

He spoke no more; but, after a pause, softly groped his way out of the room, and up the echoing stairs—up to the top—to the front garret—where he closed the door behind him, and remained.

It was a mere lumber-room now, but it yet contained an old dismantled bedstead; the one on which his son had slept; for no other had ever been there. He avoided it hastily, and sat down as far from it as he could.

The weakened glare of the lights in the street below, shining through the window which had no blind or curtain to intercept it, was enough to show the character of the room, though not sufficient fully to reveal the various articles of lumber, old corded trunks and broken furniture, which were scattered about. It had a shelving roof; high in one part, and at another descending almost to the floor. It was towards the highest part that Ralph directed his eyes; and, upon it he kept them fixed steadily for some minutes. Then he rose, and dragging thither an old chest upon which he had been seated, mounted on it, and felt along the wall above his head with both hands. At length, they touched a large iron hook, firmly driven into one of the beams.

At that moment, he was interrupted by a loud knocking at the door below. After a little hesitation he opened the window, and demanded who it was.

"I want Mr. Nickleby," replied a voice.

"What with him?"

"That's not Mr. Nickleby's voice surely?" was the rejoinder.

It was not like it; but it was Ralph who spoke, and so he said.

The voice made answer that the twin brothers wished to know whether the man whom he had seen that night, was to be detained; and that although it was now midnight they had sent, in their anxiety to do right.

"Yes," cried Ralph, "detain him till to-morrow; then let them bring him here—him and my nephew—and come themselves, and be sure that I will be ready to receive them."

"At what hour?" asked the voice.

"At any hour," replied Ralph fiercely. "In the afternoon, tell them. At any hour, at any minute. All times will be alike to me."

He listened to the man's retreating footsteps, until the