

that closed the prospect, strongly relieved, at the present moment, by the dark and dusky sky. In spite of his distress and pre-occupied mind, poor Edward, who had, probably without knowing it, much of those two rare gifts, the poet's feeling and the painter's eye, could not help stopping a moment, on the centre of the bridge, to contemplate so fine an effect of *chiar'oscuro*, so striking and beautiful a picture, composed almost without colour, by the nice contrast of light and shade.

*Concluded next week.*

NICHOLAS NICKLEBY.—No. 3.

A COUNTRY LOVE SCENE.

To account for the rapidity with which Miss Squeers had conceived a passion for Nicholas, it may be necessary to state that the friend from whom she had so recently returned was a miller's daughter of only eighteen, who had contracted herself unto the son of a small corn-factor resident in the nearest market town. Miss Squeers and the miller's daughter being fast friends, had covenanted together some two years before, according to a custom prevalent among young ladies, that whoever was first engaged to be married should straightway confide the mighty secret to the bosom of the other, before communicating it to any living soul, and bespeak her as bridesmaid without loss of time; in fulfilment of which pledge the miller's daughter, when her engagement was formed, came out express at eleven o'clock at night as the corn-factor's son made an offer of his hand and heart at twenty-five minutes past ten by the Dutch clock in the kitchen, and rushed into Miss Squeers's bed-room with the gratifying intelligence. Now, Miss Squeers being five years older, and out of her teens (which is also a great matter), had since been more than commonly anxious to return the compliment, and press her friend with a similar secret; but either in consequence of finding it hard to please herself, or harder still to please any body else, had never had an opportunity so to do, inasmuch as she had no such secret to disclose. The little interview with Nicholas had no sooner passed as above described, however, than Miss Squeers, putting on her bonnet, made her way with great precipitation to her friend's house, and upon a solemn renewal of divers old vows of secrecy, revealed how that she was—not exactly engaged, but going to be—to a gentleman's son—(none of your corn-factors, but a gentleman's son of high descent)—who had come down as teacher to Dotieboys Hall under most mysterious and remarkable circumstances—indeed, as Miss Squeers more than once hinted she had good reason to believe—induced by the fame of her many charms to seek her out, and woo and win her.

"Isn't it an extraordinary thing?" said Miss Squeers, emphasizing the adjective strongly.

"Most extraordinary," replied the friend. "But what has he said to you?"

"Don't ask me what he said, my dear," rejoined Miss Squeers. "If you had only seen his looks and smiles! I never was so overcome in all my life."

"Did he look in this way?" inquired the miller's daughter, counterfeiting as nearly as she could a favourite leer of the corn-factor.

"Very like that—only more genteel, replied Miss Squeers.

Ah!" said the friend, "then he means something depend on it."

Miss Squeers, having slight misgivings on the subject, was by no means ill pleased to be confirmed by a competent authority; and discovering, on further conversation and comparison of notes, a great many points of resemblance between the behaviour of Nicholas and that of the corn-factor, grew so exceedingly confidential, that she intrusted her friend with a vast number of things Nicholas had not said, which were all so very complimentary as to be quite conclusive. Then she dilated on the fearful hardship of having a father and mother strenuously opposed to her intended husband, on which unhappy circumstance she dwelt at great length; for the friend's father and mother were quite agreeable to her being married, and the whole courtship was in consequence as flat and common-place an affair as it was possible to imagine.

"How I should like to see him!" exclaimed the friend.

"So you shall, 'Tilda," replied Miss Squeers. "I should consider myself one of the most ungrateful creatures alive, if I denied you. I think mother's going away for two days to fetch some boys, and when she does, I'll ask you and John up to tea, and have him to meet you."

This was a charming idea, and having fully discussed it, the friends parted.

It so fell out that Mrs. Squeers's journey to some distance, to fetch three new boys, and dun the relations of two old ones for the balance of a small account, was fixed that very afternoon for the next day but one; and on the next day but one Mrs. Squeers got up outside the coach as it stopped to change at Greta Bridge, taking with her a small bundle containing something in a bottle and some sandwiches, and carrying besides a large white top-coat to wear in the night-time; with which baggage she went her way.

Whenever such opportunities as these occurred, it was Squeers's custom to drive over to the market town every evening on pretence of urgent business, and stop till ten or eleven o'clock

at a tavern he much affected. As the party was not in his way therefore, but rather afforded a means of compromise with Miss Squeers, he readily yielded his full assent thereunto, and willingly communicated to Nicholas that he was expected to take his tea in the parlour that evening at five o'clock.

To be sure Miss Squeers was in a desperate flutter as the time approached, and to be sure she was dressed out to the best advantage: with her hair—it had more than a tinge of red, and she wore it in a crop—curled in five distinct rows up to the very top of her head, and arranged dexterously over the doubtful eye; to say nothing of the blue sash which floated down her back, or the worked apron, or the long gloves, or the green gauze scarf worn over one shoulder and under the other, or any of the numerous devices which were to be as so many arrows to the heart of Nicholas. She had scarcely completed these arrangements to her entire satisfaction when the friend arrived with a whitey-brown parcel—flat and three-cornered—containing sundry small adornments which were to be put on up-stairs, and which the friend put on, talking incessantly. When Miss Squeers had "done" the friend's hair, the friend "did" Miss Squeers's hair, throwing in some striking improvements in the way of ringlets down the neck; and then, when they were both touched up to their entire satisfaction, they went down stairs in full state with the long gloves on, all ready for company.

"Where's John, 'Tilda?" said Miss Squeers.

"Only gone home to clean himself," replied the friend. "He will be here by the time the tea's drawn."

"I do so palpitate," observed Miss Squeers.

"Ah! I know what it is," replied the friend.

"I have not been used to it, you know, 'Tilda," said Miss Squeers, applying her hand to the left side of her sash.

"You'll soon get the better of it, dear," rejoined the friend.

While they were talking thus the hungry servant brought in the tea things, and soon afterwards somebody tapped at the room door.

"There he is!" cried Miss Squeers. "Oh 'Tilda!"

"Hush!" said 'Tilda. Hem! Say, come in."

"Come in," cried Miss Squeers faintly. And in walked Nicholas.

"Good evening," said that young gentleman, all unconscious of his conquest. "I understood from Mr. Squeers that"—

"Oh yes;" it's all right," interposed Miss Squeers. "Father don't tea with us, but you won't mind that I dare say." (This was said archly.)

Nicholas opened his eyes at this, but he turned the matter off very coolly—not caring, particularly about any thing just then—and went through the ceremony of introduction to the miller's daughter with so much grace, that that young lady was lost in admiration.

"We are only waiting for one more gentleman," said Miss Squeers, taking off the tea-pot lid, and looking in, to see how the tea was getting on.

It was matter of equal moment to Nicholas whether they were waiting for one gentleman or twenty, so he received the intelligence with perfect unconcern; and being out of spirits, and not seeing any especial reason why he should make himself agreeable, looked out of the window and sighed involuntarily.

As luck would have it, Miss Squeer's friend was of a playful turn, and hearing Nicholas sigh, she took it into her head to rally the lovers on their lowness of spirits.

"But if it's caused by my being here," said the young lady, "don't mind me a bit, for I'm quite as bad. You may go on just as you would if you were alone."

"'Tilda," said Miss Squeers, colouring up to the top row of curls, "I am ashamed of you; and here the two friends burst into a variety of giggles, and glanced from time to time over the tops of their pocket-handkerchiefs at Nicholas, who, from a state of unmixed astonishment, gradually fell into one of irrefragable laughter—occasioned partly by the bare notion of his being in love with Miss Squeers, and partly by the preposterous appearance and behaviour of the two girls, the two causes of merriment taken together, struck him as being so keenly ridiculous, that despite his miserable condition, he laughed till he was thoroughly exhausted.

"Well," thought Nicholas, "as I am here, and seem expected for some reason or other to be amiable, it's of no use looking like a goose. I may as well accommodate myself to the company."

We blush to tell it, but his youthful spirits and vivacity getting for a time the better of his sad thoughts, he no sooner formed this resolution than he saluted Miss Squeers and the friend with great gallantry, and drawing a chair to the tea-table, began to make himself more at home than in all probability an usher has ever done in his employer's house since ushers were first invented.

The ladies were in the full delight of this altered behaviour on the part of Mr. Nickleby, when the expected swain arrived with his hair very damp from recent washing; and a clean shirt, whereof the collar might have belonged to some giant ancestor, forming, together with a white waistcoat of similar dimensions, the chief ornament of his person.

"Well, John," said Miss Matilda Price (which, by-the-by, was the name of the miller's daughter).

"Weel," said John, with a grin that even the collar could not conceal.

"I beg your pardon," interposed Miss Squeers, hastening to do the honours, "Mr. Nickleby—Mr. John Browdie."

"Servant, Sir," said John, who was something over six feet high, with a face and body rather above the due proportion than below it.

"Yours to command, Sir," replied Nicholas, making fearful ravages on the bread and butter.

Mr. Browdie was not a gentleman of great conversational powers, so he grinned twice more, and having now bestowed his customary mark of recognition on every person in company, grinned at nothing particular and helped himself to food.

"Old wooman awa', beant she?" said Mr. Browdie, with his mouth full.

Miss Squeers nodded assent.

Mr. Browdie gave a grin of special width, as if he thought that really was something to laugh at, and went to work at the bread and butter with increased vigour. It was quite a sight to behold how he and Nicholas emptied the plate between them.

"Ye weant get bread and butther ev'ry neight I expect, man," said Mr. Browdie, after he had sat staring at Nicholas a long time over the empty plate.

Nicholas bit his lip and coloured, but affected not to hear the remark.

"Ecod," said Mr. Browdie, laughing boisterously, "they deant put too much intiv' em. Ye'll be nowt but'skeen and boans if you stop here long enaef, Ho! ho! ho!"

"You are facetious, Sir," said Nicholas, scornfully.

"Na; I deant know," replied Mr. Browdie, "but t'other teacher, 'cod he were a lean 'un, he wur." The recollection of the last teacher's leanness seemed to afford Mr. Browdie the most exquisite delight, for he laughed until he found it necessary to apply his coat-cuffs to his eyes.

"I don't know whether your perceptions are quite keen enough, Mr. Browdie, to enable you to understand that your remarks are very offensive," said Nicholas in a towering passion, "but if they are, have the goodness to—"

"If you say another word, John," shrieked Miss Price, stopping her admirer's mouth as he was about to interrupt, "only half a word, I'll never forgive you, or speak to you again."

"Weel, my lass, I deant care about 'un," said the corn-factor, bestowing a hearty kiss on Miss Matilda; "let 'un gang on, let 'un gang on."

It now became Miss Squeers's turn to intercede with Nicholas, which she did with many symptoms of alarm and horror; the effect of the double intercession was that he and John Browdie shook hands across the table with much gravity, and such was the imposing nature of the ceremonial, that Miss Squeers was overcome and shed tears.

"What's the matter, Fanny?" said Miss Price.

"Nothing, 'Tilda," replied Miss Squeers, sobbing.

"There never was any danger," said Miss Price, "was there, Mr. Nickleby?"

"None at all," replied Nicholas. "Absurd."

"That's right," whispered Miss Price, "say something kind to her, and she'll soon come round. Here, shall John and I go into the little kitchen, and come back presently?"

"Not on any account," rejoined Nicholas, quite alarmed at the proposition. "What on earth should you do that for?"

"Well," said Miss Price, beckoning him aside, and speaking with some degree of contempt—"you are a one to keep company."

"What do you mean?" said Nicholas; "I am not one to keep company at all—here at all events. I can't make this out."

"No, nor I neither," rejoined Miss Price; "but men are always fickle, and always were, and always will be; that I can make out, very easily."

"Fickle!" cried Nicholas; what do you suppose? You don't mean to say that you think—"

"Oh no, I think nothing at all," retorted Miss Price pettishly. "Look at her, dressed so beautiful and looking so well—really almost handsome. I am ashamed at you."

"My dear girl, what have I got to do with her dressing beautifully or looking well?" inquired Nicholas.

"Come, don't call me a dear girl," said Miss Price—smiling a little though, for she was pretty, and a coquette too in her small way, and Nicholas was good-looking, and she supposed him the property of somebody else, which were all reasons why she should be gratified to think she had made an impression on him, "or Fanny will be saying it's my fault. Come; we're going to have a game at cards." Pronouncing these last words aloud, she tripped away and rejoined the big Yorkshireman.

This was wholly unintelligible to Nicholas, who had no other distinct impression on his mind at the moment, than that Miss Squeers was an ordinary-looking girl, and her friend Miss Price a pretty one; but he had not time to enlighten himself by reflection, for the hearth being by this time swept up, and the caudle snuffed, they sat down to play speculation.

"There are only four of us, 'Tilda," said Miss Squeers, look-