

*NICHOLAS NICKLEBY.—No. 6.

The last man being gone, Mr. Gregsby rubbed his hands and chuckled, as merry fellows will, when they think they have said or done a more than commonly good thing; he was so engrossed in this self-congratulation, that he did not observe that Nicholas had been left behind in the shadow of the window-curtains, until that young gentleman, fearing he might otherwise overhear some soliloquy intended to have no listeners, coughed twice or thrice to attract the member's notice.

"What's that?" said Mr. Gregsby, in sharp accents.

Nicholas stepped forward and bowed.

"What do you do here, Sir?" asked Mr. Gregsby; "a spy upon my privacy! A concealed voter! You have heard my answer, Sir. Pray follow the deputation."

"I should have done so if I had belonged to it, but I do not," said Nicholas.

"Then how came you here, Sir?" was the natural inquiry of Mr. Gregsby, M. P. "And where the devil have you come from, Sir?" was the question which followed it.

"I brought this card from the General Agency Office, Sir," said Nicholas, "wishing to offer myself as your secretary, understanding that you stood in need of one."

"That's all you have come for, is it?" said Mr. Gregsby, eyeing him in some doubt.

Nicholas replied in the affirmative.

"You have no connexion with any of these rascally papers, have you?" said Mr. Gregsby. "You didn't get into the room to hear what was going forward, and put it in print, eh?"

"I have no connexion, I am sorry to say, with anything at present," rejoined Nicholas,—politely enough, but quite at his ease.

"Oh!" said Mr. Gregsby. "How did you find your way up here, then?"

Nicholas related how he had been forced up by the deputation.

"That was the way, was it?" said Mr. Gregsby. "Sit down."

Nicholas took a chair, and Mr. Gregsby stared at him for a long time, as if to make certain, before he asked any further questions, that there were no objections to his outward appearance.

"You want to be my secretary, do you?" he said at length.

"I wish to be employed in that capacity," replied Nicholas.

"Well," said Mr. Gregsby; "Now what can you do?"

"I suppose," replied Nicholas, smiling, "that I can do what usually falls to the lot of other secretaries."

"What's that?" inquired Mr. Gregsby.

"What is it?" replied Nicholas.

"Ah! What is it?" retorted the member, looking shrewdly at him, with his head on one side.

"A secretary's duties are rather difficult to define, perhaps," said Nicholas, considering. "They include, I presume, correspondence."

"Good," interposed Mr. Gregsby.

"The arrangement of papers and documents—"

"Very good."

"Occasionally, perhaps, the writing from your dictation; and possibly,"—said Nicholas, with a half smile, "the copying of your speech, for some public journal, when you have made one of more than usual importance."

"Certainly," rejoined Mr. Gregsby. "What else?"

"Really," said Nicholas, after a moment's reflection, "I am not able, at this instant, to recapitulate any other duty of a secretary, beyond the general one of making himself as agreeable and useful to his employer as he can consistently with his own respectability, and without overstepping that line of duties which he undertakes to perform, and which the designation of his office is usually understood to imply."

Mr. Gregsby looked fixedly at Nicholas for a short time, and then glancing warily round the room, said in a suppressed voice—

"This is all very well, Mr.—what is your name?"

"Nickleby."

"This is all very well, Mr. Nickleby, and very proper, so far as it goes—so far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough. There are other duties, Mr. Nickleby, which a secretary to a parliamentary gentleman must never lose sight of. I should require to be crammed, Sir."

"I beg your pardon," interposed Nicholas, doubtful whether he had heard aright.

"—To be crammed, Sir," repeated Mr. Gregsby.

"May I beg your pardon again, if I inquire what you mean?" said Nicholas.

"My meaning, Sir, is perfectly plain," replied Mr. Gregsby, with a solemn aspect. "My secretary would have to make himself master of the foreign policy of the world, as it is mirrored in the newspapers; to run his eye over all accounts of public meetings, all leading articles, and accounts of the proceedings of public bodies; and to make notes of anything which it appeared to him might be made a point of, in any little speech upon the question of some petition lying on the table, or anything of that kind. Do you understand?"

"I think I do, Sir," replied Nicholas.

"Then," said Mr. Gregsby, "it would be necessary for him to make himself acquainted from day to day with newspaper paragraphs on passing events; such as 'Mysterious disappearance, and supposed suicide of a pot-boy,' or anything of that sort, upon which I might find a question to the Secretary of State for the Home Department. Then he would have to copy the question, and as much as I remembered of the answer (including a little compliment about my independence and good sense); and to send the manuscript in a frank to the local paper, with perhaps half a dozen lines of leader, to the effect, I was always to be found in my place in parliament, and never shrunk from the discharge of my responsible and arduous duties, and so forth. You see?"

Nicholas bowed.

"Besides which," continued Mr. Gregsby, "I should expect him now and then to go through a few figures in the printed tables, and to pick out a few results, so that I might come out pretty well on timber duty questions, and finance questions, and so on; and I should like him to get up a few little arguments about the disastrous effects of a return to cash payments and a metallic currency, with a touch now and then about the exportation of bullion, and the Emperor of Russia, and bank notes and all that kind of thing, which it's only necessary to talk fluently about, because nobody understands it. Do you take me?"

"I think I understand," said Nicholas.

"With regard to such questions as are not political," continued Mr. Gregsby, warming; "and which one can't be expected to care a pin about, beyond the natural care of not allowing inferior people to be as well off as ourselves, else where are our privileges? I should wish my secretary to get together a few little flourishing speeches, of a patriotic cast. For instance, if any preposterous bill were brought forward for giving poor grubbing devils of authors a right to their own property, I should like to say, that I for one would never consent to opposing an insurmountable bar to the diffusion of literature among the people,—you understand? that the creations of the pocket, being man's, might belong to one man, or one family; but that the creations of the brain, being God's, ought as a matter of course to belong to the people at large—and if I was pleasantly disposed, I should like to make a joke about posterity, and say that those who wrote for posterity should be content to be rewarded by the approbation of posterity; it might take with the house, and could never do me any harm, because posterity can't be expected to know anything about me or my jokes either—don't you see?"

"I see that, Sir," replied Nicholas.

"You must always bear in mind, in such cases as this, where our interests are not affected," said Mr. Gregsby, "to put it very strong about the people, because it comes out very well at election-time; and you could be as funny as you liked about the authors; because I believe the greater part of them live in lodgings, and are not voters. This is a hasty outline of the chief things you'd have to do, except waiting in the lobby every night, in case I forgot any thing, and should want fresh cramming; and now and then, during great debates, sitting in the front row of the gallery, and saying to the people about—'You see that gentleman, with his hand to his face, and his arm twisted round the pillar—that's Mr. Gregsby—the celebrated Mr. Gregsby—' with any other little eulogium that might strike you at the moment. And for salary," said Mr. Gregsby, winding up with great rapidity; for he was out of breath—"And for salary, I don't mind saying at once in round numbers, to prevent any dissatisfaction—though it's more than I've been accustomed to give—fifteen shillings a week, and find yourself. There."

With this handsome offer Mr. Gregsby once more threw himself back in his chair, and looked like a man who has been most profligately liberal, but is determined not to repent of it notwithstanding.

"Fifteen shillings a week is not much," said Nicholas, mildly.

"Not much! Fifteen shillings a week not much, young man?" cried Mr. Gregsby. "Fifteen shillings a—"

"Pray do not suppose that I quarrel with the sum," replied Nicholas; "for I am not ashamed to confess, that whatever it may be in itself, to me it is a great deal. But the duties and responsibilities make the recompense small, and they are so heavy that I fear to undertake them."

"Do you decline to undertake them, Sir?" inquired Mr. Gregsby, with his hand on the bell-rope.

"I fear they are too great for my powers, however good my will may be," replied Nicholas.

"That is as much as to say that you had rather not accept the place, and that you consider fifteen shillings a week too little," said Mr. Gregsby, ringing. "Do you decline it, Sir?"

"I have no alternative but to do so," replied Nicholas.

"Door, Matthews," said Mr. Gregsby, as the boy appeared.

"I am sorry I have troubled you unnecessarily, Sir," said Nicholas.

"I am sorry you have," rejoined Mr. Gregsby, turning his back upon him. "Door, Matthews."

"Good morning," said Nicholas.

"Door, Matthews," cried Mr. Gregsby. The boy beckoned Nicholas, and tumbling lazily down stairs

before him, opened the door and ushered him into the street. With a sad and pensive air he retraced his steps homewards.

Smike had scraped a meal together from the remnant of last night's supper, and was anxiously awaiting his return. The occurrences of the morning had not improved Nicholas's appetite, and by him the dinner remained untasted. He was sitting in a thoughtful attitude, with the plate which the poor fellow had assiduously filled with the choicest morsels untouched, by his side, when Newman Noggs looked into the room.

"Come back?" asked Newman.

"Yes," replied Nicholas, "tired to death; and what is worse, might have remained at home for all the good I have done."

"Couldn't expect to do much in one morning," said Newman.

"May be so, but I am sanguine, and did expect," said Nicholas, "and am proportionately disappointed." Saying which, he gave Newman an account of his proceedings.

"If I could do anything," said Nicholas, "anything however slight, until Ralph Nickleby returns, and I have eased my mind by confronting him, I should feel happier. I should think it no disgrace to work, Heaven knows. Lying indolently here like a half-tamed sullen beast distracts me."

"I don't know," said Newman; "small things offer—they would pay the rent, and more—but you wouldn't like them; no, you could hardly be expected to undergo it—no, no."

"What could I hardly be expected to undergo?" asked Nicholas, raising his eyes. "Show me, in this wide waste of London, any honest means by which I could even defray the weekly hire of this poor room, and see if I shrink from resorting to them. Undergo! I have undergone too much, my friend, to feel pride or squeamishness now. Except—" added Nicholas hastily, after a short silence, "except such squeamishness as is common honesty, and so much pride as constitutes self-respect. I see little to choose, between the assistant to a brutal pedagogue, and the toad-eater of a mean and ignorant upstart be he member or no member."

"I hardly know whether I should tell you what I heard this morning or not," said Newman.

"Has it reference to what you said just now?" asked Nicholas.

"It has."

"Then in Heaven's name, my good friend, tell it me," said Nicholas. "For God's sake consider my deplorable condition; and while I promise to take no step without taking counsel with you, give me, at least, a vote in my own behalf."

Moved by this entreaty, Newman stammered forth a variety of most unaccountable and entangled sentences, the upshot of which was, that Mrs. Kenwigs had examined him at great length that morning touching the origin of his acquaintance with, and the whole life, adventures, and pedigree of Nicholas; that Newman had parried these questions as long as he could, but being at length hard pressed and driven into a corner, had gone so far as to admit, that Nicholas was a tutor of great accomplishments, involved in some misfortunes which he was not at liberty to explain, and bearing the name of Johnson. That Mrs. Kenwigs, impelled by gratitude, or ambition, or maternal pride, or maternal love, or all four powerful motives conjointly, had taken secret conference with Mr. Kenwigs, and finally returned to propose that Mr. Johnson should instruct the four Miss Kenwigses in the French language as spoken by natives, at the weekly stipend of five shillings current coin of the realm, being at the rate of one shilling per week per each Miss Kenwigs, and one shilling over, until such time as the baby might be able to take it out in grammar.

"Which, unless I am very much mistaken," observed Mrs. Kenwigs in making the proposition, "will not be very long; for such clever children, Mr. Noggs, never were born into this world I do believe."

"There," said Newman, "that's all. It's beneath you, I know; but I thought that perhaps you might—"

"Might!" said Nicholas, with great alacrity; "of course I shall. I accept the offer at once. Tell the worthy mother so without delay, my dear fellow; and that I am ready to begin whenever she pleases."

Newman hastened with joyful steps to inform Mrs. Kenwigs of his friend's acquiescence, and soon returning, brought back word that they would be happy to see him in the first floor as soon as convenient; that Mrs. Kenwigs had upon the instant sent out to secure a second-hand French grammar and dialogues, which had long been fluttering in the sixpenny box at the book-stall round the corner; and that the family, highly excited at the prospect of this addition to their gentility wished the initiatory lesson to come off immediately.

And here it may be observed, that Nicholas was not, in the ordinary sense of the word, a young man of high spirit. He would resent an affront to himself, or interpose to redress a wrong offered to another, as boldly and freely as any knight that ever set lance in rest; but he lacked that peculiar excess of coolness and great-minded selfishness, which invariably distinguish gentlemen of high spirit. In truth, for our own part, we are rather disposed to look upon such gentlemen as being rather encumbrances than otherwise in rising families, happening to be