

Chapter LIX

The Plots begin to fail, and Doubts and Dangers to disturb the Plotter

Ralph sat alone, in the solitary room where he was accustomed to take his meals, and to sit of nights when no profitable occupation called him abroad. Before him was an untasted breakfast, and near to where his fingers beat restlessly upon the table, lay his watch. It was long past the time at which, for many years, he had put it in his pocket and gone with measured steps downstairs to the business of the day, but he took as little heed of its monotonous warning, as of the meat and drink before him, and remained with his head resting on one hand, and his eyes fixed moodily on the ground.

This departure from his regular and constant habit, in one so regular and unvarying in all that appertained to the daily pursuit of riches, would almost of itself have told that the usurer was not well. That he laboured under some mental or bodily indisposition, and that it was one of no slight kind so to affect a man like him, was sufficiently shown by his haggard face, jaded air, and hollow languid eyes: which he raised at last with a start and a hasty glance around him, as one who suddenly awakes from sleep, and cannot immediately recognise the place in which he finds himself.

'What is this,' he said, 'that hangs over me, and I cannot shake off? I have never pampered myself, and should not be ill. I have never moped, and pined, and yielded to fancies; but what CAN a man do without rest?'

He pressed his hand upon his forehead.

'Night after night comes and goes, and I have no rest. If I sleep, what rest is that which is disturbed by constant dreams of the same detested faces crowding round me - of the same detested people, in every variety of action, mingling with all I say and do, and always to my defeat? Waking, what rest have I, constantly haunted by this heavy shadow of - I know not what - which is its worst character? I must have rest. One night's unbroken rest, and I should be a man again.'

Pushing the table from him while he spoke, as though he loathed the sight of food, he encountered the watch: the hands of which were almost upon noon.

'This is strange!' he said; 'noon, and Noggs not here! What drunken brawl keeps him away? I would give something now - something in money even after that dreadful loss - if he had stabbed a man in a

tavern scuffle, or broken into a house, or picked a pocket, or done anything that would send him abroad with an iron ring upon his leg, and rid me of him. Better still, if I could throw temptation in his way, and lure him on to rob me. He should be welcome to what he took, so I brought the law upon him; for he is a traitor, I swear! How, or when, or where, I don't know, though I suspect.'

After waiting for another half-hour, he dispatched the woman who kept his house to Newman's lodging, to inquire if he were ill, and why he had not come or sent. She brought back answer that he had not been home all night, and that no one could tell her anything about him.

'But there is a gentleman, sir,' she said, 'below, who was standing at the door when I came in, and he says - '

'What says he?' demanded Ralph, turning angrily upon her. 'I told you I would see nobody.'

'He says,' replied the woman, abashed by his harshness, 'that he comes on very particular business which admits of no excuse; and I thought perhaps it might be about - '

'About what, in the devil's name?' said Ralph. 'You spy and speculate on people's business with me, do you?'

'Dear, no, sir! I saw you were anxious, and thought it might be about Mr Noggs; that's all.'

'Saw I was anxious!' muttered Ralph; 'they all watch me, now. Where is this person? You did not say I was not down yet, I hope?'

The woman replied that he was in the little office, and that she had said her master was engaged, but she would take the message.

'Well,' said Ralph, 'I'll see him. Go you to your kitchen, and keep there. Do you mind me?'

Glad to be released, the woman quickly disappeared. Collecting himself, and assuming as much of his accustomed manner as his utmost resolution could summon, Ralph descended the stairs. After pausing for a few moments, with his hand upon the lock, he entered Newman's room, and confronted Mr Charles Cheeryble.

Of all men alive, this was one of the last he would have wished to meet at any time; but, now that he recognised in him only the patron and protector of Nicholas, he would rather have seen a spectre. One beneficial effect, however, the encounter had upon him. It instantly

roused all his dormant energies; rekindled in his breast the passions that, for many years, had found an improving home there; called up all his wrath, hatred, and malice; restored the sneer to his lip, and the scowl to his brow; and made him again, in all outward appearance, the same Ralph Nickleby whom so many had bitter cause to remember.

'Humph!' said Ralph, pausing at the door. 'This is an unexpected favour, sir.'

'And an unwelcome one,' said brother Charles; 'an unwelcome one, I know.'

'Men say you are truth itself, sir,' replied Ralph. 'You speak truth now, at all events, and I'll not contradict you. The favour is, at least, as unwelcome as it is unexpected. I can scarcely say more.'

'Plainly, sir - ' began brother Charles.

'Plainly, sir,' interrupted Ralph, 'I wish this conference to be a short one, and to end where it begins. I guess the subject upon which you are about to speak, and I'll not hear you. You like plainness, I believe; there it is. Here is the door as you see. Our way lies in very different directions. Take yours, I beg of you, and leave me to pursue mine in quiet.'

'In quiet!' repeated brother Charles mildly, and looking at him with more of pity than reproach. 'To pursue HIS way in quiet!'

'You will scarcely remain in my house, I presume, sir, against my will,' said Ralph; 'or you can scarcely hope to make an impression upon a man who closes his ears to all that you can say, and is firmly and resolutely determined not to hear you.'

'Mr Nickleby, sir,' returned brother Charles: no less mildly than before, but firmly too: 'I come here against my will, sorely and grievously against my will. I have never been in this house before; and, to speak my mind, sir, I don't feel at home or easy in it, and have no wish ever to be here again. You do not guess the subject on which I come to speak to you; you do not indeed. I am sure of that, or your manner would be a very different one.'

Ralph glanced keenly at him, but the clear eye and open countenance of the honest old merchant underwent no change of expression, and met his look without reserve.

'Shall I go on?' said Mr Cheeryble.

'Oh, by all means, if you please,' returned Ralph drily. 'Here are walls to speak to, sir, a desk, and two stools: most attentive auditors, and certain not to interrupt you. Go on, I beg; make my house yours, and perhaps by the time I return from my walk, you will have finished what you have to say, and will yield me up possession again.'

So saying, he buttoned his coat, and turning into the passage, took down his hat. The old gentleman followed, and was about to speak, when Ralph waved him off impatiently, and said:

'Not a word. I tell you, sir, not a word. Virtuous as you are, you are not an angel yet, to appear in men's houses whether they will or no, and pour your speech into unwilling ears. Preach to the walls I tell you; not to me!'

'I am no angel, Heaven knows,' returned brother Charles, shaking his head, 'but an erring and imperfect man; nevertheless, there is one quality which all men have, in common with the angels, blessed opportunities of exercising, if they will; mercy. It is an errand of mercy that brings me here. Pray let me discharge it.'

'I show no mercy,' retorted Ralph with a triumphant smile, 'and I ask none. Seek no mercy from me, sir, in behalf of the fellow who has imposed upon your childish credulity, but let him expect the worst that I can do.'

'HE ask mercy at your hands!' exclaimed the old merchant warmly; 'ask it at his, sir; ask it at his. If you will not hear me now, when you may, hear me when you must, or anticipate what I would say, and take measures to prevent our ever meeting again. Your nephew is a noble lad, sir, an honest, noble lad. What you are, Mr Nickleby, I will not say; but what you have done, I know. Now, sir, when you go about the business in which you have been recently engaged, and find it difficult of pursuing, come to me and my brother Ned, and Tim Linkinwater, sir, and we'll explain it for you - and come soon, or it may be too late, and you may have it explained with a little more roughness, and a little less delicacy - and never forget, sir, that I came here this morning, in mercy to you, and am still ready to talk to you in the same spirit.'

With these words, uttered with great emphasis and emotion, brother Charles put on his broad-brimmed hat, and, passing Ralph Nickleby without any other remark, trotted nimbly into the street. Ralph looked after him, but neither moved nor spoke for some time: when he broke what almost seemed the silence of stupefaction, by a scornful laugh.

'This,' he said, 'from its wildness, should be another of those dreams that have so broken my rest of late. In mercy to me! Pho! The old simpleton has gone mad.'

Although he expressed himself in this derisive and contemptuous manner, it was plain that, the more Ralph pondered, the more ill at ease he became, and the more he laboured under some vague anxiety and alarm, which increased as the time passed on and no tidings of Newman Noggs arrived. After waiting until late in the afternoon, tortured by various apprehensions and misgivings, and the recollection of the warning which his nephew had given him when they last met: the further confirmation of which now presented itself in one shape of probability, now in another, and haunted him perpetually: he left home, and, scarcely knowing why, save that he was in a suspicious and agitated mood, betook himself to Snawley's house. His wife presented herself; and, of her, Ralph inquired whether her husband was at home.

'No,' she said sharply, 'he is not indeed, and I don't think he will be at home for a very long time; that's more.'

'Do you know who I am?' asked Ralph.

'Oh yes, I know you very well; too well, perhaps, and perhaps he does too, and sorry am I that I should have to say it.'

'Tell him that I saw him through the window-blind above, as I crossed the road just now, and that I would speak to him on business,' said Ralph. 'Do you hear?'

'I hear,' rejoined Mrs Snawley, taking no further notice of the request.

'I knew this woman was a hypocrite, in the way of psalms and Scripture phrases,' said Ralph, passing quietly by, 'but I never knew she drank before.'

'Stop! You don't come in here,' said Mr Snawley's better-half, interposing her person, which was a robust one, in the doorway. 'You have said more than enough to him on business, before now. I always told him what dealing with you and working out your schemes would come to. It was either you or the schoolmaster - one of you, or the two between you - that got the forged letter done; remember that! That wasn't his doing, so don't lay it at his door.'

'Hold your tongue, you Jezebel,' said Ralph, looking fearfully round.

'Ah, I know when to hold my tongue, and when to speak, Mr Nickleby,' retorted the dame. 'Take care that other people know when to hold theirs.'

'You jade,' said Ralph, 'if your husband has been idiot enough to trust you with his secrets, keep them; keep them, she-devil that you are!'

'Not so much his secrets as other people's secrets, perhaps,' retorted the woman; 'not so much his secrets as yours. None of your black looks at me! You'll want 'em all, perhaps, for another time. You had better keep 'em.'

'Will you,' said Ralph, suppressing his passion as well as he could, and clutching her tightly by the wrist; 'will you go to your husband and tell him that I know he is at home, and that I must see him? And will you tell me what it is that you and he mean by this new style of behaviour?'

'No,' replied the woman, violently disengaging herself, 'I'll do neither.'

'You set me at defiance, do you?' said Ralph.

'Yes,' was the answer. I do.'

For an instant Ralph had his hand raised, as though he were about to strike her; but, checking himself, and nodding his head and muttering as though to assure her he would not forget this, walked away.

Thence, he went straight to the inn which Mr Squeers frequented, and inquired when he had been there last; in the vague hope that, successful or unsuccessful, he might, by this time, have returned from his mission and be able to assure him that all was safe. But Mr Squeers had not been there for ten days, and all that the people could tell about him was, that he had left his luggage and his bill.

Disturbed by a thousand fears and surmises, and bent upon ascertaining whether Squeers had any suspicion of Snawley, or was, in any way, a party to this altered behaviour, Ralph determined to hazard the extreme step of inquiring for him at the Lambeth lodging, and having an interview with him even there. Bent upon this purpose, and in that mood in which delay is insupportable, he repaired at once to the place; and being, by description, perfectly acquainted with the situation of his room, crept upstairs and knocked gently at the door.

Not one, nor two, nor three, nor yet a dozen knocks, served to convince Ralph, against his wish, that there was nobody inside. He reasoned that he might be asleep; and, listening, almost persuaded himself that he could hear him breathe. Even when he was satisfied

that he could not be there, he sat patiently on a broken stair and waited; arguing, that he had gone out upon some slight errand, and must soon return.

Many feet came up the creaking stairs; and the step of some seemed to his listening ear so like that of the man for whom he waited, that Ralph often stood up to be ready to address him when he reached the top; but, one by one, each person turned off into some room short of the place where he was stationed: and at every such disappointment he felt quite chilled and lonely.

At length he felt it was hopeless to remain, and going downstairs again, inquired of one of the lodgers if he knew anything of Mr Squeers's movements - mentioning that worthy by an assumed name which had been agreed upon between them. By this lodger he was referred to another, and by him to someone else, from whom he learnt, that, late on the previous night, he had gone out hastily with two men, who had shortly afterwards returned for the old woman who lived on the same floor; and that, although the circumstance had attracted the attention of the informant, he had not spoken to them at the time, nor made any inquiry afterwards.

This possessed him with the idea that, perhaps, Peg Sliderskew had been apprehended for the robbery, and that Mr Squeers, being with her at the time, had been apprehended also, on suspicion of being a confederate. If this were so, the fact must be known to Gride; and to Gride's house he directed his steps; now thoroughly alarmed, and fearful that there were indeed plots afoot, tending to his discomfiture and ruin.

Arrived at the usurer's house, he found the windows close shut, the dingy blinds drawn down; all was silent, melancholy, and deserted. But this was its usual aspect. He knocked - gently at first - then loud and vigorously. Nobody came. He wrote a few words in pencil on a card, and having thrust it under the door was going away, when a noise above, as though a window-sash were stealthily raised, caught his ear, and looking up he could just discern the face of Gride himself, cautiously peering over the house parapet from the window of the garret. Seeing who was below, he drew it in again; not so quickly, however, but that Ralph let him know he was observed, and called to him to come down.

The call being repeated, Gride looked out again, so cautiously that no part of the old man's body was visible. The sharp features and white hair appearing alone, above the parapet, looked like a severed head garnishing the wall.

'Hush!' he cried. 'Go away, go away!'

'Come down,' said Ralph, beckoning him.

'Go a - way!' squeaked Gride, shaking his head in a sort of ecstasy of impatience. 'Don't speak to me, don't knock, don't call attention to the house, but go away.'

'I'll knock, I swear, till I have your neighbours up in arms,' said Ralph, 'if you don't tell me what you mean by lurking there, you whining cur.'

'I can't hear what you say - don't talk to me - it isn't safe - go away - go away!' returned Gride.

'Come down, I say. Will you come down?' said Ralph fiercely.

'No - o - o - oo,' snarled Gride. He drew in his head; and Ralph, left standing in the street, could hear the sash closed, as gently and carefully as it had been opened.

'How is this,' said he, 'that they all fall from me, and shun me like the plague, these men who have licked the dust from my feet? IS my day past, and is this indeed the coming on of night? I'll know what it means! I will, at any cost. I am firmer and more myself, just now, than I have been these many days.'

Turning from the door, which, in the first transport of his rage, he had meditated battering upon until Gride's very fears should impel him to open it, he turned his face towards the city, and working his way steadily through the crowd which was pouring from it (it was by this time between five and six o'clock in the afternoon) went straight to the house of business of the brothers Cheeryble, and putting his head into the glass case, found Tim Linkinwater alone.

'My name's Nickleby,' said Ralph.

'I know it,' replied Tim, surveying him through his spectacles.

'Which of your firm was it who called on me this morning?' demanded Ralph.

'Mr Charles.'

'Then, tell Mr Charles I want to see him.'

'You shall see,' said Tim, getting off his stool with great agility, 'you shall see, not only Mr Charles, but Mr Ned likewise.'

Tim stopped, looked steadily and severely at Ralph, nodded his head once, in a curt manner which seemed to say there was a little more

behind, and vanished. After a short interval, he returned, and, ushering Ralph into the presence of the two brothers, remained in the room himself.

'I want to speak to you, who spoke to me this morning,' said Ralph, pointing out with his finger the man whom he addressed.

'I have no secrets from my brother Ned, or from Tim Linkinwater,' observed brother Charles quietly.

'I have,' said Ralph.

'Mr Nickleby, sir,' said brother Ned, 'the matter upon which my brother Charles called upon you this morning is one which is already perfectly well known to us three, and to others besides, and must unhappily soon become known to a great many more. He waited upon you, sir, this morning, alone, as a matter of delicacy and consideration. We feel, now, that further delicacy and consideration would be misplaced; and, if we confer together, it must be as we are or not at all.'

'Well, gentlemen,' said Ralph with a curl of the lip, 'talking in riddles would seem to be the peculiar forte of you two, and I suppose your clerk, like a prudent man, has studied the art also with a view to your good graces. Talk in company, gentlemen, in God's name. I'll humour you.'

'Humour!' cried Tim Linkinwater, suddenly growing very red in the face. 'He'll humour us! He'll humour Cheeryble Brothers! Do you hear that? Do you hear him? DO you hear him say he'll humour Cheeryble Brothers?'

'Tim,' said Charles and Ned together, 'pray, Tim, pray now, don't.'

Tim, taking the hint, stifled his indignation as well as he could, and suffered it to escape through his spectacles, with the additional safety-valve of a short hysterical laugh now and then, which seemed to relieve him mightily.

'As nobody bids me to a seat,' said Ralph, looking round, 'I'll take one, for I am fatigued with walking. And now, if you please, gentlemen, I wish to know - I demand to know; I have the right - what you have to say to me, which justifies such a tone as you have assumed, and that underhand interference in my affairs which, I have reason to suppose, you have been practising. I tell you plainly, gentlemen, that little as I care for the opinion of the world (as the slang goes), I don't choose to submit quietly to slander and malice. Whether you suffer yourselves to be imposed upon too easily, or wilfully make yourselves parties to

it, the result to me is the same. In either case, you can't expect from a plain man like myself much consideration or forbearance.'

So coolly and deliberately was this said, that nine men out of ten, ignorant of the circumstances, would have supposed Ralph to be really an injured man. There he sat, with folded arms; paler than usual, certainly, and sufficiently ill-favoured, but quite collected - far more so than the brothers or the exasperated Tim - and ready to face out the worst.

'Very well, sir,' said brother Charles. 'Very well. Brother Ned, will you ring the bell?'

'Charles, my dear fellow! stop one instant,' returned the other. 'It will be better for Mr Nickleby and for our object that he should remain silent, if he can, till we have said what we have to say. I wish him to understand that.'

'Quite right, quite right,' said brother Charles.

Ralph smiled, but made no reply. The bell was rung; the room-door opened; a man came in, with a halting walk; and, looking round, Ralph's eyes met those of Newman Noggs. From that moment, his heart began to fail him.

'This is a good beginning,' he said bitterly. 'Oh! this is a good beginning. You are candid, honest, open-hearted, fair-dealing men! I always knew the real worth of such characters as yours! To tamper with a fellow like this, who would sell his soul (if he had one) for drink, and whose every word is a lie. What men are safe if this is done? Oh, it's a good beginning!'

'I WILL speak,' cried Newman, standing on tiptoe to look over Tim's head, who had interposed to prevent him. 'Hallo, you sir - old Nickleby! - what do you mean when you talk of 'a fellow like this'? Who made me 'a fellow like this'? If I would sell my soul for drink, why wasn't I a thief, swindler, housebreaker, area sneak, robber of pence out of the trays of blind men's dogs, rather than your drudge and packhorse? If my every word was a lie, why wasn't I a pet and favourite of yours? Lie! When did I ever cringe and fawn to you. Tell me that! I served you faithfully. I did more work, because I was poor, and took more hard words from you because I despised you and them, than any man you could have got from the parish workhouse. I did. I served you because I was proud; because I was a lonely man with you, and there were no other drudges to see my degradation; and because nobody knew, better than you, that I was a ruined man: that I hadn't always been what I am: and that I might have been better off, if I

hadn't been a fool and fallen into the hands of you and others who were knaves. Do you deny that?

'Gently,' reasoned Tim; 'you said you wouldn't.'

'I said I wouldn't!' cried Newman, thrusting him aside, and moving his hand as Tim moved, so as to keep him at arm's length; 'don't tell me! Here, you Nickleby! Don't pretend not to mind me; it won't do; I know better. You were talking of tampering, just now. Who tampered with Yorkshire schoolmasters, and, while they sent the drudge out, that he shouldn't overhear, forgot that such great caution might render him suspicious, and that he might watch his master out at nights, and might set other eyes to watch the schoolmaster? Who tampered with a selfish father, urging him to sell his daughter to old Arthur Gride, and tampered with Gride too, and did so in the little office, WITH A CLOSET IN THE ROOM?'

Ralph had put a great command upon himself; but he could not have suppressed a slight start, if he had been certain to be beheaded for it next moment.

'Aha!' cried Newman, 'you mind me now, do you? What first set this fag to be jealous of his master's actions, and to feel that, if he hadn't crossed him when he might, he would have been as bad as he, or worse? That master's cruel treatment of his own flesh and blood, and vile designs upon a young girl who interested even his broken-down, drunken, miserable hack, and made him linger in his service, in the hope of doing her some good (as, thank God, he had done others once or twice before), when he would, otherwise, have relieved his feelings by pummelling his master soundly, and then going to the Devil. He would - mark that; and mark this - that I'm here now, because these gentlemen thought it best. When I sought them out (as I did; there was no tampering with me), I told them I wanted help to find you out, to trace you down, to go through with what I had begun, to help the right; and that when I had done it, I'd burst into your room and tell you all, face to face, man to man, and like a man. Now I've said my say, and let anybody else say theirs, and fire away!'

With this concluding sentiment, Newman Noggs, who had been perpetually sitting down and getting up again all through his speech, which he had delivered in a series of jerks; and who was, from the violent exercise and the excitement combined, in a state of most intense and fiery heat; became, without passing through any intermediate stage, stiff, upright, and motionless, and so remained, staring at Ralph Nickleby with all his might and main.

Ralph looked at him for an instant, and for an instant only; then, waved his hand, and beating the ground with his foot, said in a choking voice:

'Go on, gentlemen, go on! I'm patient, you see. There's law to be had, there's law. I shall call you to an account for this. Take care what you say; I shall make you prove it.'

'The proof is ready,' returned brother Charles, 'quite ready to our hands. The man Snawley, last night, made a confession.'

'Who may 'the man Snawley' be,' returned Ralph, 'and what may his 'confession' have to do with my affairs?'

To this inquiry, put with a dogged inflexibility of manner, the old gentleman returned no answer, but went on to say, that to show him how much they were in earnest, it would be necessary to tell him, not only what accusations were made against him, but what proof of them they had, and how that proof had been acquired. This laying open of the whole question brought up brother Ned, Tim Linkinwater, and Newman Noggs, all three at once; who, after a vast deal of talking together, and a scene of great confusion, laid before Ralph, in distinct terms, the following statement.

That, Newman, having been solemnly assured by one not then producible that Smike was not the son of Snawley, and this person having offered to make oath to that effect, if necessary, they had by this communication been first led to doubt the claim set up, which they would otherwise have seen no reason to dispute, supported as it was by evidence which they had no power of disproving. That, once suspecting the existence of a conspiracy, they had no difficulty in tracing back its origin to the malice of Ralph, and the vindictiveness and avarice of Squeers. That, suspicion and proof being two very different things, they had been advised by a lawyer, eminent for his sagacity and acuteness in such practice, to resist the proceedings taken on the other side for the recovery of the youth as slowly and artfully as possible, and meanwhile to beset Snawley (with whom it was clear the main falsehood must rest); to lead him, if possible, into contradictory and conflicting statements; to harass him by all available means; and so to practise on his fears, and regard for his own safety, as to induce him to divulge the whole scheme, and to give up his employer and whomsoever else he could implicate. That, all this had been skilfully done; but that Snawley, who was well practised in the arts of low cunning and intrigue, had successfully baffled all their attempts, until an unexpected circumstance had brought him, last night, upon his knees.

It thus arose. When Newman Noggs reported that Squeers was again in town, and that an interview of such secrecy had taken place between him and Ralph that he had been sent out of the house, plainly lest he should overhear a word, a watch was set upon the schoolmaster, in the hope that something might be discovered which would throw some light upon the suspected plot. It being found, however, that he held no further communication with Ralph, nor any with Snawley, and lived quite alone, they were completely at fault; the watch was withdrawn, and they would have observed his motions no longer, if it had not happened that, one night, Newman stumbled unobserved on him and Ralph in the street together. Following them, he discovered, to his surprise, that they repaired to various low lodging-houses, and taverns kept by broken gamblers, to more than one of whom Ralph was known, and that they were in pursuit - so he found by inquiries when they had left - of an old woman, whose description exactly tallied with that of deaf Mrs Sliderskew. Affairs now appearing to assume a more serious complexion, the watch was renewed with increased vigilance; an officer was procured, who took up his abode in the same tavern with Squeers: and by him and Frank Cheeryble the footsteps of the unconscious schoolmaster were dogged, until he was safely housed in the lodging at Lambeth. Mr Squeers having shifted his lodging, the officer shifted his, and lying concealed in the same street, and, indeed, in the opposite house, soon found that Mr Squeers and Mrs Sliderskew were in constant communication.

In this state of things, Arthur Gride was appealed to. The robbery, partly owing to the inquisitiveness of the neighbours, and partly to his own grief and rage, had, long ago, become known; but he positively refused to give his sanction or yield any assistance to the old woman's capture, and was seized with such a panic at the idea of being called upon to give evidence against her, that he shut himself up close in his house, and refused to hold communication with anybody. Upon this, the pursuers took counsel together, and, coming so near the truth as to arrive at the conclusion that Gride and Ralph, with Squeers for their instrument, were negotiating for the recovery of some of the stolen papers which would not bear the light, and might possibly explain the hints relative to Madeline which Newman had overheard, resolved that Mrs Sliderskew should be taken into custody before she had parted with them: and Squeers too, if anything suspicious could be attached to him. Accordingly, a search-warrant being procured, and all prepared, Mr Squeers's window was watched, until his light was put out, and the time arrived when, as had been previously ascertained, he usually visited Mrs Sliderskew. This done, Frank Cheeryble and Newman stole upstairs to listen to their discourse, and to give the signal to the officer at the most favourable time. At what an opportune moment they arrived, how they listened, and what they heard, is already known to the reader. Mr Squeers, still half stunned, was hurried off with a stolen deed in his possession, and Mrs

Sliderskew was apprehended likewise. The information being promptly carried to Snawley that Squeers was in custody - he was not told for what - that worthy, first extorting a promise that he should be kept harmless, declared the whole tale concerning Smike to be a fiction and forgery, and implicated Ralph Nickleby to the fullest extent. As to Mr Squeers, he had, that morning, undergone a private examination before a magistrate; and, being unable to account satisfactorily for his possession of the deed or his companionship with Mrs Sliderskew, had been, with her, remanded for a week.

All these discoveries were now related to Ralph, circumstantially, and in detail. Whatever impression they secretly produced, he suffered no sign of emotion to escape him, but sat perfectly still, not raising his frowning eyes from the ground, and covering his mouth with his hand. When the narrative was concluded; he raised his head hastily, as if about to speak, but on brother Charles resuming, fell into his old attitude again.

'I told you this morning,' said the old gentleman, laying his hand upon his brother's shoulder, 'that I came to you in mercy. How far you may be implicated in this last transaction, or how far the person who is now in custody may criminate you, you best know. But, justice must take its course against the parties implicated in the plot against this poor, unoffending, injured lad. It is not in my power, or in the power of my brother Ned, to save you from the consequences. The utmost we can do is, to warn you in time, and to give you an opportunity of escaping them. We would not have an old man like you disgraced and punished by your near relation; nor would we have him forget, like you, all ties of blood and nature. We entreat you - brother Ned, you join me, I know, in this entreaty, and so, Tim Linkinwater, do you, although you pretend to be an obstinate dog, sir, and sit there frowning as if you didn't - we entreat you to retire from London, to take shelter in some place where you will be safe from the consequences of these wicked designs, and where you may have time, sir, to atone for them, and to become a better man.'

'And do you think,' returned Ralph, rising, 'and do you think, you will so easily crush ME? Do you think that a hundred well-arranged plans, or a hundred suborned witnesses, or a hundred false curs at my heels, or a hundred canting speeches full of oily words, will move me? I thank you for disclosing your schemes, which I am now prepared for. You have not the man to deal with that you think; try me! and remember that I spit upon your fair words and false dealings, and dare you - provoke you - taunt you - to do to me the very worst you can!'

Thus they parted, for that time; but the worst had not come yet.