

Chapter LXI

Wherein Nicholas and his Sister forfeit the good Opinion of all worldly and prudent People

On the next morning after Brooker's disclosure had been made, Nicholas returned home. The meeting between him and those whom he had left there was not without strong emotion on both sides; for they had been informed by his letters of what had occurred: and, besides that his griefs were theirs, they mourned with him the death of one whose forlorn and helpless state had first established a claim upon their compassion, and whose truth of heart and grateful earnest nature had, every day, endeared him to them more and more.

'I am sure,' said Mrs Nickleby, wiping her eyes, and sobbing bitterly, 'I have lost the best, the most zealous, and most attentive creature that has ever been a companion to me in my life - putting you, my dear Nicholas, and Kate, and your poor papa, and that well-behaved nurse who ran away with the linen and the twelve small forks, out of the question, of course. Of all the tractable, equal-tempered, attached, and faithful beings that ever lived, I believe he was the most so. To look round upon the garden, now, that he took so much pride in, or to go into his room and see it filled with so many of those little contrivances for our comfort that he was so fond of making, and made so well, and so little thought he would leave unfinished - I can't bear it, I cannot really. Ah! This is a great trial to me, a great trial. It will be comfort to you, my dear Nicholas, to the end of your life, to recollect how kind and good you always were to him - so it will be to me, to think what excellent terms we were always upon, and how fond he always was of me, poor fellow! It was very natural you should have been attached to him, my dear - very - and of course you were, and are very much cut up by this. I am sure it's only necessary to look at you and see how changed you are, to see that; but nobody knows what my feelings are - nobody can - it's quite impossible!'

While Mrs Nickleby, with the utmost sincerity, gave vent to her sorrows after her own peculiar fashion of considering herself foremost, she was not the only one who indulged such feelings. Kate, although well accustomed to forget herself when others were to be considered, could not repress her grief; Madeline was scarcely less moved than she; and poor, hearty, honest little Miss La Creevy, who had come upon one of her visits while Nicholas was away, and had done nothing, since the sad news arrived, but console and cheer them all, no sooner beheld him coming in at the door, than she sat herself down upon the stairs, and bursting into a flood of tears, refused for a long time to be comforted.

'It hurts me so,' cried the poor body, 'to see him come back alone. I can't help thinking what he must have suffered himself. I wouldn't mind so much if he gave way a little more; but he bears it so manfully.'

'Why, so I should,' said Nicholas, 'should I not?'

'Yes, yes,' replied the little woman, 'and bless you for a good creature! but this does seem at first to a simple soul like me - I know it's wrong to say so, and I shall be sorry for it presently - this does seem such a poor reward for all you have done.'

'Nay,' said Nicholas gently, 'what better reward could I have, than the knowledge that his last days were peaceful and happy, and the recollection that I was his constant companion, and was not prevented, as I might have been by a hundred circumstances, from being beside him?'

'To be sure,' sobbed Miss La Creevy; 'it's very true, and I'm an ungrateful, impious, wicked little fool, I know.'

With that, the good soul fell to crying afresh, and, endeavouring to recover herself, tried to laugh. The laugh and the cry, meeting each other thus abruptly, had a struggle for the mastery; the result was, that it was a drawn battle, and Miss La Creevy went into hysterics.

Waiting until they were all tolerably quiet and composed again, Nicholas, who stood in need of some rest after his long journey, retired to his own room, and throwing himself, dressed as he was, upon the bed, fell into a sound sleep. When he awoke, he found Kate sitting by his bedside, who, seeing that he had opened his eyes, stooped down to kiss him.

'I came to tell you how glad I am to see you home again.'

'But I can't tell you how glad I am to see you, Kate.'

'We have been wearying so for your return,' said Kate, 'mama and I, and - and Madeline.'

'You said in your last letter that she was quite well,' said Nicholas, rather hastily, and colouring as he spoke. 'Has nothing been said, since I have been away, about any future arrangements that the brothers have in contemplation for her?'

'Oh, not a word,' replied Kate. 'I can't think of parting from her without sorrow; and surely, Nicholas, YOU don't wish it!'

Nicholas coloured again, and, sitting down beside his sister on a little couch near the window, said:

'No, Kate, no, I do not. I might strive to disguise my real feelings from anybody but you; but I will tell you that - briefly and plainly, Kate - that I love her.'

Kate's eyes brightened, and she was going to make some reply, when Nicholas laid his hand upon her arm, and went on:

'Nobody must know this but you. She, last of all.'

'Dear Nicholas!'

'Last of all; never, though never is a long day. Sometimes, I try to think that the time may come when I may honestly tell her this; but it is so far off; in such distant perspective, so many years must elapse before it comes, and when it does come (if ever) I shall be so unlike what I am now, and shall have so outlived my days of youth and romance - though not, I am sure, of love for her - that even I feel how visionary all such hopes must be, and try to crush them rudely myself, and have the pain over, rather than suffer time to wither them, and keep the disappointment in store. No, Kate! Since I have been absent, I have had, in that poor fellow who is gone, perpetually before my eyes, another instance of the munificent liberality of these noble brothers. As far as in me lies, I will deserve it, and if I have wavered in my bounden duty to them before, I am now determined to discharge it rigidly, and to put further delays and temptations beyond my reach.'

'Before you say another word, dear Nicholas,' said Kate, turning pale, 'you must hear what I have to tell you. I came on purpose, but I had not the courage. What you say now, gives me new heart.' She faltered, and burst into tears.

There was that in her manner which prepared Nicholas for what was coming. Kate tried to speak, but her tears prevented her.

'Come, you foolish girl,' said Nicholas; 'why, Kate, Kate, be a woman! I think I know what you would tell me. It concerns Mr Frank, does it not?'

Kate sunk her head upon his shoulder, and sobbed out 'Yes.'

'And he has offered you his hand, perhaps, since I have been away,' said Nicholas; 'is that it? Yes. Well, well; it is not so difficult, you see, to tell me, after all. He offered you his hand?'

'Which I refused,' said Kate.

'Yes; and why?'

'I told him,' she said, in a trembling voice, 'all that I have since found you told mama; and while I could not conceal from him, and cannot from you, that - that it was a pang and a great trial, I did so firmly, and begged him not to see me any more.'

'That's my own brave Kate!' said Nicholas, pressing her to his breast. 'I knew you would.'

'He tried to alter my resolution,' said Kate, 'and declared that, be my decision what it might, he would not only inform his uncles of the step he had taken, but would communicate it to you also, directly you returned. I am afraid,' she added, her momentary composure forsaking her, 'I am afraid I may not have said, strongly enough, how deeply I felt such disinterested love, and how earnestly I prayed for his future happiness. If you do talk together, I should - I should like him to know that.'

'And did you suppose, Kate, when you had made this sacrifice to what you knew was right and honourable, that I should shrink from mine?' said Nicholas tenderly.

'Oh no! not if your position had been the same, but - '

'But it is the same,' interrupted Nicholas. 'Madeline is not the near relation of our benefactors, but she is closely bound to them by ties as dear; and I was first intrusted with her history, specially because they reposed unbounded confidence in me, and believed that I was as true as steel. How base would it be of me to take advantage of the circumstances which placed her here, or of the slight service I was happily able to render her, and to seek to engage her affections when the result must be, if I succeeded, that the brothers would be disappointed in their darling wish of establishing her as their own child, and that I must seem to hope to build my fortunes on their compassion for the young creature whom I had so meanly and unworthily entrapped: turning her very gratitude and warmth of heart to my own purpose and account, and trading in her misfortunes! I, too, whose duty, and pride, and pleasure, Kate, it is to have other claims upon me which I will never forget; and who have the means of a comfortable and happy life already, and have no right to look beyond it! I have determined to remove this weight from my mind. I doubt whether I have not done wrong, even now; and today I will, without reserve or equivocation, disclose my real reasons to Mr Cherryble, and implore him to take immediate measures for removing this young lady to the shelter of some other roof.'

'Today? so very soon?'

'I have thought of this for weeks, and why should I postpone it? If the scene through which I have just passed has taught me to reflect, and has awakened me to a more anxious and careful sense of duty, why should I wait until the impression has cooled? You would not dissuade me, Kate; now would you?'

'You may grow rich, you know,' said Kate.

'I may grow rich!' repeated Nicholas, with a mournful smile, 'ay, and I may grow old! But rich or poor, or old or young, we shall ever be the same to each other, and in that our comfort lies. What if we have but one home? It can never be a solitary one to you and me. What if we were to remain so true to these first impressions as to form no others? It is but one more link to the strong chain that binds us together. It seems but yesterday that we were playfellows, Kate, and it will seem but tomorrow when we are staid old people, looking back to these cares as we look back, now, to those of our childish days: and recollecting with a melancholy pleasure that the time was, when they could move us. Perhaps then, when we are quaint old folks and talk of the times when our step was lighter and our hair not grey, we may be even thankful for the trials that so endeared us to each other, and turned our lives into that current, down which we shall have glided so peacefully and calmly. And having caught some inkling of our story, the young people about us - as young as you and I are now, Kate - may come to us for sympathy, and pour distresses which hope and inexperience could scarcely feel enough for, into the compassionate ears of the old bachelor brother and his maiden sister.'

Kate smiled through her tears as Nicholas drew this picture; but they were not tears of sorrow, although they continued to fall when he had ceased to speak.

'Am I not right, Kate?' he said, after a short silence.

'Quite, quite, dear brother; and I cannot tell you how happy I am that I have acted as you would have had me.'

'You don't regret?'

'N - n - no,' said Kate timidly, tracing some pattern upon the ground with her little foot. 'I don't regret having done what was honourable and right, of course; but I do regret that this should have ever happened - at least sometimes I regret it, and sometimes I - I don't know what I say; I am but a weak girl, Nicholas, and it has agitated me very much.'

It is no vaunt to affirm that if Nicholas had had ten thousand pounds at the minute, he would, in his generous affection for the owner of the

blushing cheek and downcast eye, have bestowed its utmost farthing, in perfect forgetfulness of himself, to secure her happiness. But all he could do was to comfort and console her by kind words; and words they were of such love and kindness, and cheerful encouragement, that poor Kate threw her arms about his neck, and declared she would weep no more.

'What man,' thought Nicholas proudly, while on his way, soon afterwards, to the brothers' house, 'would not be sufficiently rewarded for any sacrifice of fortune by the possession of such a heart as Kate's, which, but that hearts weigh light, and gold and silver heavy, is beyond all praise? Frank has money, and wants no more. Where would it buy him such a treasure as Kate? And yet, in unequal marriages, the rich party is always supposed to make a great sacrifice, and the other to get a good bargain! But I am thinking like a lover, or like an ass: which I suppose is pretty nearly the same.'

Checking thoughts so little adapted to the business on which he was bound, by such self-reproofs as this and many others no less sturdy, he proceeded on his way and presented himself before Tim Linkinwater.

'Ah! Mr Nickleby!' cried Tim, 'God bless you! how d'ye do? Well? Say you're quite well and never better. Do now.'

'Quite,' said Nicholas, shaking him by both hands.

'Ah!' said Tim, 'you look tired though, now I come to look at you. Hark! there he is, d'ye hear him? That was Dick, the blackbird. He hasn't been himself since you've been gone. He'd never get on without you, now; he takes as naturally to you as he does to me.'

'Dick is a far less sagacious fellow than I supposed him, if he thinks I am half so well worthy of his notice as you,' replied Nicholas.

'Why, I'll tell you what, sir,' said Tim, standing in his favourite attitude and pointing to the cage with the feather of his pen, 'it's a very extraordinary thing about that bird, that the only people he ever takes the smallest notice of, are Mr Charles, and Mr Ned, and you, and me.'

Here, Tim stopped and glanced anxiously at Nicholas; then unexpectedly catching his eye repeated, 'And you and me, sir, and you and me.' And then he glanced at Nicholas again, and, squeezing his hand, said, 'I am a bad one at putting off anything I am interested in. I didn't mean to ask you, but I should like to hear a few particulars about that poor boy. Did he mention Cheeryble Brothers at all?'

'Yes,' said Nicholas, 'many and many a time.'

'That was right of him,' returned Tim, wiping his eyes; 'that was very right of him.'

'And he mentioned your name a score of times,' said Nicholas, 'and often bade me carry back his love to Mr Linkinwater.'

'No, no, did he though?' rejoined Tim, sobbing outright. 'Poor fellow! I wish we could have had him buried in town. There isn't such a burying-ground in all London as that little one on the other side of the square - there are counting-houses all round it, and if you go in there, on a fine day, you can see the books and safes through the open windows. And he sent his love to me, did he? I didn't expect he would have thought of me. Poor fellow, poor fellow! His love too!'

Tim was so completely overcome by this little mark of recollection, that he was quite unequal to any more conversation at the moment. Nicholas therefore slipped quietly out, and went to brother Charles's room.

If he had previously sustained his firmness and fortitude, it had been by an effort which had cost him no little pain; but the warm welcome, the hearty manner, the homely unaffected commiseration, of the good old man, went to his heart, and no inward struggle could prevent his showing it.

'Come, come, my dear sir,' said the benevolent merchant; 'we must not be cast down; no, no. We must learn to bear misfortune, and we must remember that there are many sources of consolation even in death. Every day that this poor lad had lived, he must have been less and less qualified for the world, and more and more unhappy in his own deficiencies. It is better as it is, my dear sir. Yes, yes, yes, it's better as it is.'

'I have thought of all that, sir,' replied Nicholas, clearing his throat. 'I feel it, I assure you.'

'Yes, that's well,' replied Mr Cheeryble, who, in the midst of all his comforting, was quite as much taken aback as honest old Tim; 'that's well. Where is my brother Ned? Tim Linkinwater, sir, where is my brother Ned?'

'Gone out with Mr Trimmers, about getting that unfortunate man into the hospital, and sending a nurse to his children,' said Tim.

'My brother Ned is a fine fellow, a great fellow!' exclaimed brother Charles as he shut the door and returned to Nicholas. 'He will be overjoyed to see you, my dear sir. We have been speaking of you every day.'

'To tell you the truth, sir, I am glad to find you alone,' said Nicholas, with some natural hesitation; 'for I am anxious to say something to you. Can you spare me a very few minutes?'

'Surely, surely,' returned brother Charles, looking at him with an anxious countenance. 'Say on, my dear sir, say on.'

'I scarcely know how, or where, to begin,' said Nicholas. 'If ever one mortal had reason to be penetrated with love and reverence for another: with such attachment as would make the hardest service in his behalf a pleasure and delight: with such grateful recollections as must rouse the utmost zeal and fidelity of his nature: those are the feelings which I should entertain for you, and do, from my heart and soul, believe me!'

'I do believe you,' replied the old gentleman, 'and I am happy in the belief. I have never doubted it; I never shall. I am sure I never shall.'

'Your telling me that so kindly,' said Nicholas, 'emboldens me to proceed. When you first took me into your confidence, and dispatched me on those missions to Miss Bray, I should have told you that I had seen her long before; that her beauty had made an impression upon me which I could not efface; and that I had fruitlessly endeavoured to trace her, and become acquainted with her history. I did not tell you so, because I vainly thought I could conquer my weaker feelings, and render every consideration subservient to my duty to you.'

'Mr Nickleby,' said brother Charles, 'you did not violate the confidence I placed in you, or take an unworthy advantage of it. I am sure you did not.'

'I did not,' said Nicholas, firmly. 'Although I found that the necessity for self-command and restraint became every day more imperious, and the difficulty greater, I never, for one instant, spoke or looked but as I would have done had you been by. I never, for one moment, deserted my trust, nor have I to this instant. But I find that constant association and companionship with this sweet girl is fatal to my peace of mind, and may prove destructive to the resolutions I made in the beginning, and up to this time have faithfully kept. In short, sir, I cannot trust myself, and I implore and beseech you to remove this young lady from under the charge of my mother and sister without delay. I know that to anyone but myself - to you, who consider the immeasurable distance between me and this young lady, who is now your ward, and the object of your peculiar care - my loving her, even in thought, must appear the height of rashness and presumption. I know it is so. But who can see her as I have seen, who can know what her life has been, and not love her? I have no excuse but that; and as I cannot fly from this temptation, and cannot repress this passion, with

its object constantly before me, what can I do but pray and beseech you to remove it, and to leave me to forget her?'

'Mr Nickleby,' said the old man, after a short silence, 'you can do no more. I was wrong to expose a young man like you to this trial. I might have foreseen what would happen. Thank you, sir, thank you. Madeline shall be removed.'

'If you would grant me one favour, dear sir, and suffer her to remember me with esteem, by never revealing to her this confession - '

'I will take care,' said Mr Cheeryble. 'And now, is this all you have to tell me?'

'No!' returned Nicholas, meeting his eye, 'it is not.'

'I know the rest,' said Mr Cheeryble, apparently very much relieved by this prompt reply. 'When did it come to your knowledge?'

'When I reached home this morning.'

'You felt it your duty immediately to come to me, and tell me what your sister no doubt acquainted you with?'

'I did,' said Nicholas, 'though I could have wished to have spoken to Mr Frank first.'

'Frank was with me last night,' replied the old gentleman. 'You have done well, Mr Nickleby - very well, sir - and I thank you again.'

Upon this head, Nicholas requested permission to add a few words. He ventured to hope that nothing he had said would lead to the estrangement of Kate and Madeline, who had formed an attachment for each other, any interruption of which would, he knew, be attended with great pain to them, and, most of all, with remorse and pain to him, as its unhappy cause. When these things were all forgotten, he hoped that Frank and he might still be warm friends, and that no word or thought of his humble home, or of her who was well contented to remain there and share his quiet fortunes, would ever again disturb the harmony between them. He recounted, as nearly as he could, what had passed between himself and Kate that morning: speaking of her with such warmth of pride and affection, and dwelling so cheerfully upon the confidence they had of overcoming any selfish regrets and living contented and happy in each other's love, that few could have heard him unmoved. More moved himself than he had been yet, he expressed in a few hurried words - as expressive, perhaps, as the most eloquent phrases - his devotion to the brothers, and his hope that he might live and die in their service.

To all this, brother Charles listened in profound silence, and with his chair so turned from Nicholas that his face could not be seen. He had not spoken either, in his accustomed manner, but with a certain stiffness and embarrassment very foreign to it. Nicholas feared he had offended him. He said, 'No, no, he had done quite right,' but that was all.

'Frank is a heedless, foolish fellow,' he said, after Nicholas had paused for some time; 'a very heedless, foolish fellow. I will take care that this is brought to a close without delay. Let us say no more upon the subject; it's a very painful one to me. Come to me in half an hour; I have strange things to tell you, my dear sir, and your uncle has appointed this afternoon for your waiting upon him with me.'

'Waiting upon him! With you, sir!' cried Nicholas.

'Ay, with me,' replied the old gentleman. 'Return to me in half an hour, and I'll tell you more.'

Nicholas waited upon him at the time mentioned, and then learnt all that had taken place on the previous day, and all that was known of the appointment Ralph had made with the brothers; which was for that night; and for the better understanding of which it will be requisite to return and follow his own footsteps from the house of the twin brothers. Therefore, we leave Nicholas somewhat reassured by the restored kindness of their manner towards him, and yet sensible that it was different from what it had been (though he scarcely knew in what respect): so he was full of uneasiness, uncertainty, and disquiet.