

Chapter LXIII

The Brothers Cheeryble make various Declarations for themselves and others. Tim Linkinwater makes a Declaration for himself

Some weeks had passed, and the first shock of these events had subsided. Madeline had been removed; Frank had been absent; and Nicholas and Kate had begun to try in good earnest to stifle their own regrets, and to live for each other and for their mother - who, poor lady, could in nowise be reconciled to this dull and altered state of affairs - when there came one evening, per favour of Mr Linkinwater, an invitation from the brothers to dinner on the next day but one: comprehending, not only Mrs Nickleby, Kate, and Nicholas, but little Miss La Creevy, who was most particularly mentioned.

'Now, my dears,' said Mrs Nickleby, when they had rendered becoming honour to the bidding, and Tim had taken his departure, 'what does THIS mean?'

'What do YOU mean, mother?' asked Nicholas, smiling.

'I say, my dear,' rejoined that lady, with a face of unfathomable mystery, 'what does this invitation to dinner mean? What is its intention and object?'

'I conclude it means, that on such a day we are to eat and drink in their house, and that its intent and object is to confer pleasure upon us,' said Nicholas.

'And that's all you conclude it is, my dear?'

'I have not yet arrived at anything deeper, mother.'

'Then I'll just tell you one thing,' said Mrs Nickleby, you'll find yourself a little surprised; that's all. You may depend upon it that this means something besides dinner.'

'Tea and supper, perhaps,' suggested Nicholas.

'I wouldn't be absurd, my dear, if I were you,' replied Mrs Nickleby, in a lofty manner, 'because it's not by any means becoming, and doesn't suit you at all. What I mean to say is, that the Mr Cheerybles don't ask us to dinner with all this ceremony for nothing. Never mind; wait and see. You won't believe anything I say, of course. It's much better to wait; a great deal better; it's satisfactory to all parties, and there can be no disputing. All I say is, remember what I say now, and when I say I said so, don't say I didn't.'

With this stipulation, Mrs Nickleby, who was troubled, night and day, with a vision of a hot messenger tearing up to the door to announce that Nicholas had been taken into partnership, quitted that branch of the subject, and entered upon a new one.

'It's a very extraordinary thing,' she said, 'a most extraordinary thing, that they should have invited Miss La Creevy. It quite astonishes me, upon my word it does. Of course it's very pleasant that she should be invited, very pleasant, and I have no doubt that she'll conduct herself extremely well; she always does. It's very gratifying to think that we should have been the means of introducing her into such society, and I'm quite glad of it - quite rejoiced - for she certainly is an exceedingly well-behaved and good-natured little person. I could wish that some friend would mention to her how very badly she has her cap trimmed, and what very preposterous bows those are, but of course that's impossible, and if she likes to make a fright of herself, no doubt she has a perfect right to do so. We never see ourselves - never do, and never did - and I suppose we never shall.'

This moral reflection reminding her of the necessity of being peculiarly smart on the occasion, so as to counterbalance Miss La Creevy, and be herself an effectual set-off and atonement, led Mrs Nickleby into a consultation with her daughter relative to certain ribbons, gloves, and trimmings: which, being a complicated question, and one of paramount importance, soon routed the previous one, and put it to flight.

The great day arriving, the good lady put herself under Kate's hands an hour or so after breakfast, and, dressing by easy stages, completed her toilette in sufficient time to allow of her daughter's making hers, which was very simple, and not very long, though so satisfactory that she had never appeared more charming or looked more lovely. Miss La Creevy, too, arrived with two bandboxes (whereof the bottoms fell out as they were handed from the coach) and something in a newspaper, which a gentleman had sat upon, coming down, and which was obliged to be ironed again, before it was fit for service. At last, everybody was dressed, including Nicholas, who had come home to fetch them, and they went away in a coach sent by the brothers for the purpose: Mrs Nickleby wondering very much what they would have for dinner, and cross-examining Nicholas as to the extent of his discoveries in the morning; whether he had smelt anything cooking at all like turtle, and if not, what he had smelt; and diversifying the conversation with reminiscences of dinners to which she had gone some twenty years ago, concerning which she particularised not only the dishes but the guests, in whom her hearers did not feel a very absorbing interest, as not one of them had ever chanced to hear their names before.

The old butler received them with profound respect and many smiles, and ushered them into the drawing-room, where they were received by the brothers with so much cordiality and kindness that Mrs Nickleby was quite in a flutter, and had scarcely presence of mind enough, even to patronise Miss La Creevy. Kate was still more affected by the reception: for, knowing that the brothers were acquainted with all that had passed between her and Frank, she felt her position a most delicate and trying one, and was trembling on the arm of Nicholas, when Mr Charles took her in his, and led her to another part of the room.

'Have you seen Madeline, my dear,' he said, 'since she left your house?'

'No, sir!' replied Kate. 'Not once.'

'And not heard from her, eh? Not heard from her?'

'I have only had one letter,' rejoined Kate, gently. 'I thought she would not have forgotten me quite so soon.'

'Ah,' said the old man, patting her on the head, and speaking as affectionately as if she had been his favourite child. 'Poor dear! what do you think of this, brother Ned? Madeline has only written to her once, only once, Ned, and she didn't think she would have forgotten her quite so soon, Ned.'

'Oh! sad, sad; very sad!' said Ned.

The brothers interchanged a glance, and looking at Kate for a little time without speaking, shook hands, and nodded as if they were congratulating each other on something very delightful.

'Well, well,' said brother Charles, 'go into that room, my dear - that door yonder - and see if there's not a letter for you from her. I think there's one upon the table. You needn't hurry back, my love, if there is, for we don't dine just yet, and there's plenty of time. Plenty of time.'

Kate retired as she was directed. Brother Charles, having followed her graceful figure with his eyes, turned to Mrs Nickleby, and said:

'We took the liberty of naming one hour before the real dinner-time, ma'am, because we had a little business to speak about, which would occupy the interval. Ned, my dear fellow, will you mention what we agreed upon? Mr Nickleby, sir, have the goodness to follow me.'

Without any further explanation, Mrs Nickleby, Miss La Creevy, and brother Ned, were left alone together, and Nicholas followed brother

Charles into his private room; where, to his great astonishment, he encountered Frank, whom he supposed to be abroad.

'Young men,' said Mr Cheeryble, 'shake hands!'

'I need no bidding to do that,' said Nicholas, extending his.

'Nor I,' rejoined Frank, as he clasped it heartily.

The old gentleman thought that two handsomer or finer young fellows could scarcely stand side by side than those on whom he looked with so much pleasure. Suffering his eyes to rest upon them, for a short time in silence, he said, while he seated himself at his desk:

'I wish to see you friends - close and firm friends - and if I thought you otherwise, I should hesitate in what I am about to say. Frank, look here! Mr Nickleby, will you come on the other side?'

The young men stepped up on either hand of brother Charles, who produced a paper from his desk, and unfolded it.

'This,' he said, 'is a copy of the will of Madeline's maternal grandfather, bequeathing her the sum of twelve thousand pounds, payable either upon her coming of age or marrying. It would appear that this gentleman, angry with her (his only relation) because she would not put herself under his protection, and detach herself from the society of her father, in compliance with his repeated overtures, made a will leaving this property (which was all he possessed) to a charitable institution. He would seem to have repented this determination, however, for three weeks afterwards, and in the same month, he executed this. By some fraud, it was abstracted immediately after his decease, and the other - the only will found - was proved and administered. Friendly negotiations, which have only just now terminated, have been proceeding since this instrument came into our hands, and, as there is no doubt of its authenticity, and the witnesses have been discovered (after some trouble), the money has been refunded. Madeline has therefore obtained her right, and is, or will be, when either of the contingencies which I have mentioned has arisen, mistress of this fortune. You understand me?'

Frank replied in the affirmative. Nicholas, who could not trust himself to speak lest his voice should be heard to falter, bowed his head.

'Now, Frank,' said the old gentleman, 'you were the immediate means of recovering this deed. The fortune is but a small one; but we love Madeline; and such as it is, we would rather see you allied to her with that, than to any other girl we know who has three times the money. Will you become a suitor to her for her hand?'

'No, sir. I interested myself in the recovery of that instrument, believing that her hand was already pledged to one who has a thousand times the claims upon her gratitude, and, if I mistake not, upon her heart, that I or any other man can ever urge. In this it seems I judged hastily.'

'As you always, do, sir,' cried brother Charles, utterly forgetting his assumed dignity, 'as you always do. How dare you think, Frank, that we would have you marry for money, when youth, beauty, and every amiable virtue and excellence were to be had for love? How dared you, Frank, go and make love to Mr Nickleby's sister without telling us first what you meant to do, and letting us speak for you?'

'I hardly dared to hope - '

'You hardly dared to hope! Then, so much the greater reason for having our assistance! Mr Nickleby, sir, Frank, although he judged hastily, judged, for once, correctly. Madeline's heart IS occupied. Give me your hand, sir; it is occupied by you, and worthily and naturally. This fortune is destined to be yours, but you have a greater fortune in her, sir, than you would have in money were it forty times told. She chooses you, Mr Nickleby. She chooses as we, her dearest friends, would have her choose. Frank chooses as we would have HIM choose. He should have your sister's little hand, sir, if she had refused it a score of times; ay, he should, and he shall! You acted nobly, not knowing our sentiments, but now you know them, sir, you must do as you are bid. What! You are the children of a worthy gentleman! The time was, sir, when my dear brother Ned and I were two poor simple-hearted boys, wandering, almost barefoot, to seek our fortunes: are we changed in anything but years and worldly circumstances since that time? No, God forbid! Oh, Ned, Ned, Ned, what a happy day this is for you and me! If our poor mother had only lived to see us now, Ned, how proud it would have made her dear heart at last!'

Thus apostrophised, brother Ned, who had entered with Mrs Nickleby, and who had been before unobserved by the young men, darted forward, and fairly hugged brother Charles in his arms.

'Bring in my little Kate,' said the latter, after a short silence. 'Bring her in, Ned. Let me see Kate, let me kiss her. I have a right to do so now; I was very near it when she first came; I have often been very near it. Ah! Did you find the letter, my bird? Did you find Madeline herself, waiting for you and expecting you? Did you find that she had not quite forgotten her friend and nurse and sweet companion? Why, this is almost the best of all!'

'Come, come,' said Ned, 'Frank will be jealous, and we shall have some cutting of throats before dinner.'

'Then let him take her away, Ned, let him take her away. Madeline's in the next room. Let all the lovers get out of the way, and talk among themselves, if they've anything to say. Turn 'em out, Ned, every one!'

Brother Charles began the clearance by leading the blushing girl to the door, and dismissing her with a kiss. Frank was not very slow to follow, and Nicholas had disappeared first of all. So there only remained Mrs Nickleby and Miss La Creevy, who were both sobbing heartily; the two brothers; and Tim Linkinwater, who now came in to shake hands with everybody: his round face all radiant and beaming with smiles.

'Well, Tim Linkinwater, sir,' said brother Charles, who was always spokesman, 'now the young folks are happy, sir.'

'You didn't keep 'em in suspense as long as you said you would, though,' returned Tim, archly. 'Why, Mr Nickleby and Mr Frank were to have been in your room for I don't know how long; and I don't know what you weren't to have told them before you came out with the truth.'

'Now, did you ever know such a villain as this, Ned?' said the old gentleman; 'did you ever know such a villain as Tim Linkinwater? He accusing me of being impatient, and he the very man who has been wearying us morning, noon, and night, and torturing us for leave to go and tell 'em what was in store, before our plans were half complete, or we had arranged a single thing. A treacherous dog!'

'So he is, brother Charles,' returned Ned; 'Tim is a treacherous dog. Tim is not to be trusted. Tim is a wild young fellow. He wants gravity and steadiness; he must sow his wild oats, and then perhaps he'll become in time a respectable member of society.'

This being one of the standing jokes between the old fellows and Tim, they all three laughed very heartily, and might have laughed much longer, but that the brothers, seeing that Mrs Nickleby was labouring to express her feelings, and was really overwhelmed by the happiness of the time, took her between them, and led her from the room under pretence of having to consult her on some most important arrangements.

Now, Tim and Miss La Creevy had met very often, and had always been very chatty and pleasant together - had always been great friends - and consequently it was the most natural thing in the world that Tim, finding that she still sobbed, should endeavour to console her. As Miss La Creevy sat on a large old-fashioned window-seat, where there was ample room for two, it was also natural that Tim should sit down beside her; and as to Tim's being unusually spruce

and particular in his attire that day, why it was a high festival and a great occasion, and that was the most natural thing of all.

Tim sat down beside Miss La Creevy, and, crossing one leg over the other so that his foot - he had very comely feet and happened to be wearing the neatest shoes and black silk stockings possible - should come easily within the range of her eye, said in a soothing way:

'Don't cry!'

'I must,' rejoined Miss La Creevy.

'No, don't,' said Tim. 'Please don't; pray don't.'

'I am so happy!' sobbed the little woman.

'Then laugh,' said Tim. 'Do laugh.'

What in the world Tim was doing with his arm, it is impossible to conjecture, but he knocked his elbow against that part of the window which was quite on the other side of Miss La Creevy; and it is clear that it could have no business there.

'Do laugh,' said Tim, 'or I'll cry.'

'Why should you cry?' asked Miss La Creevy, smiling.

'Because I'm happy too,' said Tim. 'We are both happy, and I should like to do as you do.'

Surely, there never was a man who fidgeted as Tim must have done then; for he knocked the window again - almost in the same place - and Miss La Creevy said she was sure he'd break it.

'I knew,' said Tim, 'that you would be pleased with this scene.'

'It was very thoughtful and kind to remember me,' returned Miss La Creevy. 'Nothing could have delighted me half so much.'

Why on earth should Miss La Creevy and Tim Linkinwater have said all this in a whisper? It was no secret. And why should Tim Linkinwater have looked so hard at Miss La Creevy, and why should Miss La Creevy have looked so hard at the ground?

'It's a pleasant thing,' said Tim, 'to people like us, who have passed all our lives in the world alone, to see young folks that we are fond of, brought together with so many years of happiness before them.'

'Ah!' cried the little woman with all her heart, 'that it is!'

'Although,' pursued Tim 'although it makes one feel quite solitary and cast away. Now don't it?'

Miss La Creevy said she didn't know. And why should she say she didn't know? Because she must have known whether it did or not.

'It's almost enough to make us get married after all, isn't it?' said Tim.

'Oh, nonsense!' replied Miss La Creevy, laughing. 'We are too old.'

'Not a bit,' said Tim; 'we are too old to be single. Why shouldn't we both be married, instead of sitting through the long winter evenings by our solitary firesides? Why shouldn't we make one fireside of it, and marry each other?'

'Oh, Mr Linkinwater, you're joking!'

'No, no, I'm not. I'm not indeed,' said Tim. 'I will, if you will. Do, my dear!'

'It would make people laugh so.'

'Let 'em laugh,' cried Tim stoutly; 'we have good tempers I know, and we'll laugh too. Why, what hearty laughs we have had since we've known each other!'

'So we have,' cried Miss La Creevy - giving way a little, as Tim thought.

'It has been the happiest time in all my life; at least, away from the counting-house and Cheeryble Brothers,' said Tim. 'Do, my dear! Now say you will.'

'No, no, we mustn't think of it,' returned Miss La Creevy. 'What would the brothers say?'

'Why, God bless your soul!' cried Tim, innocently, 'you don't suppose I should think of such a thing without their knowing it! Why they left us here on purpose.'

'I can never look 'em in the face again!' exclaimed Miss La Creevy, faintly.

'Come,' said Tim, 'let's be a comfortable couple. We shall live in the old house here, where I have been for four-and-forty year; we shall go to the old church, where I've been, every Sunday morning, all through

that time; we shall have all my old friends about us - Dick, the archway, the pump, the flower-pots, and Mr Frank's children, and Mr Nickleby's children, that we shall seem like grandfather and grandmother to. Let's be a comfortable couple, and take care of each other! And if we should get deaf, or lame, or blind, or bed-ridden, how glad we shall be that we have somebody we are fond of, always to talk to and sit with! Let's be a comfortable couple. Now, do, my dear!

Five minutes after this honest and straightforward speech, little Miss La Creevy and Tim were talking as pleasantly as if they had been married for a score of years, and had never once quarrelled all the time; and five minutes after that, when Miss La Creevy had bustled out to see if her eyes were red and put her hair to rights, Tim moved with a stately step towards the drawing-room, exclaiming as he went, 'There an't such another woman in all London! I KNOW there an't!'

By this time, the apoplectic butler was nearly in fits, in consequence of the unheard-of postponement of dinner. Nicholas, who had been engaged in a manner in which every reader may imagine for himself or herself, was hurrying downstairs in obedience to his angry summons, when he encountered a new surprise.

On his way down, he overtook, in one of the passages, a stranger genteelly dressed in black, who was also moving towards the dining-room. As he was rather lame, and walked slowly, Nicholas lingered behind, and was following him step by step, wondering who he was, when he suddenly turned round and caught him by both hands.

'Newman Noggs!' cried Nicholas joyfully

'Ah! Newman, your own Newman, your own old faithful Newman! My dear boy, my dear Nick, I give you joy - health, happiness, every blessing! I can't bear it - it's too much, my dear boy - it makes a child of me!'

'Where have you been?' said Nicholas. 'What have you been doing? How often have I inquired for you, and been told that I should hear before long!'

'I know, I know!' returned Newman. 'They wanted all the happiness to come together. I've been helping 'em. I - I - look at me, Nick, look at me!'

'You would never let ME do that,' said Nicholas in a tone of gentle reproach.

'I didn't mind what I was, then. I shouldn't have had the heart to put on gentleman's clothes. They would have reminded me of old times

and made me miserable. I am another man now, Nick. My dear boy, I can't speak. Don't say anything to me. Don't think the worse of me for these tears. You don't know what I feel today; you can't, and never will!

They walked in to dinner arm-in-arm, and sat down side by side.

Never was such a dinner as that, since the world began. There was the superannuated bank clerk, Tim Linkinwater's friend; and there was the chubby old lady, Tim Linkinwater's sister; and there was so much attention from Tim Linkinwater's sister to Miss La Creevy, and there were so many jokes from the superannuated bank clerk, and Tim Linkinwater himself was in such tiptop spirits, and little Miss La Creevy was in such a comical state, that of themselves they would have composed the pleasantest party conceivable. Then, there was Mrs Nickleby, so grand and complacent; Madeline and Kate, so blushing and beautiful; Nicholas and Frank, so devoted and proud; and all four so silently and tremblingly happy; there was Newman so subdued yet so overjoyed, and there were the twin brothers so delighted and interchanging such looks, that the old servant stood transfixed behind his master's chair, and felt his eyes grow dim as they wandered round the table.

When the first novelty of the meeting had worn off, and they began truly to feel how happy they were, the conversation became more general, and the harmony and pleasure if possible increased. The brothers were in a perfect ecstasy; and their insisting on saluting the ladies all round, before they would permit them to retire, gave occasion to the superannuated bank clerk to say so many good things, that he quite outshone himself, and was looked upon as a prodigy of humour.

'Kate, my dear,' said Mrs Nickleby, taking her daughter aside, as soon as they got upstairs, 'you don't really mean to tell me that this is actually true about Miss La Creevy and Mr Linkinwater?'

'Indeed it is, mama.'

'Why, I never heard such a thing in my life!' exclaimed Mrs Nickleby.

'Mr Linkinwater is a most excellent creature,' reasoned Kate, 'and, for his age, quite young still.'

'For HIS age, my dear!' returned Mrs Nickleby, 'yes; nobody says anything against him, except that I think he is the weakest and most foolish man I ever knew. It's HER age I speak of. That he should have gone and offered himself to a woman who must be - ah, half as old

again as I am - and that she should have dared to accept him! It don't signify, Kate; I'm disgusted with her!

Shaking her head very emphatically indeed, Mrs Nickleby swept away; and all the evening, in the midst of the merriment and enjoyment that ensued, and in which with that exception she freely participated, conducted herself towards Miss La Creevy in a stately and distant manner, designed to mark her sense of the impropriety of her conduct, and to signify her extreme and cutting disapprobation of the misdemeanour she had so flagrantly committed.