

# Nicholas Nickleby

A classic story by Charles Dickens

Adapted by Gill Munton

Series Editor: Louis Fidge



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## CHAPTER 1

# The Nickleby family history

Ralph and Nicholas Nickleby were brothers. They lived on a farm in Devon with their mother and father. The brothers stayed at school during the week but they went home to see their parents each weekend.

One Saturday evening, the two brothers were sitting by the fire with their mother.

‘Tell us about when you were young, Mother,’ said Ralph.

‘When we got married, your father and I were very poor,’ their mother replied. ‘We never had enough money for food and life was very hard.’

‘We’re not poor now, Mother,’ said Ralph.

‘No – one day, your father’s uncle died and left him five thousand pounds!’

‘Five thousand pounds! That’s a lot of money!’ said Nicholas.



Their mother continued with her story. 'We bought this farm with some of the money and began to grow our own vegetables. We were careful with the money because we didn't want to waste it.'

'When I grow up, I am going to have lots of money,' Ralph said. 'I will do whatever I can to get it.'

Nicholas said nothing. He was thinking about his future. He decided to be careful with his money. He didn't want to take any risks and lose it all. He decided that he wanted to stay on the farm. Life was not very exciting there, but it was safe.

When the brothers returned to school on Monday, Ralph started to make money straight away. He gave his toys and books to other boys in his class – but they had to pay to borrow them! When the other boys needed money, Ralph gave them money, too – but he made them pay back more than they borrowed. The two brothers grew up and left school. Ralph left the farm and went to London to earn money. When their parents died some years later, Nicholas stayed on the farm and lived a quiet life with his cows and his sheep.

One day, Nicholas went to visit a neighbour and he fell in love with his neighbour's daughter. After a short time, they got married and lived together on the farm.

Nicholas and his wife had two children, a boy and a girl. The boy was called Nicholas, like his father, and the girl was called Kate. The Nicklebys wanted their children to have a good education so they sent them to the best schools.

One day, Nicholas was looking at some papers. 'Look! Here's another bill from Kate's school. It is very expensive to give a child a good education!' he said.

'Yes, it is,' his wife replied. 'But young Nicholas is nearly sixteen now. He will leave school soon and get a good job. And Kate is fourteen – she will leave school soon, too. Then there won't be any school bills.'

'That is true,' Nicholas said. 'But I don't have much money. I've spent so much! I don't have enough money to pay this school bill.'

'You could try to be a businessman and make some money, like your brother Ralph,' his wife said.

'But you can lose all your money in business!' Nicholas replied.

'It's the only answer,' his wife said. 'We need to make more money, Nicholas.'

So Mr Nickleby tried to be a businessman for some years. But he was not as good at business as his brother.

'I am not very good at this. I've lost all my money!' Nicholas said to his wife. 'Now we will have to sell our farm to pay the bills!'

He sat in his chair and put his head in his hands.



'Don't give up,' his wife said. 'Your luck will soon change!'

But Nicholas went to bed. The doctor came to see him. All the neighbours came, too. Everyone told Nicholas to get out of bed, but he didn't want to.

As he lay in bed, he talked about his schooldays with Ralph and the happy times they had. Then he said to his wife, 'I am going to leave this world now, my dear. Look after our children.'

With that, Mr Nicholas Nickleby went to sleep. He never woke up.

Ralph Nickleby lived in a big house in London, in Golden Square. On the front door there was a brass plate with the word 'Office' on it. In the office, Ralph did business with the help of his assistant, Newman Noggs. Newman Noggs



was a tall, thin man with a red nose. Every day, he sat in a little room from nine-thirty until five o'clock. Ralph made his assistant work hard and didn't pay him much money.

One day, Ralph was returning from a business meeting when Newman Noggs came out to meet him in the street.

'This letter came for you, sir,' he said.

Ralph took the letter and stared at the envelope.

'It was posted in the Strand, London,' he said. 'And the envelope has a black border – that tells me that someone has died.'

Ralph looked at his gold pocket watch. He did not have much time. He opened the envelope and pulled out the letter. He read it quickly.

'I was right!' Ralph said. 'My brother Nicholas has died. He has left a wife and two children, Nicholas and Kate. They are all here in London. The letter says that *I* am to look after them all!' He was angry. 'My brother never did anything for me. Do you think that's fair, Newman?'

'I don't know, sir,' Newman replied.

'I've never met those children. Oh, well. You can go home now, Newman, and I will close the office. I must go to the Strand,' Ralph said.

Ralph Nickleby knocked on the door of an old house in the Strand. A servant girl with a dirty face answered the door.

'Can I help you, sir?' she asked.

'I am looking for Mrs Nickleby. Is she at home?'

'She lives upstairs, sir,' the girl replied.

Ralph went in and climbed the narrow stairs.

At the top, he knocked on the door. He was tired after the long climb.

A pretty girl of about seventeen opened the door. Ralph took off his hat and went in. Inside the room, he saw a woman dressed in black clothes. A young man was sitting next to her.

The young man stood up to welcome him.

'You must be my nephew, young Nicholas Nickleby,' said Ralph.

'That is my name, sir,' the young man replied.

Then Ralph looked at the woman and spoke to her. 'And you must be my sister-in-law – the wife of my poor dead brother. How do you do, my dear?' Ralph said. He took her hand. 'I am very sorry.'

'He was a good man,' said Mrs Nickleby sadly. Then she wiped her eyes with a white handkerchief.

'I'm afraid good men die every day,' replied Ralph. 'What illness did your husband have? You didn't tell me in your letter.'

'I don't know. I think he died of a broken heart,' said Mrs Nickleby.

'That can't be true!' Ralph said angrily. 'People die of a broken neck, but no one dies of a broken heart!'

The young man, Nicholas, did not like his uncle talking to his mother in this way.

'Some people have no heart to break,' he said quietly. Ralph turned and stared at his nephew.

'How old is this rude young man?' he asked.

'Nearly nineteen,' Mrs Nickleby replied.

'Tell me, Nicholas, how are you going to earn money?' Ralph asked.

'I don't know, sir. But I will not take money from my mother,' Nicholas replied proudly. 'And I will not ask *you* for money!'

'Mrs Nickleby, tell your son to be careful what he says to me,' Ralph shouted.



'Be quiet, Nicholas. Let your uncle speak,' Mrs Nickleby said quietly to her son.

Ralph turned back to his sister-in-law.

'Do you have any money?' he asked her.

'None,' she replied. 'I am not worried about myself, but I hope you will help your brother's children.'

'Hmmm. I see,' said Ralph. 'You have got no money, and now you want some of mine!'

Ralph walked angrily to the end of the room and then walked back again.



‘And what about your daughter? What kind of work can she do?’ Ralph asked.

‘Kate went to a very good school. She can speak French ...’ replied Mrs Nickleby.

‘Pah! That’s no good! She must become a dressmaker or something like that,’ Ralph said. He turned back to Nicholas. ‘Do you want to work, young man?’ he asked.

‘Yes, sir,’ Nicholas replied.

Ralph pulled a newspaper from his coat pocket. He unfolded it and put it on the table.

‘Read that!’ he said. He pointed to an advertisement on one of the pages.

Nicholas read the advertisement aloud:

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## DOTHEBOYS HALL GRETA BRIDGE YORKSHIRE

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AT THIS EXCELLENT SCHOOL, SCHOOLMASTER MR. WACKFORD SQUEERS  
TEACHES ALL SUBJECTS.

BOYS ARE GIVEN THE BEST FOOD AND COMFORTABLE LODGINGS,  
BOOKS, CLOTHES AND GENEROUS POCKET MONEY.

FEES: TWENTY POUNDS A YEAR

THIS WEEK, MR WACKFORD SQUEERS MAY BE FOUND  
AT THE SNOWBALL HOTEL, SNOW HILL, LONDON.

NOTE: ASSISTANT SCHOOLMASTER REQUIRED  
PAY: FIVE POUNDS A YEAR

‘That’s the job for you, Nicholas!’ said Ralph. He folded the newspaper and put it back in his pocket. ‘You can be a schoolteacher at Dotheboys Hall!’

Kate spoke for the first time. ‘But the pay is very low, sir,’ she said. ‘It is only five pounds a year! And Yorkshire is so far away.’

‘If Nicholas doesn’t like the job I have found for him, he must find another job for himself,’ replied Ralph angrily.

‘If I do take this job, sir, what will happen to my mother and my sister?’ Nicholas asked.

‘I will look after them. But if you don’t take the job, they will get no help from me!’ Ralph replied.

‘Then let us go at once, Uncle Ralph!’ cried Nicholas. ‘Let us go to the Snowball Hotel and meet Mr Wackford Squeers!’