

Chapter LVII

How Ralph Nickleby's Auxiliary went about his Work, and how he prospered with it

It was a dark, wet, gloomy night in autumn, when in an upper room of a mean house situated in an obscure street, or rather court, near Lambeth, there sat, all alone, a one-eyed man grotesquely habited, either for lack of better garments or for purposes of disguise, in a loose greatcoat, with arms half as long again as his own, and a capacity of breadth and length which would have admitted of his winding himself in it, head and all, with the utmost ease, and without any risk of straining the old and greasy material of which it was composed.

So attired, and in a place so far removed from his usual haunts and occupations, and so very poor and wretched in its character, perhaps Mrs Squeers herself would have had some difficulty in recognising her lord: quickened though her natural sagacity doubtless would have been by the affectionate yearnings and impulses of a tender wife. But Mrs Squeers's lord it was; and in a tolerably disconsolate mood Mrs Squeers's lord appeared to be, as, helping himself from a black bottle which stood on the table beside him, he cast round the chamber a look, in which very slight regard for the objects within view was plainly mingled with some regretful and impatient recollection of distant scenes and persons.

There were, certainly, no particular attractions, either in the room over which the glance of Mr Squeers so discontentedly wandered, or in the narrow street into which it might have penetrated, if he had thought fit to approach the window. The attic chamber in which he sat was bare and mean; the bedstead, and such few other articles of necessary furniture as it contained, were of the commonest description, in a most crazy state, and of a most uninviting appearance. The street was muddy, dirty, and deserted. Having but one outlet, it was traversed by few but the inhabitants at any time; and the night being one of those on which most people are glad to be within doors, it now presented no other signs of life than the dull glimmering of poor candles from the dirty windows, and few sounds but the pattering of the rain, and occasionally the heavy closing of some creaking door.

Mr Squeers continued to look disconsolately about him, and to listen to these noises in profound silence, broken only by the rustling of his large coat, as he now and then moved his arm to raise his glass to his lips. Mr Squeers continued to do this for some time, until the increasing gloom warned him to snuff the candle. Seeming to be slightly roused by this exertion, he raised his eye to the ceiling, and

fixing it upon some uncouth and fantastic figures, traced upon it by the wet and damp which had penetrated through the roof, broke into the following soliloquy:

'Well, this is a pretty go, is this here! An uncommon pretty go! Here have I been, a matter of how many weeks - hard upon six - a follering up this here blessed old dowager petty larcenerer,' - Mr Squeers delivered himself of this epithet with great difficulty and effort, - 'and Dotheboys Hall a-running itself regularly to seed the while! That's the worst of ever being in with a owdacious chap like that old Nickleby. You never know when he's done with you, and if you're in for a penny, you're in for a pound.'

This remark, perhaps, reminded Mr Squeers that he was in for a hundred pound at any rate. His countenance relaxed, and he raised his glass to his mouth with an air of greater enjoyment of its contents than he had before evinced.

'I never see,' soliloquised Mr Squeers in continuation, 'I never see nor come across such a file as that old Nickleby. Never! He's out of everybody's depth, he is. He's what you may call a rasper, is Nickleby. To see how sly and cunning he grubbed on, day after day, a-worming and plodding and tracing and turning and twining of hisself about, till he found out where this precious Mrs Peg was hid, and cleared the ground for me to work upon. Creeping and crawling and gliding, like a ugly, old, bright-eyed, stagnation-blooded adder! Ah! He'd have made a good 'un in our line, but it would have been too limited for him; his genius would have busted all bonds, and coming over every obstacle, broke down all before it, till it erected itself into a monneyment of - Well, I'll think of the rest, and say it when conwenient.'

Making a halt in his reflections at this place, Mr Squeers again put his glass to his lips, and drawing a dirty letter from his pocket, proceeded to con over its contents with the air of a man who had read it very often, and now refreshed his memory rather in the absence of better amusement than for any specific information.

'The pigs is well,' said Mr Squeers, 'the cows is well, and the boys is bobbish. Young Sprouter has been a-winking, has he? I'll wink him when I get back. 'Cobbey would persist in sniffing while he was a-eating his dinner, and said that the beef was so strong it made him.' - Very good, Cobbey, we'll see if we can't make you sniff a little without beef. 'Pitcher was took with another fever,' - of course he was - 'and being fetched by his friends, died the day after he got home,' - of course he did, and out of aggravation; it's part of a deep-laid system. There an't another chap in the school but that boy as would have died exactly at the end of the quarter: taking it out of me to the very last, and then carrying his spite to the utmost extremity. 'The juniorest

Palmer said he wished he was in Heaven.' I really don't know, I do NOT know what's to be done with that young fellow; he's always a-wishing something horrid. He said once, he wished he was a donkey, because then he wouldn't have a father as didn't love him! Pretty vicious that for a child of six!

Mr Squeers was so much moved by the contemplation of this hardened nature in one so young, that he angrily put up the letter, and sought, in a new train of ideas, a subject of consolation.

'It's a long time to have been a-lingering in London,' he said; 'and this is a precious hole to come and live in, even if it has been only for a week or so. Still, one hundred pound is five boys, and five boys takes a whole year to pay one hundred pounds, and there's their keep to be subtracted, besides. There's nothing lost, neither, by one's being here; because the boys' money comes in just the same as if I was at home, and Mrs Squeers she keeps them in order. There'll be some lost time to make up, of course. There'll be an arrear of flogging as'll have to be gone through: still, a couple of days makes that all right, and one don't mind a little extra work for one hundred pound. It's pretty nigh the time to wait upon the old woman. From what she said last night, I suspect that if I'm to succeed at all, I shall succeed tonight; so I'll have half a glass more, to wish myself success, and put myself in spirits. Mrs Squeers, my dear, your health!'

Leering with his one eye as if the lady to whom he drank had been actually present, Mr Squeers - in his enthusiasm, no doubt - poured out a full glass, and emptied it; and as the liquor was raw spirits, and he had applied himself to the same bottle more than once already, it is not surprising that he found himself, by this time, in an extremely cheerful state, and quite enough excited for his purpose.

What this purpose was soon appeared; for, after a few turns about the room to steady himself, he took the bottle under his arm and the glass in his hand, and blowing out the candle as if he purposed being gone some time, stole out upon the staircase, and creeping softly to a door opposite his own, tapped gently at it.

'But what's the use of tapping?' he said, 'She'll never hear. I suppose she isn't doing anything very particular; and if she is, it don't much matter, that I see.'

With this brief preface, Mr Squeers applied his hand to the latch of the door, and thrusting his head into a garret far more deplorable than that he had just left, and seeing that there was nobody there but an old woman, who was bending over a wretched fire (for although the weather was still warm, the evening was chilly), walked in, and tapped her on the shoulder.

'Well, my Slider,' said Mr Squeers, jocularly.

'Is that you?' inquired Peg.

'Ah! it's me, and me's the first person singular, nominative case, agreeing with the verb 'it's', and governed by Squeers understood, as a acorn, a hour; but when the h is sounded, the a only is to be used, as a and, a art, a ighway,' replied Mr Squeers, quoting at random from the grammar. 'At least, if it isn't, you don't know any better, and if it is, I've done it accidentally.'

Delivering this reply in his accustomed tone of voice, in which of course it was inaudible to Peg, Mr Squeers drew a stool to the fire, and placing himself over against her, and the bottle and glass on the floor between them, roared out again, very loud,

'Well, my Slider!'

'I hear you,' said Peg, receiving him very graciously.

'I've come according to promise,' roared Squeers.

'So they used to say in that part of the country I come from,' observed Peg, complacently, 'but I think oil's better.'

'Better than what?' roared Squeers, adding some rather strong language in an undertone.

'No,' said Peg, 'of course not.'

'I never saw such a monster as you are!' muttered Squeers, looking as amiable as he possibly could the while; for Peg's eye was upon him, and she was chuckling fearfully, as though in delight at having made a choice repartee, 'Do you see this? This is a bottle.'

'I see it,' answered Peg.

'Well, and do you see THIS?' bawled Squeers. 'This is a glass.' Peg saw that too.

'See here, then,' said Squeers, accompanying his remarks with appropriate action, 'I fill the glass from the bottle, and I say 'Your health, Slider,' and empty it; then I rinse it genteelly with a little drop, which I'm forced to throw into the fire - hallo! we shall have the chimbley alight next - fill it again, and hand it over to you.'

'YOUR health,' said Peg.

'She understands that, anyways,' muttered Squeers, watching Mrs Sliderskew as she dispatched her portion, and choked and gasped in a most awful manner after so doing. 'Now then, let's have a talk. How's the rheumatics?'

Mrs Sliderskew, with much blinking and chuckling, and with looks expressive of her strong admiration of Mr Squeers, his person, manners, and conversation, replied that the rheumatics were better.

'What's the reason,' said Mr Squeers, deriving fresh facetiousness from the bottle; 'what's the reason of rheumatics? What do they mean? What do people have 'em for - eh?'

Mrs Sliderskew didn't know, but suggested that it was possibly because they couldn't help it.

'Measles, rheumatics, hooping-cough, fevers, agers, and lumbagers,' said Mr Squeers, 'is all philosophy together; that's what it is. The heavenly bodies is philosophy, and the earthly bodies is philosophy. If there's a screw loose in a heavenly body, that's philosophy; and if there's screw loose in an earthly body, that's philosophy too; or it may be that sometimes there's a little metaphysics in it, but that's not often. Philosophy's the chap for me. If a parent asks a question in the classical, commercial, or mathematical line, says I, gravely, 'Why, sir, in the first place, are you a philosopher?' - 'No, Mr Squeers,' he says, 'I an't.' 'Then, sir,' says I, 'I am sorry for you, for I shan't be able to explain it.' Naturally, the parent goes away and wishes he was a philosopher, and, equally naturally, thinks I'm one.'

Saying this, and a great deal more, with tipsy profundity and a serio-comic air, and keeping his eye all the time on Mrs Sliderskew, who was unable to hear one word, Mr Squeers concluded by helping himself and passing the bottle: to which Peg did become reverence.

'That's the time of day!' said Mr Squeers. 'You look twenty pound ten better than you did.'

Again Mrs Sliderskew chuckled, but modesty forbade her assenting verbally to the compliment.

'Twenty pound ten better,' repeated Mr Squeers, 'than you did that day when I first introduced myself. Don't you know?'

'Ah!' said Peg, shaking her head, 'but you frightened me that day.'

'Did I?' said Squeers; 'well, it was rather a startling thing for a stranger to come and recommend himself by saying that he knew all

about you, and what your name was, and why you were living so quiet here, and what you had boned, and who you boned it from, wasn't it?'

Peg nodded her head in strong assent.

'But I know everything that happens in that way, you see,' continued Squeers. 'Nothing takes place, of that kind, that I an't up to entirely. I'm a sort of a lawyer, Slider, of first-rate standing, and understanding too; I'm the intimate friend and confidential adviser of pretty nigh every man, woman, and child that gets themselves into difficulties by being too nimble with their fingers, I'm - '

Mr Squeers's catalogue of his own merits and accomplishments, which was partly the result of a concerted plan between himself and Ralph Nickleby, and flowed, in part, from the black bottle, was here interrupted by Mrs Sliderskew.

'Ha, ha, ha!' she cried, folding her arms and wagging her head; 'and so he wasn't married after all, wasn't he. Not married after all?'

'No,' replied Squeers, 'that he wasn't!'

'And a young lover come and carried off the bride, eh?' said Peg.

'From under his very nose,' replied Squeers; 'and I'm told the young chap cut up rough besides, and broke the winders, and forced him to swaller his wedding favour which nearly choked him.'

'Tell me all about it again,' cried Peg, with a malicious relish of her old master's defeat, which made her natural hideousness something quite fearful; 'let's hear it all again, beginning at the beginning now, as if you'd never told me. Let's have it every word - now - now - beginning at the very first, you know, when he went to the house that morning!'

Mr Squeers, plying Mrs Sliderskew freely with the liquor, and sustaining himself under the exertion of speaking so loud by frequent applications to it himself, complied with this request by describing the discomfiture of Arthur Gride, with such improvements on the truth as happened to occur to him, and the ingenious invention and application of which had been very instrumental in recommending him to her notice in the beginning of their acquaintance. Mrs Sliderskew was in an ecstasy of delight, rolling her head about, drawing up her skinny shoulders, and wrinkling her cadaverous face into so many and such complicated forms of ugliness, as awakened the unbounded astonishment and disgust even of Mr Squeers.

'He's a treacherous old goat,' said Peg, 'and cozened me with cunning tricks and lying promises, but never mind. I'm even with him. I'm even with him.'

'More than even, Slider,' returned Squeers; 'you'd have been even with him if he'd got married; but with the disappointment besides, you're a long way ahead. Out of sight, Slider, quite out of sight. And that reminds me,' he added, handing her the glass, 'if you want me to give you my opinion of them deeds, and tell you what you'd better keep and what you'd better burn, why, now's your time, Slider.'

'There an't no hurry for that,' said Peg, with several knowing looks and winks.

'Oh! very well!' observed Squeers, 'it don't matter to me; you asked me, you know. I shouldn't charge you nothing, being a friend. You're the best judge of course. But you're a bold woman, Slider.'

'How do you mean, bold?' said Peg.

'Why, I only mean that if it was me, I wouldn't keep papers as might hang me, littering about when they might be turned into money - them as wasn't useful made away with, and them as was, laid by somewheres, safe; that's all,' returned Squeers; 'but everybody's the best judge of their own affairs. All I say is, Slider, I wouldn't do it.'

'Come,' said Peg, 'then you shall see 'em.'

'I don't want to see 'em,' replied Squeers, affecting to be out of humour; 'don't talk as if it was a treat. Show 'em to somebody else, and take their advice.'

Mr Squeers would, very likely, have carried on the farce of being offended a little longer, if Mrs Sliderskew, in her anxiety to restore herself to her former high position in his good graces, had not become so extremely affectionate that he stood at some risk of being smothered by her caresses. Repressing, with as good a grace as possible, these little familiarities - for which, there is reason to believe, the black bottle was at least as much to blame as any constitutional infirmity on the part of Mrs Sliderskew - he protested that he had only been joking: and, in proof of his unimpaired good-humour, that he was ready to examine the deeds at once, if, by so doing, he could afford any satisfaction or relief of mind to his fair friend.

'And now you're up, my Slider,' bawled Squeers, as she rose to fetch them, 'bolt the door.'

Peg trotted to the door, and after fumbling at the bolt, crept to the other end of the room, and from beneath the coals which filled the bottom of the cupboard, drew forth a small deal box. Having placed this on the floor at Squeers's feet, she brought, from under the pillow of her bed, a small key, with which she signed to that gentleman to open it. Mr Squeers, who had eagerly followed her every motion, lost no time in obeying this hint: and, throwing back the lid, gazed with rapture on the documents which lay within.

'Now you see,' said Peg, kneeling down on the floor beside him, and staying his impatient hand; 'what's of no use we'll burn; what we can get any money by, we'll keep; and if there's any we could get him into trouble by, and fret and waste away his heart to shreds, those we'll take particular care of; for that's what I want to do, and what I hoped to do when I left him.'

'I thought,' said Squeers, 'that you didn't bear him any particular good-will. But, I say, why didn't you take some money besides?'

'Some what?' asked Peg.

'Some money,' roared Squeers. 'I do believe the woman hears me, and wants to make me break a vessel, so that she may have the pleasure of nursing me. Some money, Slider, money!'

'Why, what a man you are to ask!' cried Peg, with some contempt. 'If I had taken money from Arthur Gride, he'd have scoured the whole earth to find me - aye, and he'd have smelt it out, and raked it up, somehow, if I had buried it at the bottom of the deepest well in England. No, no! I knew better than that. I took what I thought his secrets were hid in: and them he couldn't afford to make public, let'em be worth ever so much money. He's an old dog; a sly, old, cunning, thankless dog! He first starved, and then tricked me; and if I could I'd kill him.'

'All right, and very laudable,' said Squeers. 'But, first and foremost, Slider, burn the box. You should never keep things as may lead to discovery. Always mind that. So while you pull it to pieces (which you can easily do, for it's very old and rickety) and burn it in little bits, I'll look over the papers and tell you what they are.'

Peg, expressing her acquiescence in this arrangement, Mr Squeers turned the box bottom upwards, and tumbling the contents upon the floor, handed it to her; the destruction of the box being an extemporary device for engaging her attention, in case it should prove desirable to distract it from his own proceedings.

'There!' said Squeers; 'you poke the pieces between the bars, and make up a good fire, and I'll read the while. Let me see, let me see.' And taking the candle down beside him, Mr Squeers, with great eagerness and a cunning grin overspreading his face, entered upon his task of examination.

If the old woman had not been very deaf, she must have heard, when she last went to the door, the breathing of two persons close behind it: and if those two persons had been unacquainted with her infirmity, they must probably have chosen that moment either for presenting themselves or taking to flight. But, knowing with whom they had to deal, they remained quite still, and now, not only appeared unobserved at the door - which was not bolted, for the bolt had no hasp - but warily, and with noiseless footsteps, advanced into the room.

As they stole farther and farther in by slight and scarcely perceptible degrees, and with such caution that they scarcely seemed to breathe, the old hag and Squeers little dreaming of any such invasion, and utterly unconscious of there being any soul near but themselves, were busily occupied with their tasks. The old woman, with her wrinkled face close to the bars of the stove, puffing at the dull embers which had not yet caught the wood; Squeers stooping down to the candle, which brought out the full ugliness of his face, as the light of the fire did that of his companion; both intently engaged, and wearing faces of exultation which contrasted strongly with the anxious looks of those behind, who took advantage of the slightest sound to cover their advance, and, almost before they had moved an inch, and all was silent, stopped again. This, with the large bare room, damp walls, and flickering doubtful light, combined to form a scene which the most careless and indifferent spectator (could any have been present) could scarcely have failed to derive some interest from, and would not readily have forgotten.

Of the stealthy comers, Frank Cheeryble was one, and Newman Noggs the other. Newman had caught up, by the rusty nozzle, an old pair of bellows, which were just undergoing a flourish in the air preparatory to a descent upon the head of Mr Squeers, when Frank, with an earnest gesture, stayed his arm, and, taking another step in advance, came so close behind the schoolmaster that, by leaning slightly forward, he could plainly distinguish the writing which he held up to his eye.

Mr Squeers, not being remarkably erudite, appeared to be considerably puzzled by this first prize, which was in an engrossing hand, and not very legible except to a practised eye. Having tried it by reading from left to right, and from right to left, and finding it equally clear both ways, he turned it upside down with no better success.

'Ha, ha, ha!' chuckled Peg, who, on her knees before the fire, was feeding it with fragments of the box, and grinning in most devilish exultation. 'What's that writing about, eh?'

'Nothing particular,' replied Squeers, tossing it towards her. 'It's only an old lease, as well as I can make out. Throw it in the fire.'

Mrs Sliderskew complied, and inquired what the next one was.

'This,' said Squeers, 'is a bundle of overdue acceptances and renewed bills of six or eight young gentlemen, but they're all MPs, so it's of no use to anybody. Throw it in the fire!' Peg did as she was bidden, and waited for the next.

'This,' said Squeers, 'seems to be some deed of sale of the right of presentation to the rectory of Purechurch, in the valley of Cashup. Take care of that, Slider, literally for God's sake. It'll fetch its price at the Auction Mart.'

'What's the next?' inquired Peg.

'Why, this,' said Squeers, 'seems, from the two letters that's with it, to be a bond from a curate down in the country, to pay half a year's wages of forty pound for borrowing twenty. Take care of that, for if he don't pay it, his bishop will very soon be down upon him. We know what the camel and the needle's eye means; no man as can't live upon his income, whatever it is, must expect to go to heaven at any price. It's very odd; I don't see anything like it yet.'

'What's the matter?' said Peg.

'Nothing,' replied Squeers, 'only I'm looking for - '

Newman raised the bellows again. Once more, Frank, by a rapid motion of his arm, unaccompanied by any noise, checked him in his purpose.

'Here you are,' said Squeers, 'bonds - take care of them. Warrant of attorney - take care of that. Two cognovits - take care of them. Lease and release - burn that. Ah! 'Madeline Bray - come of age or marry - the said Madeline' - here, burn THAT!'

Eagerly throwing towards the old woman a parchment that he caught up for the purpose, Squeers, as she turned her head, thrust into the breast of his large coat, the deed in which these words had caught his eye, and burst into a shout of triumph.

'I've got it!' said Squeers. 'I've got it! Hurrah! The plan was a good one, though the chance was desperate, and the day's our own at last!'

Peg demanded what he laughed at, but no answer was returned. Newman's arm could no longer be restrained; the bellows, descending heavily and with unerring aim on the very centre of Mr Squeers's head, felled him to the floor, and stretched him on it flat and senseless.