

Chapter XVIII

Does Business With The House Of Anthony Chuzzlewit And Son, From Which One Of The Partners Retires Unexpectedly

Change begets change. Nothing propagates so fast. If a man habituated to a narrow circle of cares and pleasures, out of which he seldom travels, step beyond it, though for never so brief a space, his departure from the monotonous scene on which he has been an actor of importance, would seem to be the signal for instant confusion. As if, in the gap he had left, the wedge of change were driven to the head, rending what was a solid mass to fragments, things cemented and held together by the usages of years, burst asunder in as many weeks. The mine which Time has slowly dug beneath familiar objects is sprung in an instant; and what was rock before, becomes but sand and dust.

Most men, at one time or other, have proved this in some degree. The extent to which the natural laws of change asserted their supremacy in that limited sphere of action which Martin had deserted, shall be faithfully set down in these pages. 'What a cold spring it is!' whimpered old Anthony, drawing near the evening fire, 'It was a warmer season, sure, when I was young!'

'You needn't go scorching your clothes into holes, whether it was or not,' observed the amiable Jonas, raising his eyes from yesterday's newspaper, 'Broadcloth ain't so cheap as that comes to.'

'A good lad!' cried the father, breathing on his cold hands, and feebly chafing them against each other. 'A prudent lad! He never delivered himself up to the vanities of dress. No, no!'

'I don't know but I would, though, mind you, if I could do it for nothing,' said his son, as he resumed the paper.

'Ah!' chuckled the old man. 'IF, indeed! - But it's very cold.'

'Let the fire be!' cried Mr Jonas, stopping his honoured parent's hand in the use of the poker. 'Do you mean to come to want in your old age, that you take to wasting now?'

'There's not time for that, Jonas,' said the old man.

'Not time for what?' bawled his heir.

'For me to come to want. I wish there was!'

'You always were as selfish an old blade as need be,' said Jonas in a voice too low for him to hear, and looking at him with an angry frown. 'You act up to your character. You wouldn't mind coming to want, wouldn't you! I dare say you wouldn't. And your own flesh and blood might come to want too, might they, for anything you cared? Oh you precious old flint!'

After this dutiful address he took his tea-cup in his hand - for that meal was in progress, and the father and son and Chuffey were partakers of it. Then, looking steadfastly at his father, and stopping now and then to carry a spoonful of tea to his lips, he proceeded in the same tone, thus:

'Want, indeed! You're a nice old man to be talking of want at this time of day. Beginning to talk of want, are you? Well, I declare! There isn't time? No, I should hope not. But you'd live to be a couple of hundred if you could; and after all be discontented. I know you!'

The old man sighed, and still sat cowering before the fire. Mr Jonas shook his Britannia-metal teaspoon at him, and taking a loftier position, went on to argue the point on high moral grounds.

'If you're in such a state of mind as that,' he grumbled, but in the same subdued key, 'why don't you make over your property? Buy an annuity cheap, and make your life interesting to yourself and everybody else that watches the speculation. But no, that wouldn't suit YOU. That would be natural conduct to your own son, and you like to be unnatural, and to keep him out of his rights. Why, I should be ashamed of myself if I was you, and glad to hide my head in the what you may call it.'

Possibly this general phrase supplied the place of grave, or tomb, or sepulchre, or cemetery, or mausoleum, or other such word which the filial tenderness of Mr Jonas made him delicate of pronouncing. He pursued the theme no further; for Chuffey, somehow discovering, from his old corner by the fireside, that Anthony was in the attitude of a listener, and that Jonas appeared to be speaking, suddenly cried out, like one inspired:

'He is your own son, Mr Chuzzlewit. Your own son, sir!'

Old Chuffey little suspected what depth of application these words had, or that, in the bitter satire which they bore, they might have sunk into the old man's very soul, could he have known what words here hanging on his own son's lips, or what was passing in his thoughts. But the voice diverted the current of Anthony's reflections, and roused him.

'Yes, yes, Chuffey, Jonas is a chip of the old block. It is a very old block, now, Chuffey,' said the old man, with a strange look of discomposure.

'Precious old,' assented Jonas

'No, no, no,' said Chuffey. 'No, Mr Chuzzlewit. Not old at all, sir.'

'Oh! He's worse than ever, you know!' cried Jonas, quite disgusted. 'Upon my soul, father, he's getting too bad. Hold your tongue, will you?'

'He says you're wrong!' cried Anthony to the old clerk.

'Tut, tut!' was Chuffey's answer. 'I know better. I say HE'S wrong. I say HE'S wrong. He's a boy. That's what he is. So are you, Mr Chuzzlewit - a kind of boy. Ha! ha! ha! You're quite a boy to many I have known; you're a boy to me; you're a boy to hundreds of us. Don't mind him!'

With which extraordinary speech - for in the case of Chuffey this was a burst of eloquence without a parallel - the poor old shadow drew through his palsied arm his master's hand, and held it there, with his own folded upon it, as if he would defend him.

'I grow deafer every day, Chuff,' said Anthony, with as much softness of manner, or, to describe it more correctly, with as little hardness as he was capable of expressing.

'No, no,' cried Chuffey. 'No, you don't. What if you did? I've been deaf this twenty year.'

'I grow blinder, too,' said the old man, shaking his head.

'That's a good sign!' cried Chuffey. 'Ha! ha! The best sign in the world! You saw too well before.'

He patted Anthony upon the hand as one might comfort a child, and drawing the old man's arm still further through his own, shook his trembling fingers towards the spot where Jonas sat, as though he would wave him off. But, Anthony remaining quite still and silent, he relaxed his hold by slow degrees and lapsed into his usual niche in the corner; merely putting forth his hand at intervals and touching his old employer gently on the coat, as with the design of assuring himself that he was yet beside him.

Mr Jonas was so very much amazed by these proceedings that he could do nothing but stare at the two old men, until Chuffey had fallen into his usual state, and Anthony had sunk into a doze; when

he gave some vent to his emotions by going close up to the former personage, and making as though he would, in vulgar parlance, 'punch his head.'

'They've been carrying on this game,' thought Jonas in a brown study, 'for the last two or three weeks. I never saw my father take so much notice of him as he has in that time. What! You're legacy hunting, are you, Mister Chuff? Eh?'

But Chuffey was as little conscious of the thought as of the bodily advance of Mr Jonas's clenched fist, which hovered fondly about his ear. When he had scowled at him to his heart's content, Jonas took the candle from the table, and walking into the glass office, produced a bunch of keys from his pocket. With one of these he opened a secret drawer in the desk; peeping stealthily out, as he did so, to be certain that the two old men were still before the fire.

'All as right as ever,' said Jonas, propping the lid of the desk open with his forehead, and unfolding a paper. 'Here's the will, Mister Chuff. Thirty pound a year for your maintenance, old boy, and all the rest to his only son, Jonas. You needn't trouble yourself to be too affectionate. You won't get anything by it. What's that?'

It WAS startling, certainly. A face on the other side of the glass partition looking curiously in; and not at him but at the paper in his hand. For the eyes were attentively cast down upon the writing, and were swiftly raised when he cried out. Then they met his own, and were as the eyes of Mr Pecksniff.

Suffering the lid of the desk to fall with a loud noise, but not forgetting even then to lock it, Jonas, pale and breathless, gazed upon this phantom. It moved, opened the door, and walked in.

'What's the matter?' cried Jonas, falling back. 'Who is it? Where do you come from? What do you want?'

'Matter!' cried the voice of Mr Pecksniff, as Pecksniff in the flesh smiled amiably upon him. 'The matter, Mr Jonas!'

'What are you prying and peering about here for?' said Jonas, angrily. 'What do you mean by coming up to town in this way, and taking one unawares? It's precious odd a man can't read the - the newspaper - in his own office without being startled out of his wits by people coming in without notice. Why didn't you knock at the door?'

'So I did, Mr Jonas,' answered Pecksniff, 'but no one heard me. I was curious,' he added in his gentle way as he laid his hand upon the

young man's shoulder, 'to find out what part of the newspaper interested you so much; but the glass was too dim and dirty.'

Jonas glanced in haste at the partition. Well. It wasn't very clean. So far he spoke the truth.

'Was it poetry now?' said Mr Pecksniff, shaking the forefinger of his right hand with an air of cheerful banter. 'Or was it politics? Or was it the price of stock? The main chance, Mr Jonas, the main chance, I suspect.'

'You ain't far from the truth,' answered Jonas, recovering himself and snuffing the candle; 'but how the deuce do you come to be in London again? Ecod! it's enough to make a man stare, to see a fellow looking at him all of a sudden, who he thought was sixty or seventy mile away.'

'So it is,' said Mr Pecksniff. 'No doubt of it, my dear Mr Jonas. For while the human mind is constituted as it is - '

'Oh, bother the human mind,' interrupted Jonas with impatience 'what have you come up for?'

'A little matter of business,' said Mr Pecksniff, 'which has arisen quite unexpectedly.'

'Oh!' cried Jonas, 'is that all? Well. Here's father in the next room. Hallo father, here's Pecksniff! He gets more addle-pated every day he lives, I do believe,' muttered Jonas, shaking his honoured parent roundly. 'Don't I tell you Pecksniff's here, stupid-head?'

The combined effects of the shaking and this loving remonstrance soon awoke the old man, who gave Mr Pecksniff a chuckling welcome which was attributable in part to his being glad to see that gentleman, and in part to his unfading delight in the recollection of having called him a hypocrite. As Mr Pecksniff had not yet taken tea (indeed he had, but an hour before, arrived in London) the remains of the late collation, with a rasher of bacon, were served up for his entertainment; and as Mr Jonas had a business appointment in the next street, he stepped out to keep it; promising to return before Mr Pecksniff could finish his repast.

'And now, my good sir,' said Mr Pecksniff to Anthony; 'now that we are alone, pray tell me what I can do for you. I say alone, because I believe that our dear friend Mr Chuffey is, metaphysically speaking, a - shall I say a dummy?' asked Mr Pecksniff with his sweetest smile, and his head very much on one side.

'He neither hears us,' replied Anthony, 'nor sees us.'

'Why, then,' said Mr Pecksniff, 'I will be bold to say, with the utmost sympathy for his afflictions, and the greatest admiration of those excellent qualities which do equal honour to his head and to his heart, that he is what is playfully termed a dummy. You were going to observe, my dear sir - ?'

'I was not going to make any observation that I know of,' replied the old man.

'I was,' said Mr Pecksniff, mildly.

'Oh! YOU were? What was it?'

'That I never,' said Mr Pecksniff, previously rising to see that the door was shut, and arranging his chair when he came back, so that it could not be opened in the least without his immediately becoming aware of the circumstance; 'that I never in my life was so astonished as by the receipt of your letter yesterday. That you should do me the honour to wish to take counsel with me on any matter, amazed me; but that you should desire to do so, to the exclusion even of Mr Jonas, showed an amount of confidence in one to whom you had done a verbal injury - merely a verbal injury, you were anxious to repair - which gratified, which moved, which overcame me.'

He was always a glib speaker, but he delivered this short address very glibly; having been at some pains to compose it outside the coach.

Although he paused for a reply, and truly said that he was there at Anthony's request, the old man sat gazing at him in profound silence and with a perfectly blank face. Nor did he seem to have the least desire or impulse to pursue the conversation, though Mr Pecksniff looked towards the door, and pulled out his watch, and gave him many other hints that their time was short, and Jonas, if he kept his word, would soon return. But the strangest incident in all this strange behaviour was, that of a sudden, in a moment, so swiftly that it was impossible to trace how, or to observe any process of change, his features fell into their old expression, and he cried, striking his hand passionately upon the table as if no interval at all had taken place:

'Will you hold your tongue, sir, and let me speak?'

Mr Pecksniff deferred to him with a submissive bow; and said within himself, 'I knew his hand was changed, and that his writing staggered. I said so yesterday. Ahem! Dear me!'

'Jonas is sweet upon your daughter, Pecksniff,' said the old man, in his usual tone.

'We spoke of that, if you remember, sir, at Mrs Todgers's,' replied the courteous architect.

'You needn't speak so loud,' retorted Anthony. 'I'm not so deaf as that.'

Mr Pecksniff had certainly raised his voice pretty high; not so much because he thought Anthony was deaf, as because he felt convinced that his perceptive faculties were waxing dim; but this quick resentment of his considerate behaviour greatly disconcerted him, and, not knowing what tack to shape his course upon, he made another inclination of the head, yet more submissive than the last.

'I have said,' repeated the old man, 'that Jonas is sweet upon your daughter.'

'A charming girl, sir,' murmured Mr Pecksniff, seeing that he waited for an answer. 'A dear girl, Mr Chuzzlewit, though I say it, who should not.'

'You know better,' cried the old man, advancing his weazen face at least a yard, and starting forward in his chair to do it. 'You lie! What, you WILL be a hypocrite, will you?'

'My good sir,' Mr Pecksniff began.

'Don't call me a good sir,' retorted Anthony, 'and don't claim to be one yourself. If your daughter was what you would have me believe, she wouldn't do for Jonas. Being what she is, I think she will. He might be deceived in a wife. She might run riot, contract debts, and waste his substance. Now when I am dead - '

His face altered so horribly as he said the word, that Mr Pecksniff really was fain to look another way.

' - It will be worse for me to know of such doings, than if I was alive; for to be tormented for getting that together, which even while I suffer for its acquisition, is flung into the very kennels of the streets, would be insupportable torture. No,' said the old man, hoarsely, 'let that be saved at least; let there be something gained, and kept fast hold of, when so much is lost.'

'My dear Mr Chuzzlewit,' said Pecksniff, 'these are unwholesome fancies; quite unnecessary, sir, quite uncalled for, I am sure. The truth is, my dear sir, that you are not well!'

'Not dying though!' cried Anthony, with something like the snarl of a wild animal. 'Not yet! There are years of life in me. Why, look at him,' pointing to his feeble clerk. 'Death has no right to leave him standing, and to mow me down!'

Mr Pecksniff was so much afraid of the old man, and so completely taken aback by the state in which he found him, that he had not even presence of mind enough to call up a scrap of morality from the great storehouse within his own breast. Therefore he stammered out that no doubt it was, in fairness and decency, Mr Chuffey's turn to expire; and that from all he had heard of Mr Chuffey, and the little he had the pleasure of knowing of that gentleman, personally, he felt convinced in his own mind that he would see the propriety of expiring with as little delay as possible.

'Come here!' said the old man, beckoning him to draw nearer. 'Jonas will be my heir, Jonas will be rich, and a great catch for you. You know that. Jonas is sweet upon your daughter.'

'I know that too,' thought Mr Pecksniff, 'for you have said it often enough.'

'He might get more money than with her,' said the old man, 'but she will help him to take care of what they have. She is not too young or heedless, and comes of a good hard griping stock. But don't you play too fine a game. She only holds him by a thread; and if you draw it too tight (I know his temper) it'll snap. Bind him when he's in the mood, Pecksniff; bind him. You're too deep. In your way of leading him on, you'll leave him miles behind. Bah, you man of oil, have I no eyes to see how you have angled with him from the first?'

'Now I wonder,' thought Mr Pecksniff, looking at him with a wistful face, 'whether this is all he has to say?' Old Anthony rubbed his hands and muttered to himself; complained again that he was cold; drew his chair before the fire; and, sitting with his back to Mr Pecksniff, and his chin sunk down upon his breast, was, in another minute, quite regardless or forgetful of his presence.

Uncouth and unsatisfactory as this short interview had been, it had furnished Mr Pecksniff with a hint which, supposing nothing further were imparted to him, repaid the journey up and home again. For the good gentleman had never (for want of an opportunity) dived into the depths of Mr Jonas's nature; and any recipe for catching such a son-in-law (much more one written on a leaf out of his own father's book) was worth the having. In order that he might lose no chance of improving so fair an opportunity by allowing Anthony to fall asleep before he had finished all he had to say, Mr Pecksniff, in the disposal of the refreshments on the table, a work to which he now applied

himself in earnest, resorted to many ingenious contrivances for attracting his attention; such as coughing, sneezing, clattering the teacups, sharpening the knives, dropping the loaf, and so forth. But all in vain, for Mr Jonas returned, and Anthony had said no more.

'What! My father asleep again?' he cried, as he hung up his hat, and cast a look at him. 'Ah! and snoring. Only hear!'

'He snores very deep,' said Mr Pecksniff.

'Snores deep?' repeated Jonas. 'Yes; let him alone for that. He'll snore for six, at any time.'

'Do you know, Mr Jonas,' said Pecksniff, 'that I think your father is - don't let me alarm you - breaking?'

'Oh, is he though?' replied Jonas, with a shake of the head which expressed the closeness of his dutiful observation. 'Ecod, you don't know how tough he is. He ain't upon the move yet.'

'It struck me that he was changed, both in his appearance and manner,' said Mr Pecksniff.

'That's all you know about it,' returned Jonas, seating himself with a melancholy air. 'He never was better than he is now. How are they all at home? How's Charity?'

'Blooming, Mr Jonas, blooming.'

'And the other one; how's she?'

'Volatile trifler!' said Mr Pecksniff, fondly musing. 'She is well, she is well. Roving from parlour to bedroom, Mr Jonas, like a bee, skimming from post to pillar, like the butterfly; dipping her young beak into our currant wine, like the humming-bird! Ah! were she a little less giddy than she is; and had she but the sterling qualities of Cherry, my young friend!'

'Is she so very giddy, then?' asked Jonas.

'Well, well!' said Mr Pecksniff, with great feeling; 'let me not be hard upon my child. Beside her sister Cherry she appears so. A strange noise that, Mr Jonas!'

'Something wrong in the clock, I suppose,' said Jonas, glancing towards it. 'So the other one ain't your favourite, ain't she?'

The fond father was about to reply, and had already summoned into his face a look of most intense sensibility, when the sound he had already noticed was repeated.

'Upon my word, Mr Jonas, that is a very extraordinary clock,' said Pecksniff.

It would have been, if it had made the noise which startled them; but another kind of time-piece was fast running down, and from that the sound proceeded. A scream from Chuffey, rendered a hundred times more loud and formidable by his silent habits, made the house ring from roof to cellar; and, looking round, they saw Anthony Chuzzlewit extended on the floor, with the old clerk upon his knees beside him.

He had fallen from his chair in a fit, and lay there, battling for each gasp of breath, with every shrivelled vein and sinew starting in its place, as if it were bent on bearing witness to his age, and sternly pleading with Nature against his recovery. It was frightful to see how the principle of life, shut up within his withered frame, fought like a strong devil, mad to be released, and rent its ancient prison-house. A young man in the fullness of his vigour, struggling with so much strength of desperation, would have been a dismal sight; but an old, old, shrunken body, endowed with preternatural might, and giving the lie in every motion of its every limb and joint to its enfeebled aspect, was a hideous spectacle indeed.

They raised him up, and fetched a surgeon with all haste, who bled the patient and applied some remedies; but the fits held him so long that it was past midnight when they got him - quiet now, but quite unconscious and exhausted - into bed.

'Don't go,' said Jonas, putting his ashy lips to Mr Pecksniff's ear and whispered across the bed. 'It was a mercy you were present when he was taken ill. Some one might have said it was my doing.'

'YOUR doing!' cried Mr Pecksniff.

'I don't know but they might,' he replied, wiping the moisture from his white face. 'People say such things. How does he look now?'

Mr Pecksniff shook his head.

'I used to joke, you know,' said Jonas: 'but I - I never wished him dead. Do you think he's very bad?'

'The doctor said he was. You heard,' was Mr Pecksniff's answer.

'Ah! but he might say that to charge us more, in case of his getting well' said Jonas. 'You mustn't go away, Pecksniff. Now it's come to this, I wouldn't be without a witness for a thousand pound.'

Chuffey said not a word, and heard not a word. He had sat himself down in a chair at the bedside, and there he remained, motionless; except that he sometimes bent his head over the pillow, and seemed to listen. He never changed in this. Though once in the dreary night Mr Pecksniff, having dozed, awoke with a confused impression that he had heard him praying, and strangely mingling figures - not of speech, but arithmetic - with his broken prayers.

Jonas sat there, too, all night; not where his father could have seen him, had his consciousness returned, but hiding, as it were, behind him, and only reading how he looked, in Mr Pecksniff's eyes. HE, the coarse upstart, who had ruled the house so long - that craven cur, who was afraid to move, and shook so, that his very shadow fluttered on the wall!

It was broad, bright, stirring day when, leaving the old clerk to watch him, they went down to breakfast. People hurried up and down the street; windows and doors were opened; thieves and beggars took their usual posts; workmen bestirred themselves; tradesmen set forth their shops; bailiffs and constables were on the watch; all kinds of human creatures strove, in their several ways, as hard to live, as the one sick old man who combated for every grain of sand in his fast-emptying glass, as eagerly as if it were an empire.

'If anything happens Pecksniff,' said Jonas, 'you must promise me to stop here till it's all over. You shall see that I do what's right.'

'I know that you will do what's right, Mr Jonas,' said Pecksniff.

'Yes, yes, but I won't be doubted. No one shall have it in his power to say a syllable against me,' he returned. 'I know how people will talk. Just as if he wasn't old, or I had the secret of keeping him alive!'

Mr Pecksniff promised that he would remain, if circumstances should render it, in his esteemed friend's opinion, desirable; they were finishing their meal in silence, when suddenly an apparition stood before them, so ghastly to the view that Jonas shrieked aloud, and both recoiled in horror.

Old Anthony, dressed in his usual clothes, was in the room - beside the table. He leaned upon the shoulder of his solitary friend; and on his livid face, and on his horny hands, and in his glassy eyes, and traced by an eternal finger in the very drops of sweat upon his brow, was one word - Death.

He spoke to them - in something of his own voice too, but sharpened and made hollow, like a dead man's face. What he would have said, God knows. He seemed to utter words, but they were such as man had never heard. And this was the most fearful circumstance of all, to see him standing there, gabbling in an unearthly tongue.

'He's better now,' said Chuffey. 'Better now. Let him sit in his old chair, and he'll be well again. I told him not to mind. I said so, yesterday.'

They put him in his easy-chair, and wheeled it near the window; then, swinging open the door, exposed him to the free current of morning air. But not all the air that is, nor all the winds that ever blew 'twixt Heaven and Earth, could have brought new life to him.

Plunge him to the throat in golden pieces now, and his heavy fingers shall not close on one!