherish; almost a stranger to the endearments and devotion of its own sex, save as it learnt them from itself; and rendered, by calamity and suffering, keenly susceptible of the sympathy so long unknown and so long sought in vain? What wonder that days became as years in knitting them together! What wonder, if with every hour of returning health, there came some stronger and sweeter recognition of the praises which Kate, when they recalled old scenes - they seemed old now, and to have been acted years ago - would lavish on her brother! Where would have been the wonder, even, if those praises had found a quick response in the breast of Madeline, and if, with the image of Nicholas so constantly recurring in the features of his sister that she could scarcely separate the two, she had sometimes found it equally difficult to assign to each the feelings they had first inspired, and had imperceptibly mingled with her gratitude to Nicholas, some of that warmer feeling which she had assigned to Kate?

'My dear,' Mrs Nickleby would say, coming into the room with an elaborate caution, calculated to discompose the nerves of an invalid rather more than the entry of a horse-soldier at full gallop; 'how do you find yourself tonight? I hope you are better.'

'Almost well, mama,' Kate would reply, laying down her work, and taking Madeline's hand in hers.

'Kate!' Mrs Nickleby would say, reprovngly, 'don't talk so loud' (the worthy lady herself talking in a whisper that would have made the blood of the stoutest man run cold in his veins).

Kate would take this reproof very quietly, and Mrs Nickleby, making every board creak and every thread rustle as she moved stealthily about, would add:

'My son Nicholas has just come home, and I have come, according to custom, my dear, to know, from your own lips, exactly how you are; for he won't take my account, and never will.'

'He is later than usual to-night,' perhaps Madeline would reply. 'Nearly half an hour.'

'Well, I never saw such people in all my life as you are, for time, up here!' Mrs Nickleby would exclaim in great astonishment; 'I declare I never did! I had not the least idea that Nicholas was after his time, not the smallest. Mr Nickleby used to say - your poor papa, I am speaking of, Kate my dear - used to say, that appetite was the best clock in the world, but you have no appetite, my dear Miss Bray, I wish you had, and upon my word I really think you ought to take something that would give you one. I am sure I don't know, but I have heard that two or three dozen native lobsters give an appetite, though that comes to the same thing after all, for I suppose you must have an appetite before you can take 'em. If I said lobsters, I meant oysters, but of course it's all the same, though really how you came to know about Nicholas - '

'We happened to be just talking about him, mama; that was it.'

'You never seem to me to be talking about anything else, Kate, and upon my word I am quite surprised at your being so very thoughtless. You can find subjects enough to talk about sometimes, and when you know how important it is to keep up Miss Bray's spirits, and interest her, and all that, it really is quite extraordinary to me what can induce you to keep on prose, prose, prose, din, din, din, everlastingly, upon the same theme. You are a very kind nurse, Kate, and a very good one, and I know you mean very well; but I will say this - that if it wasn't for me, I really don't know what would become of Miss Bray's

spirits, and so I tell the doctor every day. He says he wonders how I sustain my own, and I am sure I very often wonder myself how I can contrive to keep up as I do. Of course it's an exertion, but still, when I know how much depends upon me in this house, I am obliged to make it. There's nothing praiseworthy in that, but it's necessary, and I do it.'

With that, Mrs Nickleby would draw up a chair, and for some three-quarters of an hour run through a great variety of distracting topics in the most distracting manner possible; tearing herself away, at length, on the plea that she must now go and amuse Nicholas while he took his supper. After a preliminary raising of his spirits with the information that she considered the patient decidedly worse, she would further cheer him up by relating how dull, listless, and low-spirited Miss Bray was, because Kate foolishly talked about nothing else but him and family matters. When she had made Nicholas thoroughly comfortable with these and other inspiriting remarks, she would discourse at length on the arduous duties she had performed that day; and, sometimes, be moved to tears in wondering how, if anything were to happen to herself, the family would ever get on without her.

At other times, when Nicholas came home at night, he would be accompanied by Mr Frank Cheeryble, who was commissioned by the brothers to inquire how Madeline was that evening. On such occasions (and they were of very frequent occurrence), Mrs Nickleby deemed it of particular importance that she should have her wits about her; for, from certain signs and tokens which had attracted her attention, she shrewdly suspected that Mr Frank, interested as his uncles were in Madeline, came quite as much to see Kate as to inquire after her; the more especially as the brothers were in constant communication with the medical man, came backwards and forwards very frequently themselves, and received a full report from Nicholas every morning. These were proud times for Mrs Nickleby; never was anybody half so discreet and sage as she, or half so mysterious withal; and never were there such cunning generalship, and such unfathomable designs, as she brought to bear upon Mr Frank, with the view of ascertaining whether her suspicions were well founded: and if so, of tantalising him into taking her into his confidence and throwing himself upon her merciful consideration. Extensive was the artillery, heavy and light, which Mrs Nickleby brought into play for the furtherance of these great schemes; various and opposite the means which she employed to bring about the end she had in view. At one time, she was all cordiality and ease; at another, all stiffness and frigidity. Now, she would seem to open her whole heart to her unhappy victim; the next time they met, she would receive him with the most distant and studious reserve, as if a new light had broken in upon her, and, guessing his intentions, she had resolved to check

them in the bud; as if she felt it her bounden duty to act with Spartan firmness, and at once and for ever to discourage hopes which never could be realised. At other times, when Nicholas was not there to overhear, and Kate was upstairs busily tending her sick friend, the worthy lady would throw out dark hints of an intention to send her daughter to France for three or four years, or to Scotland for the improvement of her health impaired by her late fatigues, or to America on a visit, or anywhere that threatened a long and tedious separation. Nay, she even went so far as to hint, obscurely, at an attachment entertained for her daughter by the son of an old neighbour of theirs, one Horatio Peltirogus (a young gentleman who might have been, at that time, four years old, or thereabouts), and to represent it, indeed, as almost a settled thing between the families - only waiting for her daughter's final decision, to come off with the sanction of the church, and to the unspeakable happiness and content of all parties.

It was in the full pride and glory of having sprung this last mine one night with extraordinary success, that Mrs Nickleby took the opportunity of being left alone with her son before retiring to rest, to sound him on the subject which so occupied her thoughts: not doubting that they could have but one opinion respecting it. To this end, she approached the question with divers laudatory and appropriate remarks touching the general amiability of Mr Frank Cheeryble.

'You are quite right, mother,' said Nicholas, 'quite right. He is a fine fellow.'

'Good-looking, too,' said Mrs Nickleby.

'Decidedly good-looking,' answered Nicholas.

'What may you call his nose, now, my dear?' pursued Mrs Nickleby, wishing to interest Nicholas in the subject to the utmost.

'Call it?' repeated Nicholas.

'Ah!' returned his mother, 'what style of nose? What order of architecture, if one may say so. I am not very learned in noses. Do you call it a Roman or a Grecian?'

'Upon my word, mother,' said Nicholas, laughing, 'as well as I remember, I should call it a kind of Composite, or mixed nose. But I have no very strong recollection on the subject. If it will afford you any gratification, I'll observe it more closely, and let you know.'

'I wish you would, my dear,' said Mrs Nickleby, with an earnest look.

'Very well,' returned Nicholas. 'I will.'

Nicholas returned to the perusal of the book he had been reading, when the dialogue had gone thus far. Mrs Nickleby, after stopping a little for consideration, resumed.

'He is very much attached to you, Nicholas, my dear.'

Nicholas laughingly said, as he closed his book, that he was glad to hear it, and observed that his mother seemed deep in their new friend's confidence already.

'Hem!' said Mrs Nickleby. 'I don't know about that, my dear, but I think it is very necessary that somebody should be in his confidence; highly necessary.'

Elated by a look of curiosity from her son, and the consciousness of possessing a great secret, all to herself, Mrs Nickleby went on with great animation:

'I am sure, my dear Nicholas, how you can have failed to notice it, is, to me, quite extraordinary; though I don't know why I should say that, either, because, of course, as far as it goes, and to a certain extent, there is a great deal in this sort of thing, especially in this early stage, which, however clear it may be to females, can scarcely be expected to be so evident to men. I don't say that I have any particular penetration in such matters. I may have; those about me should know best about that, and perhaps do know. Upon that point I shall express no opinion, it wouldn't become me to do so, it's quite out of the question, quite.'

Nicholas snuffed the candles, put his hands in his pockets, and, leaning back in his chair, assumed a look of patient suffering and melancholy resignation.

'I think it my duty, Nicholas, my dear,' resumed his mother, 'to tell you what I know: not only because you have a right to know it too, and to know everything that happens in this family, but because you have it in your power to promote and assist the thing very much; and there is no doubt that the sooner one can come to a clear understanding on such subjects, it is always better, every way. There are a great many things you might do; such as taking a walk in the garden sometimes, or sitting upstairs in your own room for a little while, or making believe to fall asleep occasionally, or pretending that you recollected some business, and going out for an hour or so, and taking Mr Smeke with you. These seem very slight things, and I dare say you will be amused at my making them of so much importance; at the same time, my dear, I can assure you (and you'll find this out,

Nicholas, for yourself one of these days, if you ever fall in love with anybody; as I trust and hope you will, provided she is respectable and well conducted, and of course you'd never dream of falling in love with anybody who was not), I say, I can assure you that a great deal more depends upon these little things than you would suppose possible. If your poor papa was alive, he would tell you how much depended on the parties being left alone. Of course, you are not to go out of the room as if you meant it and did it on purpose, but as if it was quite an accident, and to come back again in the same way. If you cough in the passage before you open the door, or whistle carelessly, or hum a tune, or something of that sort, to let them know you're coming, it's always better; because, of course, though it's not only natural but perfectly correct and proper under the circumstances, still it is very confusing if you interrupt young people when they are - when they are sitting on the sofa, and - and all that sort of thing: which is very nonsensical, perhaps, but still they will do it.'

The profound astonishment with which her son regarded her during this long address, gradually increasing as it approached its climax in no way discomposed Mrs Nickleby, but rather exalted her opinion of her own cleverness; therefore, merely stopping to remark, with much complacency, that she had fully expected him to be surprised, she entered on a vast quantity of circumstantial evidence of a particularly incoherent and perplexing kind; the upshot of which was, to establish, beyond the possibility of doubt, that Mr Frank Cheeryble had fallen desperately in love with Kate.

'With whom?' cried Nicholas.

Mrs Nickleby repeated, with Kate.

'What! OUR Kate! My sister!'

'Lord, Nicholas!' returned Mrs Nickleby, 'whose Kate should it be, if not ours; or what should I care about it, or take any interest in it for, if it was anybody but your sister?'

'Dear mother,' said Nicholas, 'surely it can't be!'

'Very good, my dear,' replied Mrs Nickleby, with great confidence. 'Wait and see.'

Nicholas had never, until that moment, bestowed a thought upon the remote possibility of such an occurrence as that which was now communicated to him; for, besides that he had been much from home of late and closely occupied with other matters, his own jealous fears had prompted the suspicion that some secret interest in Madeline, akin to that which he felt himself, occasioned those visits of Frank

Cheeryble which had recently become so frequent. Even now, although he knew that the observation of an anxious mother was much more likely to be correct in such a case than his own, and although she reminded him of many little circumstances which, taken together, were certainly susceptible of the construction she triumphantly put upon them, he was not quite convinced but that they arose from mere good-natured thoughtless gallantry, which would have dictated the same conduct towards any other girl who was young and pleasing. At all events, he hoped so, and therefore tried to believe it.

'I am very much disturbed by what you tell me,' said Nicholas, after a little reflection, 'though I yet hope you may be mistaken.'

'I don't understand why you should hope so,' said Mrs Nickleby, 'I confess; but you may depend upon it I am not.'

'What of Kate?' inquired Nicholas.

'Why that, my dear,' returned Mrs Nickleby, 'is just the point upon which I am not yet satisfied. During this sickness, she has been constantly at Madeline's bedside - never were two people so fond of each other as they have grown - and to tell you the truth, Nicholas, I have rather kept her away now and then, because I think it's a good plan, and urges a young man on. He doesn't get too sure, you know.'

She said this with such a mingling of high delight and self-congratulation, that it was inexpressibly painful to Nicholas to dash her hopes; but he felt that there was only one honourable course before him, and that he was bound to take it.

'Dear mother,' he said kindly, 'don't you see that if there were really any serious inclination on the part of Mr Frank towards Kate, and we suffered ourselves for a moment to encourage it, we should be acting a most dishonourable and ungrateful part? I ask you if you don't see it, but I need not say that I know you don't, or you would have been more strictly on your guard. Let me explain my meaning to you. Remember how poor we are.'

Mrs Nickleby shook her head, and said, through her tears, that poverty was not a crime.

'No,' said Nicholas, 'and for that reason poverty should engender an honest pride, that it may not lead and tempt us to unworthy actions, and that we may preserve the self-respect which a hewer of wood and drawer of water may maintain, and does better in maintaining than a monarch in preserving his. Think what we owe to these two brothers: remember what they have done, and what they do every day for us

with a generosity and delicacy for which the devotion of our whole lives would be a most imperfect and inadequate return. What kind of return would that be which would be comprised in our permitting their nephew, their only relative, whom they regard as a son, and for whom it would be mere childishness to suppose they have not formed plans suitably adapted to the education he has had, and the fortune he will inherit - in our permitting him to marry a portionless girl: so closely connected with us, that the irresistible inference must be, that he was entrapped by a plot; that it was a deliberate scheme, and a speculation amongst us three? Bring the matter clearly before yourself, mother. Now, how would you feel, if they were married, and the brothers, coming here on one of those kind errands which bring them here so often, you had to break out to them the truth? Would you be at ease, and feel that you had played an open part?'

Poor Mrs Nickleby, crying more and more, murmured that of course Mr Frank would ask the consent of his uncles first.

'Why, to be sure, that would place HIM in a better situation with them,' said Nicholas, 'but we should still be open to the same suspicions; the distance between us would still be as great; the advantages to be gained would still be as manifest as now. We may be reckoning without our host in all this,' he added more cheerfully, 'and I trust, and almost believe we are. If it be otherwise, I have that confidence in Kate that I know she will feel as I do - and in you, dear mother, to be assured that after a little consideration you will do the same.'

After many more representations and entreaties, Nicholas obtained a promise from Mrs Nickleby that she would try all she could to think as he did; and that if Mr Frank persevered in his attentions she would endeavour to discourage them, or, at the least, would render him no countenance or assistance. He determined to forbear mentioning the subject to Kate until he was quite convinced that there existed a real necessity for his doing so; and resolved to assure himself, as well as he could by close personal observation, of the exact position of affairs. This was a very wise resolution, but he was prevented from putting it in practice by a new source of anxiety and uneasiness.

Smike became alarmingly ill; so reduced and exhausted that he could scarcely move from room to room without assistance; and so worn and emaciated, that it was painful to look upon him. Nicholas was warned, by the same medical authority to whom he had at first appealed, that the last chance and hope of his life depended on his being instantly removed from London. That part of Devonshire in which Nicholas had been himself bred was named as the most favourable spot; but this advice was cautiously coupled with the information, that whoever accompanied him thither must be prepared for the worst; for every

token of rapid consumption had appeared, and he might never return alive.

The kind brothers, who were acquainted with the poor creature's sad history, dispatched old Tim to be present at this consultation. That same morning, Nicholas was summoned by brother Charles into his private room, and thus addressed:

'My dear sir, no time must be lost. This lad shall not die, if such human means as we can use can save his life; neither shall he die alone, and in a strange place. Remove him tomorrow morning, see that he has every comfort that his situation requires, and don't leave him; don't leave him, my dear sir, until you know that there is no longer any immediate danger. It would be hard, indeed, to part you now. No, no, no! Tim shall wait upon you tonight, sir; Tim shall wait upon you tonight with a parting word or two. Brother Ned, my dear fellow, Mr Nickleby waits to shake hands and say goodbye; Mr Nickleby won't be long gone; this poor chap will soon get better, very soon get better; and then he'll find out some nice homely country-people to leave him with, and will go backwards and forwards sometimes - backwards and forwards you know, Ned. And there's no cause to be downhearted, for he'll very soon get better, very soon. Won't he, won't he, Ned?'

What Tim Linkinwater said, or what he brought with him that night, needs not to be told. Next morning Nicholas and his feeble companion began their journey.

And who but one - and that one he who, but for those who crowded round him then, had never met a look of kindness, or known a word of pity - could tell what agony of mind, what blighted thoughts, what unavailing sorrow, were involved in that sad parting?

'See,' cried Nicholas eagerly, as he looked from the coach window, 'they are at the corner of the lane still! And now there's Kate, poor Kate, whom you said you couldn't bear to say goodbye to, waving her handkerchief. Don't go without one gesture of farewell to Kate!'

'I cannot make it!' cried his trembling companion, falling back in his seat and covering his eyes. 'Do you see her now? Is she there still?'

'Yes, yes!' said Nicholas earnestly. 'There! She waves her hand again! I have answered it for you - and now they are out of sight. Do not give way so bitterly, dear friend, don't. You will meet them all again.'

He whom he thus encouraged, raised his withered hands and clasped them fervently together.

'In heaven. I humbly pray to God in heaven.'

It sounded like the prayer of a broken heart.