

Chapter LXIV

An old Acquaintance is recognised under melancholy Circumstances, and Dotheboys Hall breaks up for ever

Nicholas was one of those whose joy is incomplete unless it is shared by the friends of adverse and less fortunate days. Surrounded by every fascination of love and hope, his warm heart yearned towards plain John Browdie. He remembered their first meeting with a smile, and their second with a tear; saw poor Smike once again with the bundle on his shoulder trudging patiently by his side; and heard the honest Yorkshireman's rough words of encouragement as he left them on their road to London.

Madeline and he sat down, very many times, jointly to produce a letter which should acquaint John at full length with his altered fortunes, and assure him of his friendship and gratitude. It so happened, however, that the letter could never be written. Although they applied themselves to it with the best intentions in the world, it chanced that they always fell to talking about something else, and when Nicholas tried it by himself, he found it impossible to write one-half of what he wished to say, or to pen anything, indeed, which on reperusal did not appear cold and unsatisfactory compared with what he had in his mind. At last, after going on thus from day to day, and reproaching himself more and more, he resolved (the more readily as Madeline strongly urged him) to make a hasty trip into Yorkshire, and present himself before Mr and Mrs Browdie without a word of notice.

Thus it was that between seven and eight o'clock one evening, he and Kate found themselves in the Saracen's Head booking-office, securing a place to Greta Bridge by the next morning's coach. They had to go westward, to procure some little necessaries for his journey, and, as it was a fine night, they agreed to walk there, and ride home.

The place they had just been in called up so many recollections, and Kate had so many anecdotes of Madeline, and Nicholas so many anecdotes of Frank, and each was so interested in what the other said, and both were so happy and confiding, and had so much to talk about, that it was not until they had plunged for a full half-hour into that labyrinth of streets which lies between Seven Dials and Soho, without emerging into any large thoroughfare, that Nicholas began to think it just possible they might have lost their way.

The possibility was soon converted into a certainty; for, on looking about, and walking first to one end of the street and then to the other, he could find no landmark he could recognise, and was fain to turn back again in quest of some place at which he could seek a direction.

It was a by-street, and there was nobody about, or in the few wretched shops they passed. Making towards a faint gleam of light which streamed across the pavement from a cellar, Nicholas was about to descend two or three steps so as to render himself visible to those below and make his inquiry, when he was arrested by a loud noise of scolding in a woman's voice.

'Oh come away!' said Kate, 'they are quarrelling. You'll be hurt.'

'Wait one instant, Kate. Let us hear if there's anything the matter,' returned her brother. 'Hush!'

'You nasty, idle, vicious, good-for-nothing brute,' cried the woman, stamping on the ground, 'why don't you turn the mangle?'

'So I am, my life and soul!' replied the man's voice. 'I am always turning. I am perpetually turning, like a demd old horse in a demnition mill. My life is one demd horrid grind!'

'Then why don't you go and list for a soldier?' retorted the woman; 'you're welcome to.'

'For a soldier!' cried the man. 'For a soldier! Would his joy and gladness see him in a coarse red coat with a little tail? Would she hear of his being slapped and beat by drummers demnebly? Would she have him fire off real guns, and have his hair cut, and his whiskers shaved, and his eyes turned right and left, and his trousers pipeclayed?'

'Dear Nicholas,' whispered Kate, 'you don't know who that is. It's Mr Mantalini I am confident.'

'Do make sure! Peep at him while I ask the way,' said Nicholas. 'Come down a step or two. Come!'

Drawing her after him, Nicholas crept down the steps and looked into a small boarded cellar. There, amidst clothes-baskets and clothes, stripped up to his shirt-sleeves, but wearing still an old patched pair of pantaloons of superlative make, a once brilliant waistcoat, and moustache and whiskers as of yore, but lacking their lustrous dye - there, endeavouring to mollify the wrath of a buxom female - not the lawful Madame Mantalini, but the proprietress of the concern - and grinding meanwhile as if for very life at the mangle, whose creaking noise, mingled with her shrill tones, appeared almost to deafen him - there was the graceful, elegant, fascinating, and once dashing Mantalini.

'Oh you false traitor!' cried the lady, threatening personal violence on Mr Mantalini's face.

'False! Oh dem! Now my soul, my gentle, captivating, bewitching, and most demnebly enslaving chick-a-biddy, be calm,' said Mr Mantalini, humbly.

'I won't!' screamed the woman. 'I'll tear your eyes out!'

'Oh! What a demd savage lamb!' cried Mr Mantalini.

'You're never to be trusted,' screamed the woman; 'you were out all day yesterday, and gallivanting somewhere I know. You know you were! Isn't it enough that I paid two pound fourteen for you, and took you out of prison and let you live here like a gentleman, but must you go on like this: breaking, my heart besides?'

'I will never break its heart, I will be a good boy, and never do so any more; I will never be naughty again; I beg its little pardon,' said Mr Mantalini, dropping the handle of the mangle, and folding his palms together; 'it is all up with its handsome friend! He has gone to the demnition bow-wows. It will have pity? It will not scratch and claw, but pet and comfort? Oh, demmit!'

Very little affected, to judge from her action, by this tender appeal, the lady was on the point of returning some angry reply, when Nicholas, raising his voice, asked his way to Piccadilly.

Mr Mantalini turned round, caught sight of Kate, and, without another word, leapt at one bound into a bed which stood behind the door, and drew the counterpane over his face: kicking meanwhile convulsively.

'Demmit,' he cried, in a suffocating voice, 'it's little Nickleby! Shut the door, put out the candle, turn me up in the bedstead! Oh, dem, dem, dem!'

The woman looked, first at Nicholas, and then at Mr Mantalini, as if uncertain on whom to visit this extraordinary behaviour; but Mr Mantalini happening by ill-luck to thrust his nose from under the bedclothes, in his anxiety to ascertain whether the visitors were gone, she suddenly, and with a dexterity which could only have been acquired by long practice, flung a pretty heavy clothes-basket at him, with so good an aim that he kicked more violently than before, though without venturing to make any effort to disengage his head, which was quite extinguished. Thinking this a favourable opportunity for departing before any of the torrent of her wrath discharged itself upon

him, Nicholas hurried Kate off, and left the unfortunate subject of this unexpected recognition to explain his conduct as he best could.

The next morning he began his journey. It was now cold, winter weather: forcibly recalling to his mind under what circumstances he had first travelled that road, and how many vicissitudes and changes he had since undergone. He was alone inside the greater part of the way, and sometimes, when he had fallen into a doze, and, rousing himself, looked out of the window, and recognised some place which he well remembered as having passed, either on his journey down, or in the long walk back with poor Smike, he could hardly believe but that all which had since happened had been a dream, and that they were still plodding wearily on towards London, with the world before them.

To render these recollections the more vivid, it came on to snow as night set in; and, passing through Stamford and Grantham, and by the little alehouse where he had heard the story of the bold Baron of Grogzwig, everything looked as if he had seen it but yesterday, and not even a flake of the white crust on the roofs had melted away. Encouraging the train of ideas which flocked upon him, he could almost persuade himself that he sat again outside the coach, with Squeers and the boys; that he heard their voices in the air; and that he felt again, but with a mingled sensation of pain and pleasure now, that old sinking of the heart, and longing after home. While he was yet yielding himself up to these fancies he fell asleep, and, dreaming of Madeline, forgot them.

He slept at the inn at Greta Bridge on the night of his arrival, and, rising at a very early hour next morning, walked to the market town, and inquired for John Browdie's house. John lived in the outskirts, now he was a family man; and as everybody knew him, Nicholas had no difficulty in finding a boy who undertook to guide him to his residence.

Dismissing his guide at the gate, and in his impatience not even stopping to admire the thriving look of cottage or garden either, Nicholas made his way to the kitchen door, and knocked lustily with his stick.

'Halloa!' cried a voice inside. 'Wa'et be the matther noo? Be the toon a-fire? Ding, but thou mak'st noise eneaf!'

With these words, John Browdie opened the door himself, and opening his eyes too to their utmost width, cried, as he clapped his hands together, and burst into a hearty roar:

'Ecod, it be the godfeyther, it be the godfeyther! Tilly, here be Misther Nickleby. Gi' us thee hond, mun. Coom awa', coom awa'. In wi 'un, doon beside the fire; tak' a soop o' thot. Dinnot say a word till thou'st droonk it a'! Oop wi' it, mun. Ding! but I'm reeght glod to see thee.'

Adapting his action to his text, John dragged Nicholas into the kitchen, forced him down upon a huge settle beside a blazing fire, poured out from an enormous bottle about a quarter of a pint of spirits, thrust it into his hand, opened his mouth and threw back his head as a sign to him to drink it instantly, and stood with a broad grin of welcome overspreading his great red face like a jolly giant.

'I might ha' knowa'd,' said John, 'that nobody but thou would ha' coom wi' sike a knock as you. Thot was the wa' thou knocked at schoolmeasther's door, eh? Ha, ha, ha! But I say; wa'at be a' this about schoolmeasther?'

'You know it then?' said Nicholas.

'They were talking aboot it, doon toon, last neeght,' replied John, 'but neane on 'em seemed quite to un'erstan' it, loike.'

'After various shiftings and delays,' said Nicholas, 'he has been sentenced to be transported for seven years, for being in the unlawful possession of a stolen will; and, after that, he has to suffer the consequence of a conspiracy.'

'Whew!' cried John, 'a conspiracy! Soom'at in the pooder-plot wa'? Eh? Soom'at in the Guy Faux line?'

'No, no, no, a conspiracy connected with his school; I'll explain it presently.'

'Thot's reeght!' said John, 'explain it arter breakfast, not noo, for thou be'est hoongry, and so am I; and Tilly she mun' be at the bottom o' a' explanations, for she says thot's the mutual confidence. Ha, ha, ha! Ecod, it's a room start, is the mutual confidence!'

The entrance of Mrs Browdie, with a smart cap on, and very many apologies for their having been detected in the act of breakfasting in the kitchen, stopped John in his discussion of this grave subject, and hastened the breakfast: which, being composed of vast mounds of toast, new-laid eggs, boiled ham, Yorkshire pie, and other cold substantials (of which heavy relays were constantly appearing from another kitchen under the direction of a very plump servant), was admirably adapted to the cold bleak morning, and received the utmost justice from all parties. At last, it came to a close; and the fire which

had been lighted in the best parlour having by this time burnt up, they adjourned thither, to hear what Nicholas had to tell.

Nicholas told them all, and never was there a story which awakened so many emotions in the breasts of two eager listeners. At one time, honest John groaned in sympathy, and at another roared with joy; at one time he vowed to go up to London on purpose to get a sight of the brothers Cheeryble; and, at another, swore that Tim Linkinwater should receive such a ham by coach, and carriage free, as mortal knife had never carved. When Nicholas began to describe Madeline, he sat with his mouth wide open, nudging Mrs Browdie from time to time, and exclaiming under his breath that she must be 'raa'ther a tidy sart,' and when he heard at last that his young friend had come down purposely to communicate his good fortune, and to convey to him all those assurances of friendship which he could not state with sufficient warmth in writing - that the only object of his journey was to share his happiness with them, and to tell them that when he was married they must come up to see him, and that Madeline insisted on it as well as he - John could hold out no longer, but after looking indignantly at his wife, and demanding to know what she was whimpering for, drew his coat sleeve over his eyes and blubbered outright.

'Tell'ee wa'at though,' said John seriously, when a great deal had been said on both sides, 'to return to schoolmeaster. If this news about 'un has reached school today, the old 'ooman wean't have a whole boan in her boddy, nor Fanny neither.'

'Oh, John!' cried Mrs Browdie.

'Ah! and Oh, John agean,' replied the Yorkshireman. 'I dinnot know what they lads mightn't do. When it first got about that schoolmeaster was in trouble, some feythers and moothers sent and took their young chaps awa'. If them as is left, should know waat's coom tiv'un, there'll be sike a revolution and rebel! - Ding! But I think they'll a' gang daft, and spill bluid like wather!'

In fact, John Browdie's apprehensions were so strong that he determined to ride over to the school without delay, and invited Nicholas to accompany him, which, however, he declined, pleading that his presence might perhaps aggravate the bitterness of their adversity.

'Thot's true!' said John; 'I should ne'er ha' thought o' thot.'

'I must return tomorrow,' said Nicholas, 'but I mean to dine with you today, and if Mrs Browdie can give me a bed - '

'Bed!' cried John, 'I wish thou couldst sleep in fower beds at once. Ecod, thou shouldst have 'em a'. Bide till I coom back; on'y bide till I coom back, and ecod we'll make a day of it.'

Giving his wife a hearty kiss, and Nicholas a no less hearty shake of the hand, John mounted his horse and rode off: leaving Mrs Browdie to apply herself to hospitable preparations, and his young friend to stroll about the neighbourhood, and revisit spots which were rendered familiar to him by many a miserable association.

John cantered away, and arriving at Dotheboys Hall, tied his horse to a gate and made his way to the schoolroom door, which he found locked on the inside. A tremendous noise and riot arose from within, and, applying his eye to a convenient crevice in the wall, he did not remain long in ignorance of its meaning.

The news of Mr Squeers's downfall had reached Dotheboys; that was quite clear. To all appearance, it had very recently become known to the young gentlemen; for the rebellion had just broken out.

It was one of the brimstone-and-treacle mornings, and Mrs Squeers had entered school according to custom with the large bowl and spoon, followed by Miss Squeers and the amiable Wackford: who, during his father's absence, had taken upon him such minor branches of the executive as kicking the pupils with his nailed boots, pulling the hair of some of the smaller boys, pinching the others in aggravating places, and rendering himself, in various similar ways, a great comfort and happiness to his mother. Their entrance, whether by premeditation or a simultaneous impulse, was the signal of revolt. While one detachment rushed to the door and locked it, and another mounted on the desks and forms, the stoutest (and consequently the newest) boy seized the cane, and confronting Mrs Squeers with a stern countenance, snatched off her cap and beaver bonnet, put them on his own head, armed himself with the wooden spoon, and bade her, on pain of death, go down upon her knees and take a dose directly. Before that estimable lady could recover herself, or offer the slightest retaliation, she was forced into a kneeling posture by a crowd of shouting tormentors, and compelled to swallow a spoonful of the odious mixture, rendered more than usually savoury by the immersion in the bowl of Master Wackford's head, whose ducking was intrusted to another rebel. The success of this first achievement prompted the malicious crowd, whose faces were clustered together in every variety of lank and half-starved ugliness, to further acts of outrage. The leader was insisting upon Mrs Squeers repeating her dose, Master Squeers was undergoing another dip in the treacle, and a violent assault had been commenced on Miss Squeers, when John Browdie, bursting open the door with a vigorous kick, rushed to the

rescue. The shouts, screams, groans, hoots, and clapping of hands, suddenly ceased, and a dead silence ensued.

'Ye be noice chaps,' said John, looking steadily round. 'What's to do here, thou yoong dogs?'

'Squeers is in prison, and we are going to run away!' cried a score of shrill voices. 'We won't stop, we won't stop!'

'Weel then, dinnot stop,' replied John; 'who waants thee to stop? Roon awa' loike men, but dinnot hurt the women.'

'Hurrah!' cried the shrill voices, more shrilly still.

'Hurrah?' repeated John. 'Weel, hurrah loike men too. Noo then, look out. Hip - hip, - hip - hurrah!'

'Hurrah!' cried the voices.

'Hurrah! Agean;' said John. 'Looder still.'

The boys obeyed.

'Anooother!' said John. 'Dinnot be afeared on it. Let's have a good 'un!'

'Hurrah!'

'Noo then,' said John, 'let's have yan more to end wi', and then coot off as quick as you loike. Tak'a good breath noo - Squeers be in jail - the school's brokken oop - it's a' ower - past and gane - think o' thot, and let it be a hearty 'un! Hurrah!'

Such a cheer arose as the walls of Dotheboys Hall had never echoed before, and were destined never to respond to again. When the sound had died away, the school was empty; and of the busy noisy crowd which had peopled it but five minutes before, not one remained.

'Very well, Mr Browdie!' said Miss Squeers, hot and flushed from the recent encounter, but vixenish to the last; 'you've been and excited our boys to run away. Now see if we don't pay you out for that, sir! If my pa IS unfortunate and trod down by henemies, we're not going to be basely crowed and conquered over by you and 'Tilda.'

'Noa!' replied John bluntly, 'thou bean't. Tak' thy oath o' thot. Think bettther o' us, Fanny. I tell 'ee both, that I'm glod the auld man has been caught out at last - dom'd glod - but ye'll sooffer eneaf wi'out any crowin' fra' me, and I be not the mun to crow, nor be Tilly the lass, so I tell 'ee flat. More than thot, I tell 'ee noo, that if thou need'st friends

to help thee awa' from this place - dinnot turn up thy nose, Fanny, thou may'st - thou'lt foind Tilly and I wi' a thout o' old times about us, ready to lend thee a hond. And when I say thot, dinnot think I be asheamed of waa't I've deane, for I say again, Hurrah! and dom the schoolmeasther. There!

His parting words concluded, John Browdie strode heavily out, remounted his nag, put him once more into a smart canter, and, carolling lustily forth some fragments of an old song, to which the horse's hoofs rang a merry accompaniment, sped back to his pretty wife and to Nicholas.

For some days afterwards, the neighbouring country was overrun with boys, who, the report went, had been secretly furnished by Mr and Mrs Browdie, not only with a hearty meal of bread and meat, but with sundry shillings and sixpences to help them on their way. To this rumour John always returned a stout denial, which he accompanied, however, with a lurking grin, that rendered the suspicious doubtful, and fully confirmed all previous believers.

There were a few timid young children, who, miserable as they had been, and many as were the tears they had shed in the wretched school, still knew no other home, and had formed for it a sort of attachment, which made them weep when the bolder spirits fled, and cling to it as a refuge. Of these, some were found crying under hedges and in such places, frightened at the solitude. One had a dead bird in a little cage; he had wandered nearly twenty miles, and when his poor favourite died, lost courage, and lay down beside him. Another was discovered in a yard hard by the school, sleeping with a dog, who bit at those who came to remove him, and licked the sleeping child's pale face.

They were taken back, and some other stragglers were recovered, but by degrees they were claimed, or lost again; and, in course of time, Dotheboys Hall and its last breaking-up began to be forgotten by the neighbours, or to be only spoken of as among the things that had been.