

LAST NO. OF "NICHOLAS NICKLEBY."

This very popular work is brought to a close in the 20th number. It has been published, as most readers know, in monthly parts, experiencing a vast sale, and maintaining its interest without flagging. A new work is announced from the powerful and prolific pen of Mr. Dickens, the first number is to appear in March next. We intend to keep those works, which engage so much of public attention, before the readers of the Pearl, in the most effective way within our reach. To give mere extracts would be to lose much of the interest of the narrative, and nearly all its connecting parts,—to copy the whole would be out of the question, because our space would by no means admit it, and, if it did, all would not be interesting to all readers, and the variety essential to our periodical would be sacrificed. The mean between these extremes, will be to give occasionally a running review, with extracts, as each number comes to hand; thus we may connect the more striking scenes, and secure the thread of the narrative,—giving our readers the gist of the story and its beauties in the smallest compass.—Nicholas Nickleby, and his sister Kate, and their mother, Mrs. Knickleby, are cast unexpectedly among the cares of the world, by the death of the "head of the family," Mr. Nickleby. They repair to London, where Ralph Nickleby, a brother-in-law of the widow, is looked to as a stay, under their destitute circumstances. Ralph is an ably drawn picture of an old usurer,—cold, clever, calculating, with all the features of his class exaggerated, it would appear, to monstrosity, but redeemed in their horror by eccentricity and intellectual power. The other characters, are, Squeers, a sordid monster of a schoolmaster,—Smike, a victim of Squeers,—Newman Noggs, an eccentric "poor gentleman," become drudge to the usurer,—Mr. and Mrs. Mantalini, in the fashionable millinery line,—Crammels, manager of a company of strolling players,—the Brothers Cheeryble, true old English merchants, princely and beneficent to an extreme,—Tim Linkwater, their confidential clerk,—and Madeline Bray, the elegant daughter of an unfortunate, choleric, and sensual man.

The closing Part of this work contains Nos. 19 and 20. It opens with a very characteristic picture of Ralph Nickleby, at a moment when his affairs, which had been prosperous in their iniquity for a long period, "take a turn," and he sees discomfiture and shame, and the usual consequences of guilt, throwing their shadows before :

PLOTS FAILING 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 listlessly 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 down stairs 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.'

Ralph finds, unaccountably to himself, that his old confederates avoid him, and show him a very altered front,—he becomes roused to exertion, and resolves to ferret out any secrets that may be in the wind,—and to undermine those whom he suspects of plotting against him. He sets out on such business, and meets with various disappointments,—among the rest he calls on an old fellow-usurer, Gride, who was a party in a recent conspiracy on the person and fortunes of Madeline Bray :

THE USURER'S REPULSE.

"Arrived at the usurer's house, he found the windows close shut, the dingy blinds drawn down: all silent, melancholy, and deserted. But that was its usual aspect. He knocked—gently at first, then loud and vigorously, but 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 the 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, and 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 ecstacy 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—o,' 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 my cost. I am firmer and more myself just now than I have been these many days.'

In desperation Ralph goes to the office of the Brothers Cheeryble, and demands information respecting some interferences of these gentlemen, and some allusions which they had made connected with his concerns. They confront him with his old clerk, Newman Noggs, when the following scene occurs :

NEWMAN AT BAY.

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 be 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—eh? 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—eh?'

'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, forget 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 besides? Who tampered with a sculch like her, 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 the 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 design 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, 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 any body 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 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 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.'

After an ineffectual attempt to get Squeers again in his toils, Ralph returned,—

WEARINESS OF HEART.

"He went home, and was glad to find the housekeeper complaining of illness that he might have an excuse for being alone and sending her away to where she lived, which was hard by. There he sat down by the light of a single candle, and began to think, for the first time, on all that had taken place that day.

He had neither eaten nor drunk since last night, and in addition to the anxiety of mind he had undergone, had been travelling about from place to place almost incessantly for many hours. He felt sick and exhausted, but could taste nothing save a glass of water, and continued to sit with his head upon his hand—not resting or thinking, but laboriously trying to do both, and feeling that every sense, but one of weariness and desolation, was for the time benumbed.

It was nearly ten o'clock when he heard a knocking at the door, and still sat quiet as before, as if he could not even bring his thoughts to bear upon that. It had been often repeated, and he had several times heard a voice outside, saying there was a light in the window (meaning, as he knew, his own candle), before he could rouse himself and go down stairs."

The knocking was that of a messenger from the brothers Cheeryble, requiring his immediate attendance, for the purpose of hearing something in which he was deeply concerned. This was no less, than information, by the mouth of a confessing party, that Smike—the victim of Squeers, and who had suffered a long persecution, in which Ralph, for his own purposes, took an active part, and who had recently died—was the son of Ralph, the fruit of a secret marriage,—neglected in infancy, and hidden out of revenge by a person whom Ralph had deeply wronged. This disclosure gives the guilty man a dreadful shock.

Meantime Nicholas had returned from the country, whither he had attended his poor protege, Smike, and where he had witnessed his last hours. He informs Kate that he loves Madeline Bray, but that he resolves to keep his feelings profoundly secret;—Madeline had become the wealthy ward of his employers, the Brothers Cheeryble, and he considered it an act of ingratitude and unfaithfulness, to make use of their confidence to gain her affections, and blast their prospects concerning her,—he being only a poor dependent. Kate informs her brother, that from similar feelings she had, during his absence, refused the hand of Frank Cheeryble, nephew of the good old men. Nicholas applauds her resolution, and declares that he intends to request his employers to remove Madeline from his mother's roof, where she had resided,—stating his reasons, and explaining his feelings on the subject. On this announcement of his resolution to remove her beloved companion, Kate exclaimed :

ANTICIPATION OF AGE.

"To-day? 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 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.