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Nicholas Nickleby

adapted from the novel by Charles Dickens

by Jonathan Holloway

Samuel French — London
www.samuelfrench-london.co.uk



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NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

First presented by Red Shift Theatre Company on Thursday 4th October 2001 at The Maltings Arts Centre, St Albans, and on tour throughout the UK with the following cast:

Smike	}	Darren Hawkes
Miss La Creevy		
Lord Verisopht		
Charles Cheeryble		
Gride		
Nicholas Nickleby	}	Stephen Lucas
Pluck		
Brooker		
Kate Nickleby	}	Kate Rawson
Fanny Squeers		
Mrs Nickleby	}	Susan Swanton
Mrs Squeers		
Madeleine Bray		
Squeers	}	James Traherne
Sir Mulberry Hawk		
Ned Cherryble		
Snawley		
Ralph Nickleby	}	Mario Vernazza
Vincent Crummies		
Newman Noggs	}	Tim Weekes
Pyke		
Frank Cheeryble		
Bray		

Directed by Jonathan Holloway
Designed by Neil Irish
Original Music by John Nicholls

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CHARACTERS

- Nicholas Nickleby**, optimistic, well educated young man of about 19. Standard English with a hint of Devon
- Pluck**, dissolute venomous affected friend of Sir Mulberry Hawk
- Brooker**, Ralph's old accomplice, a former gentleman, now a coarsened and dishevelled ex-convict
- Ralph Nickleby**, Nicholas's embittered uncle
- Vincent Crummles**, hugely theatrical actor-manager
- Kate Nickleby**, Nicholas's sister, well-educated, intelligent and sensitive
- Miss Fanny Squeers**, daughter of Dotheboys headmaster, coarse, ignorant young woman with no experience of the world and a very high opinion of herself
- Mrs Squeers**, coarse, ignorant and violent, villainous headmaster's wife
- Mrs Nickleby**, Nicholas's widowed mother, naïve, unworldly and always chattering
- Madeline Bray**, intelligent, sensitive and Nicholas's future wife
- Newman Noggs**, Ralph's clerk
- Pyke**, affected and dissolute friend of Mulberry Hawk
- Frank Cheeryble**, handsome and pleasant nephew of the Cheeryble brothers
- Bray**, selfish, sickly father of Madeline
- Smike**, simple, oppressed life-long victim
- Miss La Creevy**, cheerful, lonely portrait painter and landlady
- Lord Verisopht**, decent but weak noble in Hawk's power
- Charles Cheeryble**, oddball twin, Nicholas's benefactor and saviour
- Gride**, elderly usurer with designs on Madeline
- Squeers**, ignorant, violent Yorkshire headmaster
- Sir Mulberry Hawk**, monstrous manipulative usurer
- Ned Cheeryble**, the other oddball twin, Nicholas's benefactor and saviour
- Snawley**, slimy assistant in Ralph's corrupt schemes

Extras: **Boys**

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play takes place in various locations in Yorkshire, Portsmouth and London

Time — Victorian (but can be updated at the director's discretion, please see note below)

NOTE ON THE TEXT

This stage version of *Nicholas Nickleby* was first produced by Red Shift Theatre Company in 2001. It toured throughout the UK. Directed by writer Jonathan Holloway, designed by Neil Irish and with original music by Jon Nicholls, the production was set in England in the 1950s in order to link Dickens's campaigning themes with the 20th Century's post-war decline of deferential attitudes towards the establishment. An effort was made to give some of the language contemporary resonance. This ought not to discourage the producer wishing to site the play in the 19th century world of the original novel.

Jonathan Holloway

NOTE ON CASTING

The original cast list appearing at the front of this edition indicates it is possible to perform the play with a minimum cast of M5 F2 with doubling.

Other plays by Jonathan Holloway
published by Samuel French Ltd:

The Dark
Darkness Falls
Les Misérables
The Monkey's Paw
The Railway Siding

ACT I

SCENE 1

Noggs is on stage

Noggs What to tell? And how much about myself? That I was once a gentleman, I suppose. That my life was a happy one and I had respect, professional standing and money in the bank. And then I was ruined by circumstance ... No that's wrong. *(Pause)* I'm being kind. *(His temper flares)* He doesn't deserve that. When it comes to the matter of judgement, you see — death, like old age, really shouldn't be taken as a mitigating circumstance. It was him ruined me, and then made me his servant and familiar. *(Pause)* Oh how it drags on day in, day out. Crafty avarice grows rich, while honest manly hearts are made poor and sad. *(Pause)* Forgive me. It's just ... so hard to know where to start. Well ... Childhood never leaves one, does it? Then let's go to school. To the aptly named Dotheboys *(pronounced "Dutherbies")* Hall. In Yorkshire.

SCENE 2

Dotheboys Hall

Mrs Squeers, Boys and Nicholas are on stage. The Boys are seated at furniture standing in as desks, all very afraid and looking down

Mrs Squeers Good-morning, Mr Nickleby.

Nicholas Good-morning, Mrs Squeers.

Mrs Squeers You're early.

Nicholas I thought I'd give myself a chance to look around. Umm ... What's that you're giving the boys?

Squeers enters. He carries a cane

Squeers Morning, Nickleby. You're early.

Nicholas Yes.

Squeers Well, good. Well done, I suppose.

Mrs Squeers He was asking about the green liquor.

Squeers It settles the boys. Now, that can't be bad, can it?

Nicholas I didn't say it was. Bad, I mean.

Mrs Squeers We want you to be a success here, Nickleby. But if that's going to happen, you'll need to get used to us. This is a progressive school, Nickleby. In which we combine tradition and innovation.

Squeers And science.

Mrs Squeers Exactly. They have the green liquor partly because if they didn't they'd always be ill, and getting worked up, and so on.

Nicholas I ... see.

Squeers (*taking Nicholas to one side*) I'll be honest with you, if you're man enough for it.

Nicholas Yes, I think I am.

Squeers Good. Most are bastards or handicapped or both. Payment — when payment's made — covers for many things. We found it most effective when advertising “no vacations” — if you take my meaning? And the green liquor helps all around. No wantings, yearnings. A peaceful little community. No memories of home. She's a marvel, Nickleby. Does things for the boys I don't believe half their own mothers would.

Nicholas I don't doubt it, sir.

Squeers Help me into my gown, would you? That's right. Gown's an important thing, isn't it?

Nicholas Yes. Where did you study, sir?

Squeers (*after a pause, eyeing Nicholas coldly*) Because it lets everyone know where they stand.

Nicholas Yes. Of course. (*Pause*) The tall fellow?

Squeers Who?

Nicholas The boy at the front of the class.

Squeers Smike? He's an idiot. I choose the word deliberately not pejoratively. An idiot who understands less than the average mongrel. Now, let's to it. This is our centre of excellence, Nickleby. (*Turning to his wife*) Is the medicine over with?

Mrs Squeers Just finished. And don't they look the better for it.

Squeers For what we have received, may the Lord make us truly thankful.

Boys Amen.

Nicholas It's a very small class, isn't it?

Mrs Squeers These are the boys who need special help.

Nicholas They're very quiet.

Squeers Indeed.

Nicholas It doesn't sound in the least like any schoolroom I'm used to.

Squeers Good. I say, “good, and the point has been proved”.

Nicholas (*confidentially*) It's very cold in here.

Squeers (*confidentially*) You can fetch down your knitteds later.

Nicholas (*confidentially*) What about the boys?

Squeers (*confidentially*) We don't allow 'em. Spoils the uniform look of the boys. Besides, you mustn't overheat boys. All kinds of trouble. Chilliness slows 'em down. (*Out loud*) We go according to the practical mode of teaching, Nickleby. The vocational educational system, as I call it. C—L—E—A—N. Clean.

Boy Verb active — to make bright — to scour.

Squeers W—I—N. Win. D—E—R. Winder — a casement. When the boy has learned this, he puts the two together, goes outside and does it. And in that way both boys and institution benefit. Weeds and garden. Cows and milkin'. And so on. Both progressive and profound. I should publish, Nickleby. I really should. What do you think, Nickleby?

Nicholas It sounds ... a very useful approach.

Squeers (*eyeing Nicholas with suspicion*) I believe you.

Squeers removes two letters from his inside pocket, both of which have been opened.

I was about to tell you to earn your keep, Nickleby. With an hour or so of hearing 'em read. But you've won a reprieve. Letters from home, you see?

There are murmurs from the boys

Boys, I've been to London, and have returned to my family and you, as healthy as ever.

The boys give a feeble cheer — all eyeing Squeers' cane.

I have visited the education department, and the school has received an excellent report, you'll be glad to hear. I have also met the parents of some boys, and they're so pleased to hear how their sons are getting on, they tell me there's no prospect of their boys being taken away.

Pause — silence

Mrs Squeers That's a very pleasant thing to reflect upon, don't you think?

Squeers But there were disappointments. Bolder. There's a letter here from your father. He's two pounds short. Where is Bolder?

Boy's voice Please, sir. Here he is.

Squeers Come here, Bolder.

Bolder approaches

Squeers uses the cane to raise the boy's hand to the horizontal — ready for punishment

Now you just listen to me ... (*Looking at the Bolder's hands*) What do you call this?

Bolder I can't help it, sir.

Squeers Warts.

Bolder They will come. It's the dirty work, I think, sir. At least I don't know what it is, sir. But it's not my fault.

Squeers Bolder. You're an incorrigible scoundrel. And as the last thrashing did you no good, we will see how well another will do toward beating your scoundrel ... ry, out of you.

Bolder Please don't hurt me, sir.

Squeers lashes the boy across his palm

Squeers And the other one. Ah, warts there too. Well, let's see if we can't knock them off. Keep your hand still.

Squeers pauses for a moment, tormenting the boy with anticipation, then lashes his other palm

Nicholas Mr Squeers!

Mrs Squeers Quiet, Nickleby. Don't confuse the boys.

Squeers Now sit down. And shut up. Next one. Cobbey. Stand! Cobbey's maiden aunt is dead.

Mrs Squeers Maiden aunt, indeed.

Squeers There's eighteen pence enclosed. Which the school will take, Cobbey. To pay for the pane of glass Webster broke. That's shared responsibility, boys.

Boys Shared responsibility, sir.

Squeers An important lesson. (*Confidentially to Nicholas*) Not his maiden aunt at all. His maiden mother, in fact. Goes for lots of 'em. Embarrassment on two legs, humiliation at the table.

Nicholas You mean the poor boy's mother ...

Mrs Squeers Shh! Don't make a thing of it. Don't give 'em an excuse.

Squeers We want no dramas, Nickleby. No dramas, here.

SCENE 3

The schoolroom, evening

Nicholas and Smike are on stage

Nicholas Smike? Is it you? Don't shrink away. I can't stand it. You mustn't be afraid of me. *(Pause)* Are you cold?

Smike No.

Nicholas You're shivering.

Smike I'm not cold. I'm used to it.

Nicholas Please, you need not be afraid.

Smike Don't be kind. That makes it worse. You'll break my heart.

Nicholas Shhh. How old are you? Are you a man yet?

Smike By years? I don't know. So many years. A long time since I was a child, though. I was younger than any here. Where are they now?

Nicholas Who are you talking about?

Smike My friends. They are all long gone.

Nicholas Don't lose hope, Smike.

Smike Hope. There's none for me. Did they tell you about the boy who died?

Nicholas What? Recently?

Smike The headmaster said he died just to spite the school.

Nicholas The headmaster ... Well ...

Smike I was with that boy at night, and when it was all silent he cried no more for friends to come and sit with him. He saw faces from home crowded around his bedside. He said they smiled and talked. He died lifting his head so his mother could kiss him.

Nicholas Yes.

Smike What faces will smile upon me when I die? Who will talk with me in the darkness? If they came from my home, I wouldn't know who they were.

Nicholas Do you remember anything about life before you came to Yorkshire?

Smike No faces. Sometimes, I feel, but don't see, the man who left me here. One thing, though. Long, lonely nights in a small high room. And in the ceiling, a small window, through which the moon sometimes stared. And a big iron hook ... in the ceiling ... next to the latch of that window.

Nicholas *(after a pause)* Is that really all you can remember?

Smike *(offering a pitiful shrug of his shoulders)* Pain and fear. That's all. Pain and fear is all there is for me.

SCENE 4

The staff room

A few threadbare upright chairs. Nicholas is resting, reading a book at the end of the day

Mr and Mrs Squeers enter

Squeers Nickleby.

Nicholas Oh, good-evening.

Mrs Squeers What did you think of your first day?

Nicholas I think the job is going to ... test me.

Squeers Not necessarily a bad thing.

Nicholas No.

Mrs Squeers How are your quarters?

Nicholas I'm not particular.

Mrs Squeers (*under her breath*) That's lucky.

Nicholas I was wondering. Does the boy Smike ever get letters?

Squeers Smike? Not a word. And there never will be. Been left here all these years, and not a penny paid after the first six. And not a clue who he belongs to either. We were caught out there. I won't take an anonymous boy again.

Mrs Squeers Nor have you.

Squeers Nor have I, that's right, my dear.

Mrs Squeers Will you eat with us this evening?

Nicholas I'm not sure. I feel I've got a lot to do.

Squeers All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, Nickleby. Mrs Squeers sets an impressive table. All thanks to the boys, eh?

Mrs Squeers Our daughter Fanny will be joining us after supper. She doesn't eat with us. Claims it's not seemly.

Nicholas Why?

Mrs Squeers She's a young lady. And she doesn't like others seeing her nibbling, and biting and chewing. She thinks it's not nice.

Nicholas I think I'll look after myself this evening, if that's all right.

Mrs Squeers Shame. We thought a few words might be useful. (*Pause*) I can tell you straight, Mr Nickleby, I wasn't happy with your appointment.

Nicholas I'm not sure I know quite why I'm here. Except that, following my father's death, we have become dependent on my uncle Ralph. And it is he, and your husband, who settled on this position.

Mrs Squeers So it's all down to Ralph Nickleby, is it? I thought so. Why does he want you out of the way? And for how long?

Nicholas Pardon? Out of the way?

Squeers Mr Ralph Nickleby is a man of business, with a great many delicate enterprises about him. He's put plenty of boys our way. In order to help settle the affairs of those who can't look after 'em. Your presence isn't a burden, Nicholas. Not unless you make yourself one. No, you're a kind of sign. You signify a compact.

Nicholas Perhaps I ought to leave.

Squeers After I paid to get you all the way up here, and advanced you a salary for the benefit of your family? I don't think so.

Nicholas If you assume I am so naked in the world that I cannot offer you recompense, then you are both insulting and incorrect.

Squeers I would remind you that your mother and your sister are dependent on Mr Ralph Nickleby. He told me how he was angry at having you all dumped on him. How for tuppence, he'd unload you all with a "good riddance".

Nicholas He said that?

Squeers And I think he'd reckon you've set out to cross him if you turned up back in London. He doesn't like you, you know. Not one bit. Told me all about how you cheeked him on the subject of your waster of a father. How you made faces at him and clenched your fists. Just like you're doing now.

Mrs Squeers Remember your place, sir. That you are poor, and obliged to regard us as your superiors.

Nicholas Madam, I object to your —

Fanny Squeers opens the door and enters in all her glory

Squeers Fanny!

Silence

Mrs Squeers Fanny. You look a picture. Doesn't she, my dear?

Squeers Of course she does.

Fanny And you'll be the new man. Mr Nickleby.

Nicholas That's right.

Lights fade on the action, leaving an area DC which becomes Fanny's "stage"

Squeers and Mrs Squeers exit

Nicholas remains in the darkness Fanny comes to the front of the stage and talks to the audience. She is very excited

Fanny You must keep my secret. Do you promise not to tell? It's just all so exciting, and delicate. Well, the truth is, if I'm not actually engaged, it's as near as a human can be without a ring to show for it. And to a gentleman's son who has come as a teacher to Dotheboys Hall under most mysterious and remarkable circumstances. Indeed, I have divined the cause of events. The matter has come about through a business connection between my father and his uncle. And somehow the fame of my beauty coursed along this connection, and indeed, he came to Dotheboys precisely because of the fame of my many charms and accomplishments. Determined to seek me out and win me. Can you credit such a thing? Don't ask me what he said, my dear. If you had only seen his looks and smiles. I never was so overcome in all my life. I do so palpitate. Agh!

Fanny flees the stage

Nicholas walks on to the darkened space. Alone and ruminative. He stands staring into the darkness, then remembers something. He searches his pockets, his case and finally the pocket of his overcoat, where he discovers an envelope

Nicholas Someone to do with my uncle, no doubt. (*Reading — having to hold it up to the faint interior lighting*) “My dear young man. I know the world. Your father did not, or he wouldn't have lent me money when there was no hope of return. You do not either, or you wouldn't have let your uncle pack you off to the North ...”

Nicholas continues to read

Noggs walks forwards out of the darkness, places his hand on Nicholas's shoulder and speaks out loud the contents of the letter

Noggs “If ever you want a shelter in London — and don't be angry at the suggestion, I once thought I never should either — go to the Crown in Silver Street, nearby your uncle's house in Golden Square. Ask after me there. They know where I live. Of course, you can come to my apartment at night. Although I should say there was a time when no one was embarrassed to visit Newman Noggs. But never mind that. That's all over.”

Nicholas (*reading*) “Yours, in faith, Newman Noggs.”

Noggs “PS If you should happen to visit Barnard Castle in Yorkshire, then ask for a pint of ale at the King's Head. Say my name, and they won't make you pay. You may say my name there, because I was a gentleman then. I was indeed.”

Nicholas' head droops forward as he finally cries — afflicted by the awfulness of Dotheboys, and touched by Noggs' letter

SCENE 5

Miss La Creevy's lodging house

Kate Nickleby sits for a portrait executed by Miss La Creevy, her spinster landlady

Miss La Creevy And when ... (*Concentrating on her work*) When do you expect to see your uncle again?

Kate Soon, I hope. This state of uncertainty is unbearable.

Miss La Creevy I suppose he has money, doesn't he, Kate?

Kate Yes. I believe he is very rich, Miss La Creevy.

Miss La Creevy You may depend on it. Otherwise he wouldn't be so rude. When a man is that unpleasant, he's generally pretty well off.

Kate I have heard he was disappointed in early life. Or maybe had his temper soured by some calamity. I am trying not to think ill of him until I know he deserves it.

Miss La Creevy Why doesn't he make your mother and yourself an allowance? A hundred a year wouldn't matter to him at all.

Kate I don't know what it would be to him. But I would rather die than take it.

Miss La Creevy What on earth do you mean?

Kate He has made statements, Miss La Creevy. About my father. My father who was cautious, until mother persuaded him to invest — because it was the fashion. My father who was made bankrupt while the company directors escaped on their "limited liability". My father, who managed his modest resources to educate his children, nurture his family and provide an income for many others in our little corner of Devonshire. My father who died because he could no longer protect us, and it broke his heart. I only ask that my uncle Ralph will make a little gesture on my behalf, and enable me, on his recommendation, to earn — literally — my bread, and remain with my poor silly mother.

Ralph enters stealthily

Ralph Ladies.

Miss La Creevy Oh! (*Springing up*) Mr Nickleby. You quite surprised us.

Ralph Your servant, ladies. You were talking so loudly that I was unable to make you hear. Is Mrs Nickleby about?

Miss La Creevy I'll fetch her for you, sir.

Miss La Creevy exits

Ralph Your mother claims my brother died of a sadness.

Kate And I believe that too.

Ralph There's no such thing as a broken heart. I can understand a man dying of a broken neck, or suffering a broken bone. But a broken heart. Nonsense. It's the cant of the day. If a man can't pay his debts, he dies of a broken heart, and suddenly his widow's a martyr.

Kate Some people, I believe, have no hearts to break.

Ralph Don't bark at me, young lady. *(Pause)* I ... see my brother in you. Perhaps. And there should be some softness ... Don't you think?

Kate And what of Nicholas? Didn't you see the resemblance in him too?

Ralph Young women. You're a damnable problem, aren't you? Do you know what a lure is?

Kate Yes. I think so.

Ralph It's shorthand for a "young woman".

Miss La Creevy enters

Miss La Creevy She's pleased to say "Mrs Nickleby will be here directly".

Ralph Is she, really? Pleased, is she? *(Pause)* Is that my niece's portrait, ma'am?

Miss La Creevy Yes it is, Mr Nickleby. It will be a very nice portrait too, though I say it, who am the painter.

Ralph Don't bother to show it to me, ma'am. I have no eye for likenesses. Is it nearly finished?

Miss La Creevy Why, yes. Two more sittings. Are you interest —

Ralph Then you'd better be quick. She'll have no time to idle after tomorrow. Work. We must all work. Have you let their lodgings yet, ma'am?

Miss La Creevy I haven't put the notice up yet, sir.

Ralph Put it up at once, ma'am. They won't want the lodgings after this week. I have made alternative arrangements. *(Pause)* You're very silent, niece.

Mrs Nickleby enters

Mrs Nickleby My dearest Ralph.

Ralph But there's one who'll make up for you. *(To Kate's mother)* I have found a situation for your daughter, ma'am.

Mrs Nickleby Well! Now, I will say that is only just what I have expected of you. "Depend upon it," I said to Kate only yesterday

morning at breakfast, “after your uncle has provided in the most ready manner for Nicholas, he will not leave us until he has done at least the same for you.” These were my very words as near as I can remember.

Kate, my dear, why don’t you thank your —

Ralph Let me proceed ma’am, pray.

Mrs Nickleby Kate, my love, let your uncle proceed.

Ralph I have procured a place for you, ma’am. With a West End couturier.

Mrs Nickleby A dressmaker. Oh, dear.

Ralph Yes. What’s the matter? Don’t look like that. I don’t know what a dressmaker might be in Devonshire, or wherever, but in London it is a couturier — a person of great wealth and fortune.

Mrs Nickleby Really?

Ralph The lady’s name is Mantalini. The establishment is called Chez Mantalini. She lives near Cavendish Square.

Mrs Nickleby In Cavendish Square?

Ralph Yes. (*Pause*) Very nearby.

Mrs Nickleby Marvellous. At last the clouds have parted. I can see the way ahead, illuminated by the sunbeam your uncle has provided.

Ralph I’m glad you feel that way.

Mrs Nickleby Kate will surely make a success with Madam Mantalini, wouldn’t you agree, brother-in-law?

Ralph I’ve no reason to think otherwise.

Mrs Nickleby And there will be a time when the proprietress of such an establishment, worn out by the cares of presentation and art, must pass the reins to a trusted successor. And there is no reason why that shouldn’t be you, Kate. In fact, you may be a partner in no time at all. Say thank you to your uncle, Kate.

Kate I am very much obliged to you, Uncle.

Ralph I’m glad to hear it. I hope you’ll do your duty. And now, I’m going. Business — a word with which my dear brother was barely acquainted.

Mrs Nickleby I fear that’s true. In fact, if it hadn’t been for me, I don’t know what would have become of him.

Ralph (*to Kate in confidence*) No point remonstrating with her. No point, Kate. Good-day, ladies.

Ralph exits

Miss La Creevy (*after a pause*) I am afraid it is an unhealthy occupation. I recollect getting three young milliners to sit for me when I first began to paint, and I remember they were all very pale and sickly.

Mrs Nickleby Oh, that’s not a general rule by any means. I remember employing one a good few years ago. She was particularly recommended,

and wore a scarlet cloak. At the time when such things were fashionable. She had a very red face.

Miss La Creevy Perhaps she drank. But you're not to worry. If there is no other heart that takes an interest, Mrs Nickleby, there will be this one lonely woman to pray for your daughter both day and night.

Mrs Nickleby Really? (*Pause*) How kind.

SCENE 6

Early evening

Nicholas is walking in the open air, obviously distracted with worries. He passes Fanny Squeers perched upon a wall. Obviously waiting, but feigning disinterest

Nicholas Good-evening.

Fanny (*to herself*) He's going. I shall choke. (*Out loud*) Come back, Mr Nickleby, do. Come back, Mr Nickleby.

Nicholas Is there something wrong?

Fanny (*suddenly inspired*) Oh, I feel a little faint. Please ... Your arm. (*He offers it*) Thank you.

Nicholas What is it?

Fanny Nothing. The fence. I felt a little odd. The height I think. (*Laying her head on his shoulder*) So foolish. To climb so high. But I've always been an adventurous sort. (*Pause*) Reckless, even. Are you a reckless fellow also? Are we at one in that?

Nicholas (*gently but firmly disengaging himself*) I'm sorry. I'm afraid I am not in the mood for mirth just now. I wouldn't make good company.

Fanny What do you mean?

Nicholas What do you mean, what do I mean?

Fanny I mean you made it clear from your manner last night that you longed for a quiet moment together, and I have been sitting there these past forty-five minutes in order to accommodate you. And now you answer my efforts with an "I wouldn't make good company", if you please.

Nicholas I am very sorry if I have misled you in any way. If I did so, then I am very angry with myself for confusing you.

Fanny That's not all you've got to say, surely?

Nicholas (*embarrassed pause*) You don't think ... Do you imagine I have developed an attraction toward you?

Fanny It's all right. Don't look so worried. You're a little forward perhaps. But there! It's out in the open.

Nicholas Stop! Listen to me. You've made a mistake. This is only the second time I've seen you.

Fanny What?

Nicholas But if I'd seen you sixty times, the situation would still be the same. I don't want to hurt you. But you must understand, I hate this place. I regard it, and its associations, with loathing and disgust. I don't know you, Miss Squeers. You may be the best of young ladies. But the fact is I detest your father and the horrors he has perpetrated here. There is nothing about this place which inclines me to romance, I'm afraid.

Fanny (*very quietly*) Are you refusing me?

Nicholas I'm afraid so.

Fanny (*flintily*) Refused by a teacher picked up in an advert, and at a salary of five pounds a year.

Nicholas Miss Squeers. Please. This is a delusion.

Fanny is enraged, and displays a degree of mental instability

Fanny Refused by a boy given "found" lodging and food, like the children he teaches. (*Pause*) Me, attracted to you? No. I hate you for your narrow mind and your violent temper. How dare you make overtures to me. I reject you, utterly. Such an odd creature. (*She reaches for a stone from the wall in a threatening manner — obviously deranged*) I don't feel safe in your company. Damn you! (*She is about to brain him, but stops herself, is overcome by an eerie calm and carefully replaces the stone with an oddly studied precision*) No. I won't let you do that to me. You'll pay a high price for this. Or ... someone will pay it on your behalf.

SCENE 7

Miss La Creevy's lodging house

Noggs has come in order to accompany Mrs Nickleby and Kate to the new cheaper home provided by Ralph

Noggs The conveyance is outside.

Mrs Nickleby "Conveyance". Ah, you see your uncle has sent a cab to transport us to our new home.

Noggs A van for the boxes. We're to walk.

Mrs Nickleby No. Surely not.

Kate How far is it?

Noggs (*quietly, to Kate*) Couple of miles. (*To Kate's mother*) It's a fine day. It'll give a chance to sight-see. There's a fellow with the van. (*Rubbing his fingers to indicate money is involved*) He's waiting.

Mrs Nickleby Well, I suppose we'd better get on.

Noggs D'you need a hand down the steps?

Mrs Nickleby Not necessary. (*Leaving*) Besides there's not enough room for both on the stairs at one time.

Kate What is our new accommodation to be?

Noggs Style or quality?

Kate Both, I suppose.

Noggs It's from Mr Ralph Nickleby.

Kate Meaning?

Noggs Don't expect too much. It's the cheapest he could find. (*Pause*) And I'm sorry about it. (*Pause*) Now Noggs must get on. (*He makes to leave*)

Kate Excuse my curiosity, but didn't I see you at the coach station on the morning my brother went away to Yorkshire?

Noggs (*still facing away from her*) No.

Kate Pardon me. But I should have recognized you anywhere.

Noggs Well, you're wrong. This is the first time I've been out for weeks. I've had a poisoned toe.

Kate Where are we going, Mr Noggs?

Noggs (*still with his back to her*) Into the city. We'll turn down to the riverside, and after about a half an hour wash up at a dingy old house in Thames Street. I think you will consider it has been uninhabited for some years. There was a dead dog in the hallway. But I moved it yesterday afternoon.

Kate Thank you.

Noggs You're welcome.

Kate You are being kind to us. Why?

Noggs Don't suspect me, Miss Nickleby. I don't want anything. Sometimes, when a thing has gone on for too long. A way of dealing with people, so to speak. There comes a time when someone's got to draw a line. And say "no, I'm not going to allow it".

Kate Are you talking about my uncle?

Noggs That man's waiting with his van. We'd better go down.

Kate and Newman Noggs walk to the front of the stage and survey the auditorium as if we are the front of the dilapidated house Ralph has assigned to his relatives

Kate This house depresses and chills one, and seems as if some blight had fallen upon it. If I were superstitious, I would be inclined to believe that some dreadful crime had been perpetrated within those

old walls, and that the place had never prospered since. How frowning and dark it looks.

Mrs Nickleby advances DS to join them

Noggs is staring at the floor

Mr Noggs. We needn't detain you any longer.

Noggs (*still looking at the ground*) Are you sure there's nothing I can do?

Kate Nothing, thank you.

Mrs Nickleby Perhaps, my dear, (*she fumbles for a coin*) Mr Noggs would like to drink to our healths.

Kate I think, Mother, you would hurt his feelings if you offered it.

SCENE 8

Dotheboys Hall

Nicholas discovers Smike poring over a book which evidently makes no sense to him. Smike mouths the words as best he can, but tears of frustration run down his cheeks. Smike glances up and recognizes Nicholas

Smike I can't do it. No, I can't. No matter how hard I try.

Nicholas Then don't try. It's all right. Don't. Please. I can't bear to see you so unhappy.

Smike (*closing the book*) They are more hard with me than ever.

Nicholas Shhh. Not so loud. They punish you to spite me. Fanny ... Well, she is behind most of it. She has convinced her mother to hate me as much as she does, and goads her father to beat you harder each day. Squeers resents our friendship, and the way I teach.

Smike Are you going?

Nicholas I can't stay, can I? I'm making it worse for all you boys. And there's nothing to be done to change Squeers.

Smike You don't mean it. Tell me, please. Will you go?

Nicholas Quiet. Shhh. Calm down.

Smike (*after a pause*) Is the world as bad and dismal as this?

Nicholas No, Smike. The worst I've seen couldn't hold a candle to this place.

Smike Will I ever meet you out there in the world?

Nicholas Yes, of course. Nothing lasts for ever.

Smike So, I shall be sure to find you?

Nicholas Yes. And I shall be able to help you, and not bring fresh sorrows with me as I have done here.

The Lights snap to a cold dawn

Smike scuttles away

Boys, including Tomkins, enter rubbing the sleep from their eyes

Nicholas also rubs his eyes

Squeers sweeps on stage with his cane

Squeers You lazy hounds.

Nicholas We shall be down directly, sir.

Squeers Yes, you'd better be. Or I'll be dealing out thrashings every-which-way. Smike! Where is he? Nickleby!

Nicholas Yes, sir?

Squeers Smike. Where is he? I need him for scrubbing out.

Nicholas He's not here, sir.

Squeers Of course he's not here. Where have you hidden him? Where is he?

Nicholas At the bottom of the nearest pond for all I know.

Squeers Damn you, what d'you mean by that?

Tomkins Please, sir, I think Smike's run away, sir.

Squeers Who said that?

Tomkins Tomkins, please, sir.

Squeers You think he has run away, do you, sir?

Tomkins Yes, please sir.

Squeers And what reason do you have to suppose that any boy would want to run away from this establishment?

Squeers knocks Tomkins to the floor with a stunning blow which makes the onlookers gasp. Nicholas makes a slight movement towards Squeers but checks himself. Squeers has noticed and fixes Nicholas with a threatening stare

Now if any other boy thinks Smike has run away, I'll be glad to have a talk with him. Well, Nickleby? Does that include you?

Nicholas I do think it very likely he has run away.

Squeers Oh. You do, do you? Maybe you know for certain he has?

Nicholas No, I don't. If I did, then it would have been my duty to warn you.

Squeers You're proud, aren't you, Nickleby? And maybe that rubs off on the boys. Now, I want you to take the boys off to the schoolroom, and I don't want you or them stirring out of there until I give the say-so. I don't care if it's two o'clock in the morning, you'll stick at your lessons until I say otherwise.

Nicholas Yes.

Squeers "Yes." Exactly. I wouldn't want to fall out with you in a way that might spoil your beauty — handsome as you are.

Nicholas and his complement of boys make their way upstage — backs to the audience. Squeers walks to the front of the stage, then turns his back firmly to the auditorium

Smike shuffles slowly on

Squeers stretches out a hand and grips him by the collar. Smike allows himself to be gripped

Mrs Squeers enters and stands, cutting off Smike's escape

The three figures downstage are silhouetted as Nicholas and his class turn towards downstage and stare aghast at the image of the captive Smike

Squeers Is every boy here? Each boy keep his place. Nickleby, stand still sir! Smike. Do you have anything to say for yourself? *(Pause)* No, of course not. *(Pause)* Stand back a little, my dear. I need room to get a good swing at him.

Smike Please. Don't kill me, sir.

Squeers *(laughing)* Of course I won't kill you, Smike.

Mrs Squeers Not quite, anyway.

Smike I was driven to running off.

Squeers Oh, it wasn't your fault, it was mine I suppose, eh?

Mrs Squeers A nasty, ungrateful, idiotic, obstinate, sneaky little animal.

Squeers We had a boy once, used to hit himself with a spoon at the table. Blind, deaf and stupid. He enjoyed it. His idea of a good time. Now, I'm going to give you the best old time ever, Smike.

Nicholas Stop.

Squeers
Mrs Squeers } *(together)* What?

Nicholas You've done enough. The boy will die of heart failure if you're not careful.

Squeers freezes for a moment then in slow motion lets his shoulders slump as if surrendering. Then, in a flash he draws back the cane and

swipes Smike so hard the boy staggers and cries out in pain, like a wounded dog

No!

Nicholas launches himself at Squeers. He shouts his lines as he labours with the cane against both Mr and Mrs Squeers. The company of boys leap forward and hold Mr and Mrs Squeers fast

You will not. Shall not. Bully and torture these children any more. I will not stand by and see it done.

Mrs Squeers God in heaven, you've killed him.

Nicholas (*voice trembling at the magnitude of what he has done*) Boys! Clear out all of you. Get your things and go. Run, and don't stop, in case they try to blame any of you.

The Boys scatter

Nicholas backs away, leaving Mrs Squeers crying, hunched over her husband's still form. He is about to exit when she suddenly looks up

Mrs Squeers Don't think you'll get away with it. You'll be hanged for this.

The stage is empty for a few moments

Then we watch Nicholas, as if in a dream, wander into view and slump by the roadside. Smike approaches nervously

Nicholas Smike. Get away from me. For your own sake. I don't want you punished for my actions all over again. (*Pause*) What do you want, Smike?

Smike To go with you. Anywhere. Everywhere. To the world's end. To the churchyard grave. You are my home. My kind friend. Take me with you.

Nicholas Poor you. And poor me. If each can't do better than the other.

CURTAIN

ACT II

SCENE 1

London, outside Newman Noggs's apartment

There is an explosion of activity and noise representing the two men's arrival in London

Nicholas and Smike look very wet and bedraggled. Nicholas confronts Newman Noggs at his apartment door. Smike does his best to hide behind Nicholas. There is a long, awkward pause

Noggs Mr Nickleby. Better late than never. You'd better come in. You're wet through. And I'm sorry to say I don't even have a set of spare clothes for you to change into.

Nicholas I have some dry clothes. As much as I need, anyway. *(Pause)* You don't look very happy to see us. I'm sorry. Look, this is very embarrassing. I took you at your word ... What you said in the note. Could you at least tolerate us for one night?

Noggs On the contrary, sir. I don't intend you should feel unwelcome. I wouldn't have offered sanctuary if I didn't mean it. I'm just not used to things working out. It's been some while since they have. And who's that behind you?

Nicholas Step forward, Smike.

Noggs Why doesn't he speak? What's the matter with him?

Nicholas He's a poor chap from that infernal Squeers establishment. His name's Smike, and he's a frightened fellow who's used to being beaten whether he says yes or no.

Noggs No doubt you'll come out of yourself when you're ready, Mr Smike. For now, I'll make you a promise, you'll not be beaten while I've got anything to do with it. Come in and sit down, Mr Smike.

Newman Nogg's room is conjured through the arrival of a couple of upright chairs and a low level amber upright representing a fireside

They are all soon settled by the fire

Nicholas My family? Are they still living in the city?

Noggs They are.

Nicholas And my sister? Is she still employed by that lady with the exotic name?

Noggs Madam Mantalini. So you came here first. Before seeing them.

Nicholas It is for the best. Circumstances will follow me here which might place my family outside the law, were they to shelter me. Tell me, and don't spare the truth ... what have you heard from Yorkshire?

Noggs Not good.

Nicholas I understand. I am prepared to hear the very worst.

Noggs Tomorrow morning. Hear it tomorrow.

Nicholas What good would that do?

Noggs You would sleep soundly tonight.

Nicholas I can't hope to sleep tonight unless you tell me everything. I can hardly bear to think of it. Although I was driven to the act, yet the law and men's judgement will be against me. (*Hardly able to say the word*) A murderer.

Noggs (*aghast*) Who did it?

Nicholas What?

Noggs The murder. And who was killed?

Nicholas Me. I am the perpetrator.

Noggs Heavens! And who did you kill?

Nicholas Squeers, of course. God help me.

Noggs Then it seems he has. By helping Squeers back from the dead.

Nicholas What?

Noggs Your uncle received this letter the day before yesterday. Listen. "Sir. My father requests me to write to you. The doctors consider it doubtful he will ever recover the use of his legs, which makes it impossible for him to hold a pen ..."

Nicholas Alive? He's alive, then?

Noggs Shhh.

The figure of Fanny Squeers hovers in the half light on the edge of the room

Fanny My father is one mask of bruises. After the nephew you recommended as a teacher had beaten his face unrecognizable, he jumped on him with both feet. Then he assaulted my mother with dreadful violence, throwing her to the floor with terrible force. Having sated his thirst for blood, and assuming my father killed by his hand, the monstrous young man turned coward, and ran from the scene accompanied by a desperate character whose violent fits and threatening demeanour has, for years, been the prime focus of my father's remedial efforts — out of compassion for the tortured soul lurking behind the barbarian features of the boy known only as

Smike. As if your nephew's sin were not enough, the Judas stole my mother's wedding ring, presumably to finance his flight from justice. Speaking of which, my father informs me that, out of compassion for you, he will not press charges, as he does not blame you for the stain of villainy which Mr Nicholas Nickleby has brought upon your house. Return of the ring, and some compensation for lost revenue from the escaped boys, would be appreciated at your convenience. I remain your, Fanny Squeers.

Fanny retreats into the dark, outside the circle of firelight

Nicholas Mr Noggs. I must go out at once.

Noggs Out? Where? Supper will be ready soon.

Nicholas The fact Squeers lives reprieves me. But I must go to my uncle's house, at Golden Square. I have to tell him the truth, and exchange a few other words which he deserves to hear.

Noggs You must not go.

Nicholas I must.

Noggs There's no point. He's away from town. Won't be back for three days.

Nicholas Are you sure of this?

Noggs Quite. He only had time to scan the letter, before he was called away. When he gets back we'll engineer to have you appear before your family at the exact moment he conjures to confront them with the story of your violence. That will be your chance to speak the truth strong and true before everyone.

Nicholas I don't like to proceed by stratagems. It makes me uneasy.

Noggs Stratagems are exactly what you're mixed up in here. And you'd better get a sense of 'em, or you're not going to last the game out. And that reminds me, you need a new name. If you're to go about without Mr Ralph Nickleby's many ears reporting your presence, then you can't use the name you were born with. So what's it to be?

Smike Johnson!

Noggs and Nicholas jump at this unexpected contribution

Noggs Johnson?

Nicholas Why Johnson, Smike?

Smike It was Mr Johnson and Johnson on the bottle of the green stuff they gave us to make us not want to eat. And to stop us dreaming.

Noggs *(after a pause)* Poor fellow.

Nicholas Indeed. But Johnson sounds good to me. And you, Noggs? Strikes me you've made a dangerous choice here. Setting yourself against your employer.

Noggs That's assuming he ever guesses. And I intend he shouldn't, until he hears the click of the trap behind him.

Nicholas Noggs. Don't cross him.

Noggs Noggs will cross that man every way he can, and leave no trace of it, Nicholas Nickleby. That's the game I've settled on.

SCENE 2

Kate is dressed as though for a very special social occasion. She is alone, and nervously paces the room

The dull sound of indistinct male voices can be heard coming from an adjacent room

Ralph enters, flushed and in a hurry

Ralph I couldn't see you before, my dear. I had to meet them as they arrived. Now, ready? (*Pause*) Shall we go through?

Kate Uncle. Are there any other ladies here tonight?

Ralph No. I don't know any.

Kate Then, do I have to go in right now?

Ralph That's up to you. They're all here, and dinner will be announced directly. And you are here, at my request and expense, in order to ornament that dinner. That's understood, isn't it?

Ralph draws Kate's arm into his, and they walk downstage

A throng of dinner guests, including Verisopht, Hawk, Pyke and Pluck, assembles upstage of the couple, who turn to signal their entrance

Ralph (*loudly enough to draw everyone's attention*) Lord Frederick Verisopht. My niece, Miss Nickleby.

Verisopht Eh! (*Adjusting his monocle, then very impressed*) What the deyvle!

Ralph My niece, my lord.

Verisopht (*liking the look of what he sees*) Then my ears didn't deceive me, and she's not from out the g-g-gallery. How d'you do. I'm very happy to meet you.

Kate sits on an upright chair c

(To the other men, with no effort to hide his lasciviousness) Deyvlish p-p-pritty.

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