

Charles Dickens, "The Parish Clerk: A Tale of True Love" (1836)

*The Pickwick Papers*, Chapter XVII

Once upon a time, in a very small country town, at a considerable distance from London, there lived a little man named Nathaniel Pipkin, who was the parish clerk of the little town, and lived in a little house in the little High Street, within ten minutes' walk from the little church; and who was to be found every day, from nine till four, teaching a little learning to the little boys. Nathaniel Pipkin was a harmless, inoffensive, good-natured being, with a turned-up nose, and rather turned-in legs, a cast in his eye, and a halt in his gait; and he divided his time between the church and his school, verily believing that there existed not, on the face of the earth, so clever a man as the curate, so imposing an apartment as the vestry-room, or so well-ordered a seminary as his own. Once, and only once, in his life, Nathaniel Pipkin had seen a bishop--a real bishop, with his arms in lawn sleeves, and his head in a wig. He had seen him walk, and heard him talk, at a confirmation, on which momentous occasion Nathaniel Pipkin was so overcome with reverence and awe, when the aforesaid bishop laid his hand on his head, that he fainted right clean away, and was borne out of church in the arms of the beadle.

This was a great event, a tremendous era, in Nathaniel Pipkin's life, and it was the only one that had ever occurred to ruffle the smooth current of his quiet existence, when happening one fine afternoon, in a fit of mental abstraction, to raise his eyes from the slate on which he was devising some tremendous problem in compound addition for an offending urchin to solve, they suddenly rested on the blooming countenance of Maria Lobbs, the only daughter of old Lobbs, the great saddler over the way. Now, the eyes of Mr. Pipkin had rested on the pretty face of Maria Lobbs many a time and oft before, at church and elsewhere; but the eyes of Maria Lobbs had never looked so bright, the cheeks of Maria Lobbs had never looked so ruddy, as upon this particular occasion. No wonder then, that Nathaniel Pipkin was unable to take his eyes from the countenance of Miss Lobbs; no wonder that Miss Lobbs, finding herself stared at by a young man, withdrew her head from the window out of which she had been peeping, and shut the casement and pulled down the blind; no wonder that Nathaniel Pipkin, immediately thereafter, fell upon the young urchin who had previously offended, and cuffed and knocked him about to his heart's content. All this was very natural, and there's nothing at all to wonder at about it.

It IS matter of wonder, though, that anyone of Mr. Nathaniel Pipkin's retiring disposition, nervous temperament, and most particularly diminutive income, should from this day forth, have dared to aspire to the hand and heart of the only daughter of the fiery old Lobbs--of old Lobbs, the great saddler, who could have bought up the whole village at one stroke of his pen, and never felt the outlay--old Lobbs, who was well known to have heaps of money, invested in the bank at the nearest market town--

-who was reported to have countless and inexhaustible treasures hoarded up in the little iron safe with the big keyhole, over the chimney-piece in the back parlour--and who, it was well known, on festive occasions garnished his board with a real silver teapot, cream-ewer, and sugar-basin, which he was wont, in the pride of his heart, to boast should be his daughter's property when she found a man to her mind. I repeat it, to be matter of profound astonishment and intense wonder, that Nathaniel Pipkin should have had the temerity to cast his eyes in this direction. But love is blind; and Nathaniel had a cast in his eye; and perhaps these two circumstances, taken together, prevented his seeing the matter in its proper light.

Now, if old Lobbs had entertained the most remote or distant idea of the state of the affections of Nathaniel Pipkin, he would just have razed the school-room to the ground, or exterminated its master from the surface of the earth, or committed some other outrage and atrocity of an equally ferocious and violent description; for he was a terrible old fellow, was Lobbs, when his pride was injured, or his blood was up. Swear! Such trains of oaths would come rolling and peeling over the way, sometimes, when he was denouncing the idleness of the bony apprentice with the thin legs, that Nathaniel Pipkin would shake in his shoes with horror, and the hair of the pupils' heads would stand on end with fright.

Well! Day after day, when school was over, and the pupils gone, did Nathaniel Pipkin sit himself down at the front window, and, while he feigned to be reading a book, throw sidelong glances over the way in search of the bright eyes of Maria Lobbs; and he hadn't sat there many days, before the bright eyes appeared at an upper window, apparently deeply engaged in reading too. This was delightful, and gladdening to the heart of Nathaniel Pipkin. It was something to sit there for hours together, and look upon that pretty face when the eyes were cast down; but when Maria Lobbs began to raise her eyes from her book, and dart their rays in the direction of Nathaniel Pipkin, his delight and admiration were perfectly boundless. At last, one day when he knew old Lobbs was out, Nathaniel Pipkin had the temerity to kiss his hand to Maria Lobbs; and Maria Lobbs, instead of shutting the window, and pulling down the blind, kissed *HERS* to him, and smiled. Upon which Nathaniel Pipkin determined, that, come what might, he would develop the state of his feelings, without further delay.

A prettier foot, a gayer heart, a more dimpled face, or a smarter form, never bounded so lightly over the earth they graced, as did those of Maria Lobbs, the old saddler's daughter. There was a roguish twinkle in her sparkling eyes, that would have made its way to far less susceptible bosoms than that of Nathaniel Pipkin; and there was such a joyous sound in her merry laugh, that the sternest misanthrope must have smiled to hear it. Even old Lobbs himself, in the very height of his ferocity, couldn't resist the coaxing of his pretty daughter; and when she, and her cousin Kate--an arch, impudent-looking, bewitching little person--made a dead set upon the old man together, as, to say the

truth, they very often did, he could have refused them nothing, even had they asked for a portion of the countless and inexhaustible treasures, which were hidden from the light, in the iron safe.

Nathaniel Pipkin's heart beat high within him, when he saw this enticing little couple some hundred yards before him one summer's evening, in the very field in which he had many a time strolled about till night-time, and pondered on the beauty of Maria Lobbs. But though he had often thought then, how briskly he would walk up to Maria Lobbs and tell her of his passion if he could only meet her, he felt, now that she was unexpectedly before him, all the blood in his body mounting to his face, manifestly to the great detriment of his legs, which, deprived of their usual portion, trembled beneath him. When they stopped to gather a hedge flower, or listen to a bird, Nathaniel Pipkin stopped too, and pretended to be absorbed in meditation, as indeed he really was; for he was thinking what on earth he should ever do, when they turned back, as they inevitably must in time, and meet him face to face. But though he was afraid to make up to them, he couldn't bear to lose sight of them; so when they walked faster he walked faster, when they lingered he lingered, and when they stopped he stopped; and so they might have gone on, until the darkness prevented them, if Kate had not looked slyly back, and encouragingly beckoned Nathaniel to advance. There was something in Kate's manner that was not to be resisted, and so Nathaniel Pipkin complied with the invitation; and after a great deal of blushing on his part, and immoderate laughter on that of the wicked little cousin, Nathaniel Pipkin went down on his knees on the dewy grass, and declared his resolution to remain there for ever, unless he were permitted to rise the accepted lover of Maria Lobbs. Upon this, the merry laughter of Miss Lobbs rang through the calm evening air-- without seeming to disturb it, though; it had such a pleasant sound--and the wicked little cousin laughed more immoderately than before, and Nathaniel Pipkin blushed deeper than ever. At length, Maria Lobbs being more strenuously urged by the love- worn little man, turned away her head, and whispered her cousin to say, or at all events Kate did say, that she felt much honoured by Mr. Pipkin's addresses; that her hand and heart were at her father's disposal; but that nobody could be insensible to Mr. Pipkin's merits. As all this was said with much gravity, and as Nathaniel Pipkin walked home with Maria Lobbs, and struggled for a kiss at parting, he went to bed a happy man, and dreamed all night long, of softening old Lobbs, opening the strong box, and marrying Maria.

The next day, Nathaniel Pipkin saw old Lobbs go out upon his old gray pony, and after a great many signs at the window from the wicked little cousin, the object and meaning of which he could by no means understand, the bony apprentice with the thin legs came over to say that his master wasn't coming home all night, and that the ladies expected Mr. Pipkin to tea, at six o'clock precisely. How the lessons were got through that day, neither Nathaniel Pipkin nor his pupils knew any more than you do; but they were got through somehow, and, after the boys had gone, Nathaniel Pipkin took till full six

o'clock to dress himself to his satisfaction. Not that it took long to select the garments he should wear, inasmuch as he had no choice about the matter; but the putting of them on to the best advantage, and the touching of them up previously, was a task of no inconsiderable difficulty or importance.

There was a very snug little party, consisting of Maria Lobbs and her cousin Kate, and three or four romping, good-humoured, rosy-cheeked girls. Nathaniel Pipkin had ocular demonstration of the fact, that the rumours of old Lobbs's treasures were not exaggerated. There were the real solid silver teapot, cream-ewer, and sugar-basin, on the table, and real silver spoons to stir the tea with, and real china cups to drink it out of, and plates of the same, to hold the cakes and toast in. The only eye-sore in the whole place was another cousin of Maria Lobbs's, and a brother of Kate, whom Maria Lobbs called "Henry," and who seemed to keep Maria Lobbs all to himself, up in one corner of the table. It's a delightful thing to see affection in families, but it may be carried rather too far, and Nathaniel Pipkin could not help thinking that Maria Lobbs must be very particularly fond of her relations, if she paid as much attention to all of them as to this individual cousin. After tea, too, when the wicked little cousin proposed a game at blind man's buff, it somehow or other happened that Nathaniel Pipkin was nearly always blind, and whenever he laid his hand upon the male cousin, he was sure to find that Maria Lobbs was not far off. And though the wicked little cousin and the other girls pinched him, and pulled his hair, and pushed chairs in his way, and all sorts of things, Maria Lobbs never seemed to come near him at all; and once--once--Nathaniel Pipkin could have sworn he heard the sound of a kiss, followed by a faint remonstrance from Maria Lobbs, and a half-suppressed laugh from her female friends. All this was odd--very odd--and there is no saying what Nathaniel Pipkin might or might not have done, in consequence, if his thoughts had not been suddenly directed into a new channel.

The circumstance which directed his thoughts into a new channel was a loud knocking at the street door, and the person who made this loud knocking at the street door was no other than old Lobbs himself, who had unexpectedly returned, and was hammering away, like a coffin-maker; for he wanted his supper. The alarming intelligence was no sooner communicated by the bony apprentice with the thin legs, than the girls tripped upstairs to Maria Lobbs's bedroom, and the male cousin and Nathaniel Pipkin were thrust into a couple of closets in the sitting-room, for want of any better places of concealment; and when Maria Lobbs and the wicked little cousin had stowed them away, and put the room to rights, they opened the street door to old Lobbs, who had never left off knocking since he first began.

Now it did unfortunately happen that old Lobbs being very hungry was monstrous cross. Nathaniel Pipkin could hear him growling away like an old mastiff with a sore throat; and whenever the unfortunate apprentice with the thin legs came into the room, so surely did old Lobbs commence

swearing at him in a most Saracenic and ferocious manner, though apparently with no other end or object than that of easing his bosom by the discharge of a few superfluous oaths. At length some supper, which had been warming up, was placed on the table, and then old Lobbs fell to, in regular style; and having made clear work of it in no time, kissed his daughter, and demanded his pipe.

Nature had placed Nathaniel Pipkin's knees in very close juxtaposition, but when he heard old Lobbs demand his pipe, they knocked together, as if they were going to reduce each other to powder; for, depending from a couple of hooks, in the very closet in which he stood, was a large, brown-stemmed, silver-bowled pipe, which pipe he himself had seen in the mouth of old Lobbs, regularly every afternoon and evening, for the last five years. The two girls went downstairs for the pipe, and upstairs for the pipe, and everywhere but where they knew the pipe was, and old Lobbs stormed away meanwhile, in the most wonderful manner. At last he thought of the closet, and walked up to it. It was of no use a little man like Nathaniel Pipkin pulling the door inwards, when a great strong fellow like old Lobbs was pulling it outwards. Old Lobbs gave it one tug, and open it flew, disclosing Nathaniel Pipkin standing bolt upright inside, and shaking with apprehension from head to foot. Bless us! what an appalling look old Lobbs gave him, as he dragged him out by the collar, and held him at arm's length.

"Why, what the devil do you want here?" said old Lobbs, in a fearful voice.

Nathaniel Pipkin could make no reply, so old Lobbs shook him backwards and forwards, for two or three minutes, by way of arranging his ideas for him.

"What do you want here?" roared Lobbs; "I suppose you have come after my daughter, now!"

Old Lobbs merely said this as a sneer: for he did not believe that mortal presumption could have carried Nathaniel Pipkin so far. What was his indignation, when that poor man replied-- "'Yes, I did, Mr. Lobbs, I did come after your daughter. I love her, Mr. Lobbs."

"Why, you snivelling, wry-faced, puny villain," gasped old Lobbs, paralysed by the atrocious confession; "what do you mean by that? Say this to my face! Damme, I'll throttle you!"

It is by no means improbable that old Lobbs would have carried his threat into execution, in the excess of his rage, if his arm had not been stayed by a very unexpected apparition: to wit, the male cousin, who, stepping out of his closet, and walking up to old Lobbs, said--

"I cannot allow this harmless person, Sir, who has been asked here, in some girlish frolic, to take upon himself, in a very noble manner, the fault (if fault it is) which I am guilty of, and am ready to avow. I love your daughter, sir; and I came here for the purpose of meeting her."

Old Lobbs opened his eyes very wide at this, but not wider than Nathaniel Pipkin.

"You did?" said Lobbs, at last finding breath to speak.

"I did."

"And I forbade you this house, long ago."

"You did, or I should not have been here, clandestinely, to-night."

I am sorry to record it of old Lobbs, but I think he would have struck the cousin, if his pretty daughter, with her bright eyes swimming in tears, had not clung to his arm.

"Don't stop him, Maria," said the young man; "if he has the will to strike me, let him. I would not hurt a hair of his gray head, for the riches of the world."

The old man cast down his eyes at this reproof, and they met those of his daughter. I have hinted once or twice before, that they were very bright eyes, and, though they were tearful now, their influence was by no means lessened. Old Lobbs turned his head away, as if to avoid being persuaded by them, when, as fortune would have it, he encountered the face of the wicked little cousin, who, half afraid for her brother, and half laughing at Nathaniel Pipkin, presented as bewitching an expression of countenance, with a touch of slyness in it, too, as any man, old or young, need look upon. She drew her arm coaxingly through the old man's, and whispered something in his ear; and do what he would, old Lobbs couldn't help breaking out into a smile, while a tear stole down his cheek at the same time. Five minutes after this, the girls were brought down from the bedroom with a great deal of giggling and modesty; and while the young people were making themselves perfectly happy, old Lobbs got down the pipe, and smoked it; and it was a remarkable circumstance about that particular pipe of tobacco, that it was the most soothing and delightful one he ever smoked.

Nathaniel Pipkin thought it best to keep his own counsel, and by so doing gradually rose into high favour with old Lobbs. who taught him to smoke in time; and they used to sit out in the garden on the fine evenings, for many years afterwards, smoking and drinking in great state. He soon recovered the

effects of his attachment, for we find his name in the parish register, as a witness to the marriage of Maria Lobbs to her cousin; and it also appears, by reference to other documents, that on the night of the wedding he was incarcerated in the village cage, for having, in a state of extreme intoxication, committed sundry excesses in the streets, in all of which he was aided and abetted by the bony apprentice with the thin legs.'

THE END.