

to his bone, is alone adequate to its condition! And was it for this that Divinity and Humanity met in the person of the Son of God? Was it for this he bowed his head upon the cross, and died to show that God was Love? Was it for this that he instituted a church, prayed for its unity, endowed it with his Spirit, and gave to it the field of the world for the scene of its triumphs? Our hearts feel that it was not. All the unreclaimed, neglected, perishing portions of the world, protest that it was not. Shame, equal shame, on the Jews who crucified the Son of God, and on Christians, who, in the person of his members, have for ages been crucifying him afresh, and are still putting him to an open shame. Blessed Saviour, we need that thou shouldst add to the prayer for the unity of thy disciples, the prayer for thy murderers—'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' p. 298.

NICHOLAS NICKLEBY.—No. 7.

A CHAPTER WHEREIN NICHOLAS AT LENGTH ENCOUNTERS HIS UNCLE, TO WHOM HE EXPRESSES HIS SENTIMENTS WITH MUCH CANDOUR. HIS RESOLUTION.

It so chanced that Ralph Nickleby, at length seeing fit, for his own purposes, to communicate the atrocities of which Nicholas had been guilty, had (instead of first proceeding to another quarter of the town on business, as Newman Noggs supposed he would) gone straight to his sister-in-law. Hence when Miss La Creevy, admitted by a girl who has cleaning the house, made her way to the sitting-room, she found Mrs. Nickleby and Kate in tears, and Ralph just concluding his statement of his nephew's misdemeanours. Kate beckoned her not to retire, and Miss La Creevy took a seat in silence.

"This is pretty," said Ralph, folding up Miss Squeer's note; "very pretty. I recommended him—against all my previous conviction, for I knew he would never do any good—to a man with whom, behaving himself properly, he might have remained in comfort for years. What is the result? Conduct, for which he might hold up his hand at the Old Bailey."

"I never will believe it," said Kate, indignantly; "never. It is some base conspiracy, which carries its own falsehood with it."

"My dear," said Ralph, "you wrong the worthy man. These are not inventions. The man is assaulted, your brother is not to be found; this boy, of whom they speak goes with him—remember, remember."

"It is impossible," said Kate. "Nicholas!—and a thief, too! Mama, how can you sit and hear such statements?"

Poor Mrs. Nickleby, who had at no time been remarkable for the possession of a very clear understanding, and who had been reduced by the late changes in her affairs to a most complicated state of perplexity, made no other reply to this earnest remonstrance than exclaiming from behind a mass of pocket handkerchief, that she never could have believed it—thereby most ingeniously leaving her hearers to suppose that she did believe it.

"It would be my duty, if he came in my way, to deliver him up to justice," said Ralph, "my bounden duty; I should have no other course, as a man of the world and a man of business, to pursue. And yet," said Ralph, speaking in a very marked manner, and looking furtively, but fixedly, at Kate, "and yet I would not, I would spare the feelings of his—of his sister. And his mother of course," added Ralph, as though by an afterthought, and with far less emphasis.

Kate very well understood that this was held out as an additional inducement to her, to preserve the strictest silence regarding the events of the preceding night. She looked involuntarily towards Ralph as he ceased to speak, but he had turned his eyes another way, and seemed for the moment quite unconscious of her presence.

"Everything," said Ralph, after a long silence, broken only by Mrs. Nickleby's sobs, "everything combines to prove the truth of this letter, if indeed there were any possibility of disputing it. Do innocent men steal away from the sight of honest folks, and skulk in hiding-places like outlaws? Do innocent men inveigle nameless vagabonds, and prowl with them about the country as idle robbers do? Assault, riot, theft, what do you call these?"

"A lie!" cried a furious voice, as the door was dashed open, and Nicholas burst into the centre of the room.

In the first moment of surprise, and possibly of alarm, Ralph rose from his seat, and fell back a few paces, quite taken off his guard by this unexpected apparition. In another moment, he stood fixed and immovable with folded arms, regarding his nephew with a scowl of deadly hatred, while Kate and Miss La Creevy threw themselves between the two to prevent the personal violence which the fierce excitement of Nicholas appeared to threaten.

"Dear Nicholas," cried his sister, clinging to him. "Be calm, consider—"

"Consider, Kate!" cried Nicholas, clasping her hand so tight in the tumult of his anger, that she could scarcely bear the pain. "When I consider all, and think at what has passed, I need be made of iron to stand before him."

"Or bronze," said Ralph, quietly; "there is not hardihood enough in flesh and blood to face it out."

"Oh dear, dear!" cried Mrs. Nickleby, "that things should have come such to a pass as this!"

"Who speaks in a tone, as if I had done wrong, and brought disgrace on them?" said Nicholas, looking round.

"Your mother, Sir," replied Ralph, motioning towards her.

"Whose ears have been poisoned by you," said Nicholas; "by you—you, who under pretence of deserving the thanks she poured upon you, heaped every insult, wrong, and indignity, upon my head. You, who sent me to a den where sordid cruelty, worthy of yourself, runs wanton, and youthful misery stalks precocious; where the lightness of childhood shrinks into the heaviness of age, and its every promise blights, and withers as it grows. I call Heaven to witness," said Nicholas, looking eagerly round, "that I have seen all this, and that that man knows it."

"Refute these calumnies," said Kate, "and be more patient, so that you may give them no advantage. Tell us what you really did, and show that they are untrue."

"Of what do they—or of what does he accuse me?" said Nicholas.

"First, of attacking your master, and being within an ace of qualifying yourself to be tried for murder," interposed Ralph. "I speak plainly, young man, bluster as you will."

"I interfered," said Nicholas, "to save a miserable wretched creature from the vilest and most degrading cruelty. In so doing I inflicted such punishment upon a wretch as he will not readily forget, though far less than he deserved from me. If the same scene were renewed before me now, I would take the same part; but I would strike harder and heavier, and brand him with such marks as he should carry to his grave, go to it when he would."

"You hear?" said Ralph, turning to Mrs. Nickleby. "Penitence, this!"

"Oh dear me!" cried Mrs. Nickleby, "I don't know what to think, I really don't."

"Do not speak just now, mama, I entreat you," said Kate.

"Dear Nicholas, I only tell you, that you may know what wickedness can prompt, but they accuse you of—a ring is missing, and they dare to say that—"

"The woman," said Nicholas, haughtily, "the wife of the fellow from whom these charges come, dropped—as I suppose—a worthless ring among some clothes of mine, early in the morning on which I left the house. At least, I know that she was in the bed-room where they lay, struggling with an unhappy child, and that I found it when I opened my bundle on the road. I returned it at once by coach, and they have it now."

"I knew, I knew," said Kate, looking towards her uncle. "About this boy, love, in whose company they say you left?"

"That boy, a silly, helpless creature, from brutality and hard usage, is with me now," rejoined Nicholas.

"You hear?" said Ralph, appealing to the mother again, "everything proved, even upon his own confession. Do you choose to restore that boy, Sir?"

"No, I do not," replied Nicholas.

"You do not?" sneered Ralph.

"No," repeated Nicholas, "not to the man with whom I found him. I would that I knew on whom he has the claim of birth: I might wring something from his sense of shame, if he were dead to every tie of nature."

"Indeed!" said Ralph. "Now, Sir, will you hear a word or two from me?"

"You can speak when and what you please," replied Nicholas, embracing his sister. "I take little heed of what you say or threaten."

"Mighty well, Sir," retorted Ralph; "but perhaps it may concern others, who may think it worth their while to listen, and consider what I tell them. I will address your mother, Sir, who knows the world."

"Ah! and I only too dearly wish I didn't," sobbed Mrs. Nickleby.

There really was no necessity for the good lady to be much distressed upon this particular head, the extent of her worldly knowledge being, to say at least, very questionable; and so Ralph seemed to think, for he smiled as she spoke. He then glanced steadily at her and Nicholas by turns, as he delivered himself in these words:—

"Of what I have done, or what I meant to do, for you, ma'am, and my niece, I say not one syllable. I held out no promise, and leave you to judge for yourself. I hold out no threat now, but I say that this boy, headstrong, wilful, and disorderly as he is, should not have one penny of my money, or one crust of my bread, or one grasp of my hand, to save him from the loftiest gallows in all Europe. I will not meet him, come where he comes, or hear his name. I will not help him, or those who help him. With a full knowledge of what he brought upon you by so doing, he has come back in his selfish sloth, to be an aggravation of your wants and a burden upon his sister's scanty wages. I regret to leave you, and more to leave her, now, but I will not encourage this compound of meanness and cruelty, and, as I will not ask you to renounce him, I see you no more."

If Ralph had not known and felt his power in wounding those he hated, his glances at Nicholas would have shown it him in all

its force, as he proceeded in the above address. Innocent as the young man was of all wrong, every artful insinuation stung, every well-considered sarcasm cut him to the quick, and when Ralph noted his pale face and quivering lip, he hugged himself to mark how well he had chosen the taunts best calculated to strike deep into a young and ardent spirit.

"I can't help it," cried Mrs. Nickleby, "I know you have been very good to us, and meant to do a good deal for my dear daughter. I am quite sure of that; I know you did, and it was very kind of you, having her at your house and all—and of course it would have been a great thing for her, and for me too. But I can't, you know, brother-in-law, I can't renounce my own son, even if he has done all you say he has—it's not possible, I couldn't do it; so we must go to rack and ruin, Kate, my dear. I can bear it, I dare say." Pouring forth these, and a perfectly wonderful train of other disjointed expressions of regret, which no mortal power but Mrs. Nickleby's could ever have strung together, that lady wrung her hands, and her tears fell faster.

"Why do you say 'if Nicholas has done what they say he has, mama?' asked Kate, with honest anger. "You know he has not."

"I don't know what to think, one way or the other, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby; "Nicholas is so violent, and your uncle has so much honest composure, that I can only hear what he says, and not what Nicholas does. Never mind, don't let us talk any more about it. We can go to the Workhouse, or the Refuge for the Destitute, or the Magdalen Hospital, I dare say; and the sooner we go the better." With this extraordinary jumble of charitable institutions, Mrs. Nickleby again gave way to her tears.

"Stay," said Nicholas, as Ralph turned to go. "You need not leave this place, Sir, for it will be relieved of my presence in one minute, and it will be long, very long, before I darken these doors again."

"Nicholas," cried Kate, throwing herself on her brother's shoulder, and clasping him in her arms, "do not say so. My dear brother, you will break my heart. Mama, speak to him. Do not mind her, Nicholas; she does not mean it, you should know her better. Uncle, somebody, for God's sake speak to him."

"I never meant, Kate," said Nicholas, tenderly, "I never meant to stay among you; think better of me than to suppose it possible. I may turn my back on this town a few hours sooner than I intended, but what of that? We shall not forget each other apart, and better days will come when we shall part no more. Be a woman, Kate," he whispered, proudly, "and do not make me one while he looks on."

"No, no, I will not," said Kate, eagerly, "but you will not leave us. Oh! think of all the happy days we have had together before these terrible misfortunes came upon us; of all the comfort and happiness of home, and the trials we have to bear now; of our having no protector under all the slights and wrongs that poverty so much favours, and you cannot leave us to bear them alone, without one hand to help us."

"You will be helped when I am away," replied Nicholas, hurriedly. "I am no help to you, no protector; I should bring you nothing but sorrow, and want, and suffering. My own mother sees it, and the fondness and fears for you point to the course that I should take. And so all good angels bless you, Kate, till I can carry you to some home of mine, where we may revive the happiness denied to us now, and talk of these trials as of things gone by. Do not keep me here, but let me go at once. There. Dear girl—dear girl."

The grasp which had detained him, relaxed, and Kate fainted in his arms. Nicholas stooped over her for a few seconds, and placing her gently in a chair, confided her to their honest friend.

"I need not entreat your sympathy," he said, wringing her hand, "for I know your nature. You will never forget them."

He stepped up to Ralph, who remained in the same attitude which he had preserved throughout the interview, and moved not a finger.

"Whatever step you take, Sir," he said, in a voice inaudible beyond themselves, "I will keep a strict account of. I leave them to you, at your desire. There will be a day of reckoning sooner or later, and it will be a heavy one for you if they are wronged."

Ralph did not allow a muscle of his face to indicate that he heard one word of this parting address. He hardly knew that it was concluded, and Mrs. Nickleby had scarcely made up her mind to detain her son by force if necessary, when Nicholas was gone.

As he hurried through the streets to his obscure lodging, seeking to keep pace, as it were, with the rapidity of the thoughts which crowded upon him, many doubts and hesitations arose in his mind and almost tempted him to return. But what would they gain by this? Supposing he were to put Ralph Nickleby at defiance, and were even fortunate enough to obtain some small employment, his being with them could only render their present condition worse, and might greatly impair their future prospects, for his mother had spoken of some new kindness towards Kate which she had not denied. "No," thought Nicholas, "I have acted for the best."

But before he had gone five hundred yards, some other and different feeling would come upon him, and then he would lag again,