



Classic Tales By Charles Dickens

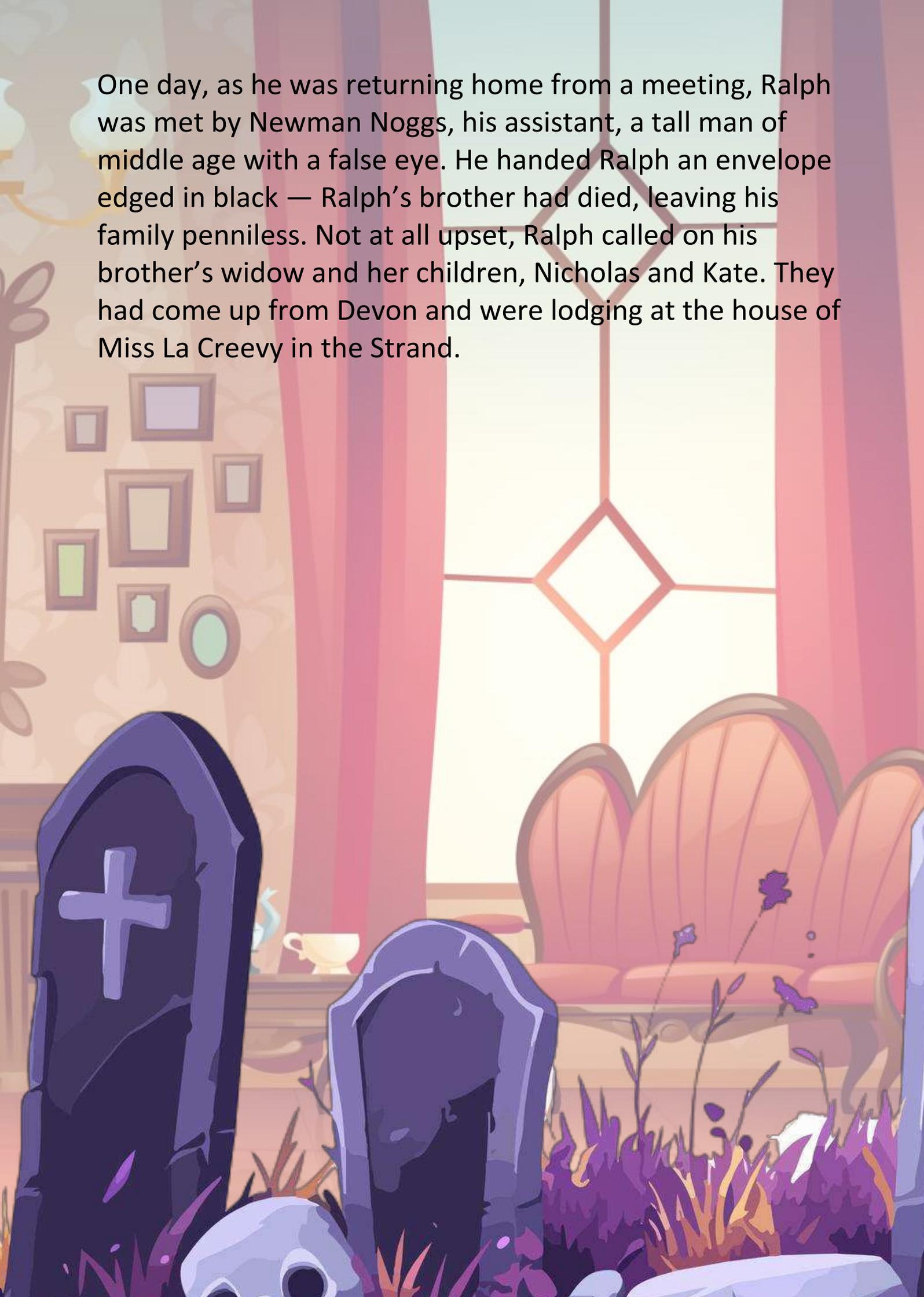
Nicholas Nickleby



Ralph Nickleby lived in Golden Square, London. Others who lived there believed him rich, though none knew how he earned his money. He had cold, restless eyes.



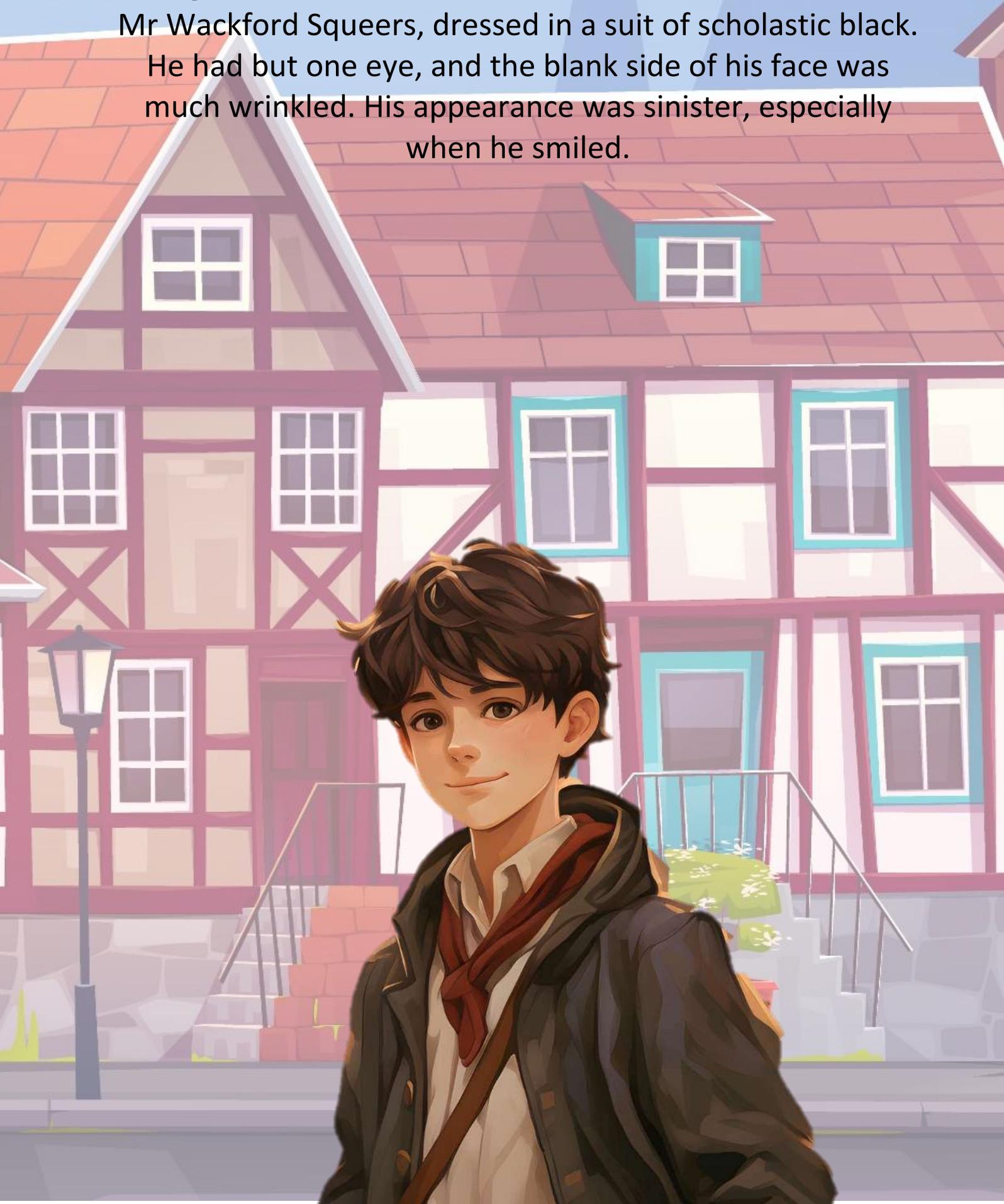
One day, as he was returning home from a meeting, Ralph was met by Newman Noggs, his assistant, a tall man of middle age with a false eye. He handed Ralph an envelope edged in black — Ralph's brother had died, leaving his family penniless. Not at all upset, Ralph called on his brother's widow and her children, Nicholas and Kate. They had come up from Devon and were lodging at the house of Miss La Creevy in the Strand.



Appealed to for help, Ralph Nickleby showed Nicholas an advertisement for an assistant at Mr Wackford Squeers's school, Dotheboys Hall, in Yorkshire, claiming, "Let him get that situation and his fortune is made." Hesitant at first, Nicholas eventually replied, "I am ready to do anything you wish me. Let us try our fortune with Mr Squeers at once."



Near Smithfield Market was the Saracen's Head Inn. At half past three one afternoon, a small, unhappy-looking boy was sitting on a deal trunk in the Coffee Room. Beside him was Mr Wackford Squeers, dressed in a suit of scholastic black. He had but one eye, and the blank side of his face was much wrinkled. His appearance was sinister, especially when he smiled.



As he was speaking to Mr Snawley, who was considering sending his two stepsons to Dotheboys, Ralph entered, offering the services of his nephew Nicholas, “hot from school, with everything he learned there fermenting in his head, and nothing fermenting in his pocket.” Squeers considered, then turned to Nicholas, who had accompanied his uncle, and said, “Your uncle’s recommendation has done it.” Nicholas was hired.



Ralph sent Nicholas home to pack, giving him some documents and saying, “Leave these papers with my clerk.”

A trunk is a large, strong box used when going on long trips. It might contain clothes or books. A deal trunk was an inexpensive one made of planks of pine.

In Golden Square, Newman Noggs turned very pale when Nicholas announced he was going to Dotheboys. Nicholas’s gentle sister, Kate, had her doubts as well. When she met Mr Squeers, she asked her brother, “What kind of place can it be that you are going to?” But Nicholas was decided.



As he climbed into the stagecoach that would take him to the school, Nicholas called to his mother, “Bless you, love, and goodbye.” When no one was looking, Newman Noggs secretly handed the young man a note, mysteriously whispering, “Take it. Read it. Nobody knows.”



Nicholas went with Squeers and some boys on their way to become pupils at Dotheboys. The journey to Yorkshire was harsh, but eventually they arrived at a long, cold-looking house, one storey high, with a few struggling outbuildings behind. A strange, tall boy, whom Nicholas learned was named Smike, opened the yard gate and stepped forward with a lamp.



Later, Nicholas ate a frugal supper with Mr and Mrs Squeers and soon met their daughter, Fanny, and their son Wackford.

That night, as he prepared for bed, Nicholas opened the letter from Newman. Because Nicholas's father had once helped him, Newman was offering assistance to Nicholas, should he ever need it.



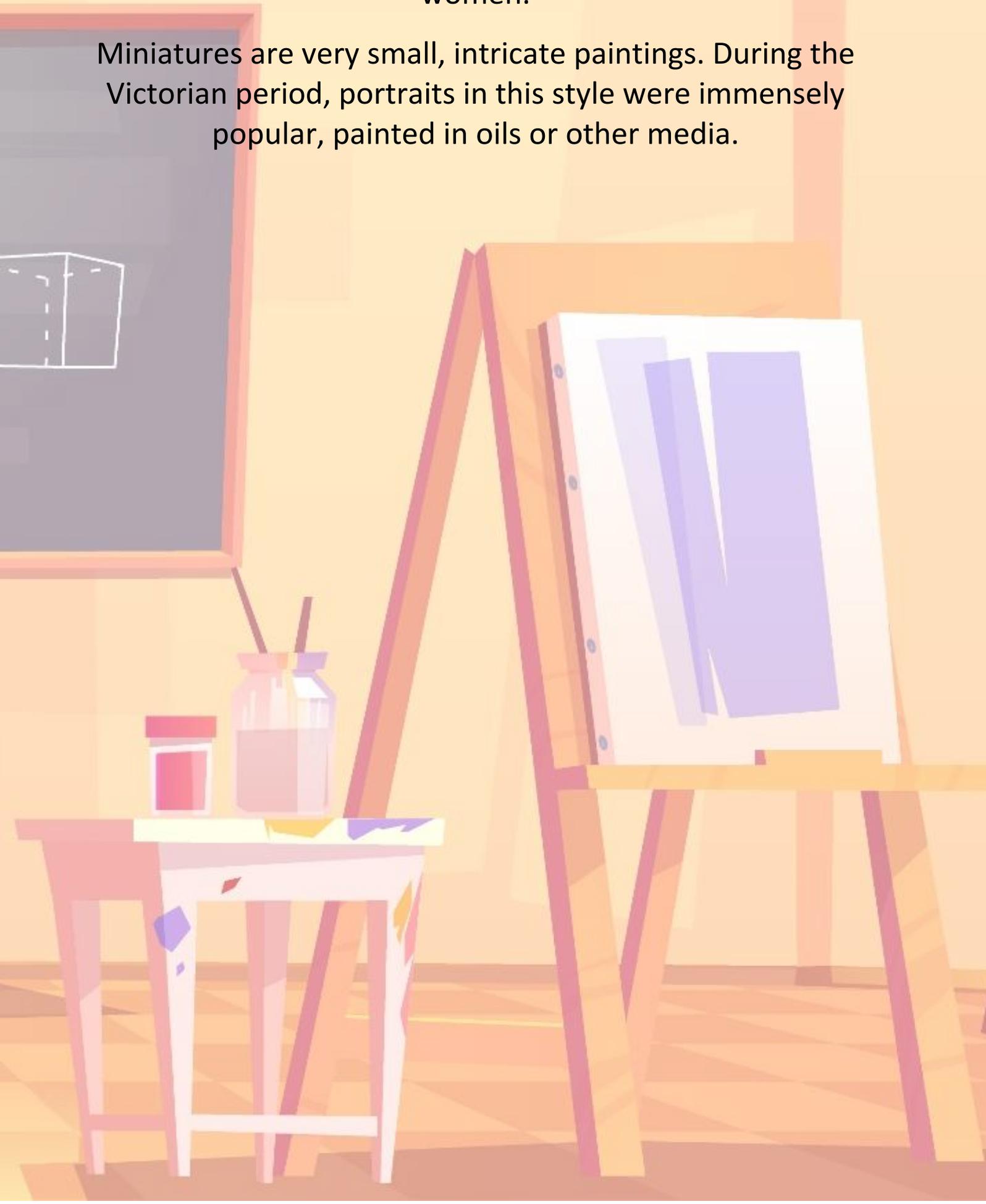
Back in London, Kate was sitting for Miss La Creevy, who painted miniatures, when Ralph arrived. He had secured her a position with Madame Mantalini. Though not the position she had hoped for, Kate said, “I am very much obliged to you, uncle.”

Ralph had also arranged new lodgings for his relatives. Newman took Kate and Mrs Nickleby to rooms in a dingy house in Thames Street. “This house depresses and chills one,” shivered Kate, “as if some blight had fallen on it.”



Although poor himself, Newman Noggs had done his best, organising some furniture, milk for tea, and coal for the women.

Miniatures are very small, intricate paintings. During the Victorian period, portraits in this style were immensely popular, painted in oils or other media.



Unaware of all this, Nicholas was learning the full horrors of Dotheboys Hall. The schoolroom was bare and dirty, its broken windows stopped up with old copybooks. The ill-treated pupils were thin, with the faces of old men darkened by suffering and neglect. When Smike asked, “Is the world as bad and dismal as this place?” Nicholas Nickleby replied, “Its hardest, coarsest toil were happiness to this.”



Time passed. Having fallen in love with Nicholas, Fanny Squeers arranged a tea party, at which Nicholas met Fanny's friend Matilda and Matilda's fiancé, the large Yorkshireman John Browdie. Nicholas's feelings were clear, and he later told Fanny that he had "not one thought, wish, or hope" of affection for her. Fanny was distressed by his declaration.



The miserable life at Dotheboys Hall continued. One freezing January morning, Smike was found to be missing. Mr and Mrs Squeers scoured the countryside until he was recaptured. With the whole school assembled, Mr Squeers began to beat Smike.

“Stop!” cried Nicholas in a voice that made the rafters ring.
“This must not go on.”



Aghast, Squeers released Smike. Then, in a violent outbreak of wrath and with a cry like the howl of a wild beast, Squeers spat at Nicholas and struck him across the face. Concentrating all his feelings of rage, scorn, and indignation, Nicholas sprang upon Squeers, wrestled the cane from his hand, grabbed him by the throat, and beat the ruffian until he roared for mercy.



Nicholas left the school on foot. On the way, he met John Browdie, who congratulated him on what he had done. The next morning, he awoke in a barn. Smike, who had followed him, dropped to his knees, begging, "Take me with you, pray." "Come," said Nicholas.

Newman Noggs was with his friends, the Kenwigses, when Nicholas and Smike arrived from Yorkshire, exhausted. A letter had already been sent from an embittered Fanny Squeers to Ralph, but luckily Ralph was away.



aying with Newman but in urgent need of work, Nicholas went to the General Agency Office, where he saw a pretty girl, neatly attired, accompanied by a slovenly, red-faced girl. He refused work with a corrupt MP.

Unaware that Nicholas was in London, Kate was unhappy working at Madame Mantalini's. One evening, Ralph invited her to supper at his house, saying, "Come in a hackney coach. I'll pay. Good night ... a ... a ... God bless you." Somehow, the blessing seemed to stick in his throat. Mrs Nickleby was excited about her daughter's invitation, so Kate was ready in her black silk dress long before the ordered carriage arrived.



At Golden Square, Ralph took his niece into an opulent room where some gentlemen were gathered. They were introduced to her as Mr Pluck, Mr Pyke, Sir Mulberry Hawk, and Lord Frederick Verisopht, who said “devilish pretty” on sight of her.

At dinner, Kate had to sit between Lord Frederick and Sir Mulberry. When Sir Mulberry behaved cruelly, Kate rushed out. Sir Mulberry followed her upstairs. When Kate attempted to escape, he grabbed her dress. “Unhand me, sir, this instant!” cried Kate. “Not for the world!” was the aristocrat’s evil reply.



“What is this?” demanded Ralph, appearing in the doorway. Taking Sir Mulberry to one side, Ralph confessed, “As a matter of business, I thought she might make some impression on the silly youth ... I thought to draw him on more gently by this device.” Ralph, it seemed, was a money-lender, and Kate was part of his plan to entrap Lord Frederick.



where employers could advertise for servants such as cooks, butlers, secretaries, or maids, and people with skills to offer could advertise for work. Today, it might be called an employment agency.



Kate took time to recover from her ordeal and was with her mother when Ralph arrived with Fanny's letter about Nicholas, which was packed with slanderous exaggeration.

Kate cried indignantly, "It is some base conspiracy!"

"Everything combines to prove the truth," insisted Ralph.

"A lie!" roared a voice outside. The door was dashed open and Nicholas entered. Furious, he decided he must leave London. Taking his leave of his mother and sister, he promised Ralph, "There will be a day of reckoning sooner or later, and it will be a heavy one for you if they are wronged."



Smike and Nicholas journeyed to Portsmouth, where they met a certain Mr Vincent Crummles and surprisingly became successful as part of a company of actors.

In London, the bailiffs arrived at Madame Mantalini's shop. In need of new employment, Kate became a companion to the insipid Mrs Witterly in Cadogan Place.



Meanwhile, Lord Frederick and Sir Mulberry hatched a plot regarding Kate. They met Mrs Nickleby at Ralph's office and escorted her home. The attentions of the two noblemen made Kate's life so distressing that she pleaded with her uncle to intervene — to no avail.

In Victorian times, companies of actors would travel from town to town. Before the days of cinema and television, their performances were a popular source of entertainment.



Newman Noggs overheard Kate's pleas. "Don't cry anymore," he whispered. "I shall see you soon. Ha! Ha! Ha! And so shall somebody else too." He immediately wrote to Nicholas, who set off back to London with Smike.



When Nicholas and Smike stopped for refreshment in a hotel, Nicholas overheard a man referring to “little Kate Nickleby.” It was Sir Mulberry out with Lord Frederick. “Your name and address?” demanded Nicholas, keen to defend his sister’s virtue. When Sir Mulberry refused to give either, Nicholas climbed onto his carriage. Sir Mulberry thrashed Nicholas with his whip, but Nicholas grabbed the handle and sliced his antagonist’s face. As the horse bolted, Nicholas was thrown free. Further up the street, the carriage crashed.



Nicholas at once went to Newman, who explained what Kate had been enduring. While Nicholas moved his family from Thames Street, Newman secretly delivered a note from Nicholas to Ralph: “Your kindred renounce you, for they know no shame but the ties of blood which bind them in name with you.”

Luckily, Nicholas met Ned and Charles Cheeryble, who employed him as a clerk. One day, Nicholas entered Charles’s room to find the pretty girl from the General Agency Office on her knees and in distress. Shocked, he retreated.



Just as things were going better for Nicholas and his family and friends, Smike was captured by Squeers, who locked him in a room at Mr Snawley's house. Only thanks to John Browdie, who was visiting London with his new wife Matilda, was Smike rescued.



Out collecting interest payments from those to whom he had lent money, Ralph met a poverty-stricken man. Twenty years ago, this man, Brooker, had been his clerk, but Ralph treated him badly and they fell out. “Are those of your name dear to you?” Brooker asked threateningly when Ralph refused to give him money. “They are not,” was Ralph’s reply.



John and Matilda were taking tea with Mrs Nickleby when Ralph entered with Squeers and Mr Snawley. “I have his father here,” claimed Ralph, pointing to Smike. “I want my son,” demanded Mr Snawley. Terrified, Smike cried, “I will not go from you with him.” Official-looking papers were produced, but Nicholas suspected a cunning trick and Smike stayed.



One day, Charles Cheeryble asked Nicholas if he would help him assist the young woman from the General Agency Office without her father knowing. The young woman was called Madeline Bray and was the daughter of a woman, now dead, whom Charles had loved in his youth. Nicholas agreed. Meanwhile, Newman Noggs overheard another money-lender, named Gride, telling Ralph about his plans to marry Madeline in return for clearing a debt.



Because Mr Bray was also in debt to Ralph, Gride needed Ralph's help. Newman told Nicholas what he had heard, and the young man pleaded with Madeline not to go ahead with the wedding — to no avail. He even offered Gride money but was refused.

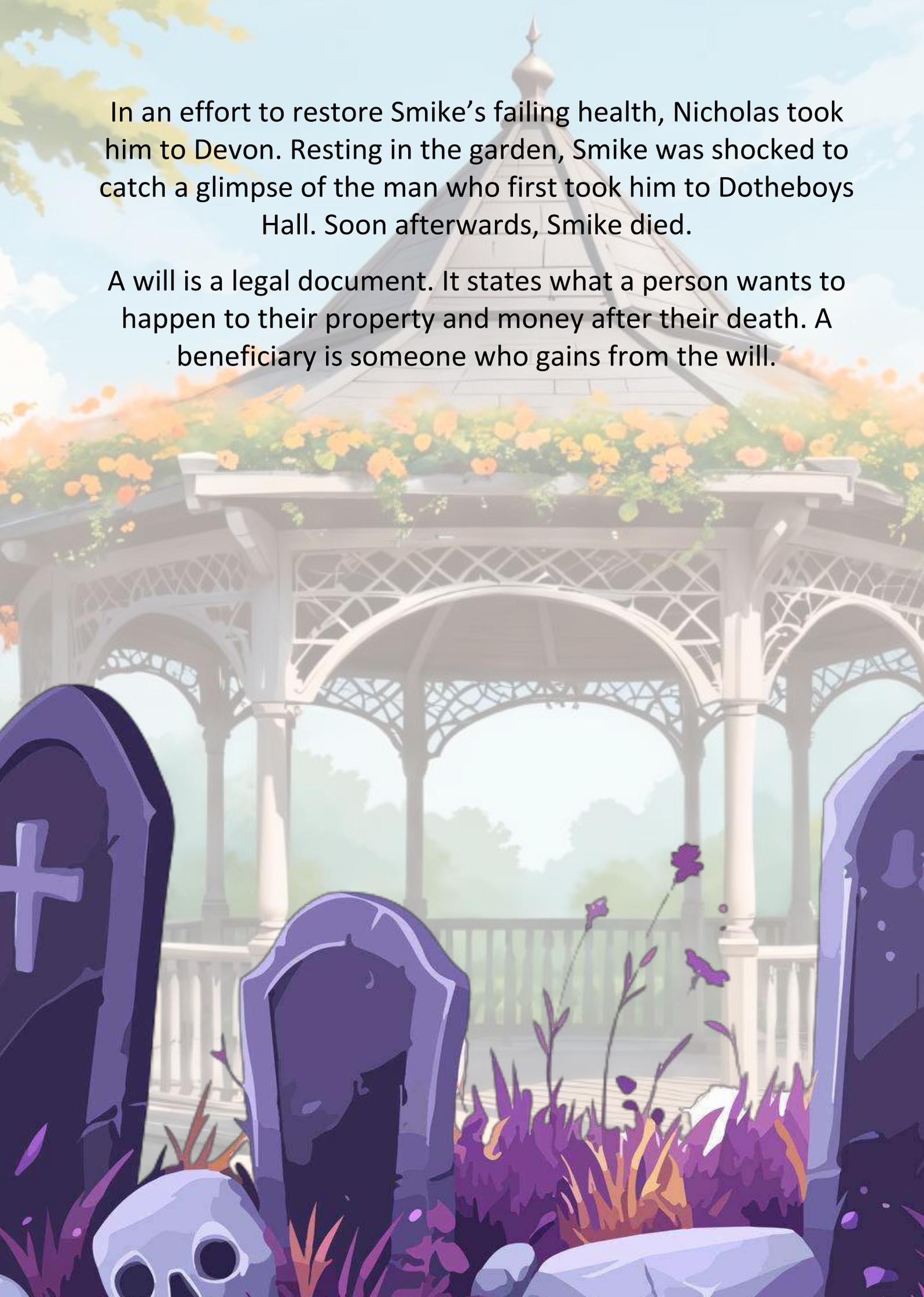


On the morning of the wedding, Nicholas went to the Bray house with Kate. While he was arguing with Gride and Ralph, the thud of something falling was heard above. Madeline screamed. Her father had dropped dead. Though Gride and Ralph protested, Nicholas carried Madeline to a carriage and took her to stay with his mother.



Gride's housekeeper, the deaf Mrs Sliderskew, soon went missing with some important papers. Squeers was persuaded by Ralph to assist in their recovery. After a clever surveillance operation, Newman Noggs and the Cheeryble brothers' nephew, Frank, apprehended Squeers and Mrs Sliderskew with the stolen papers. One of the papers found tucked inside Squeers's coat was the will of Madeline Bray's maternal grandfather. Madeline was named as the beneficiary.





In an effort to restore Smike's failing health, Nicholas took him to Devon. Resting in the garden, Smike was shocked to catch a glimpse of the man who first took him to Dotheboys Hall. Soon afterwards, Smike died.

A will is a legal document. It states what a person wants to happen to their property and money after their death. A beneficiary is someone who gains from the will.

Things were going from bad to worse for Ralph Nickleby. His associates deserted him and a bad deal lost him ten thousand pounds. He then learned from Brooker that, many years ago, when Ralph's estranged wife died, Brooker lied about the fate of Ralph's son. The child did not die but was taken by Brooker to Dotheboys. Said Brooker, "I was confirmed in my design of opening up the secret one day and making it a means of getting money." Now it was too late — the dead Smike had been Ralph's son. As rain pattered against the window, Ralph took his own life.



For others, there was a happier ending. Nicholas married Madeline, and Kate married the Cheeryble brothers' nephew Frank. Mrs Nickleby lived sometimes with her son and sometimes with her daughter. Close to Nicholas lived faithful Newman Noggs.

Up in Yorkshire, a score of shrill voices cried, "Squeers is in prison, and we are going to run away!" Such a cheer rose as the walls of Dotheboys Hall had never heard. As the sound faded, not a boy was left in the school.





THINK

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