

Chapter XX

Is A Chapter Of Love

'Pecksniff,' said Jonas, taking off his hat, to see that the black crape band was all right; and finding that it was, putting it on again, complacently; 'what do you mean to give your daughters when they marry?'

'My dear Mr Jonas,' cried the affectionate parent, with an ingenuous smile, 'what a very singular inquiry!'

'Now, don't you mind whether it's a singular inquiry or a plural one,' retorted Jonas, eyeing Mr Pecksniff with no great favour, 'but answer it, or let it alone. One or the other.'

'Hum! The question, my dear friend,' said Mr Pecksniff, laying his hand tenderly upon his kinsman's knee, 'is involved with many considerations. What would I give them? Eh?'

'Ah! what would you give 'em?' repeated Jonas.

'Why, that,' said Mr Pecksniff, 'would naturally depend in a great measure upon the kind of husbands they might choose, my dear young friend.'

Mr Jonas was evidently disconcerted, and at a loss how to proceed. It was a good answer. It seemed a deep one, but such is the wisdom of simplicity!

'My standard for the merits I would require in a son-in-law,' said Mr Pecksniff, after a short silence, 'is a high one. Forgive me, my dear Mr Jonas,' he added, greatly moved, 'if I say that you have spoiled me, and made it a fanciful one; an imaginative one; a prismatically tinged one, if I may be permitted to call it so.'

'What do you mean by that?' growled Jonas, looking at him with increased disfavour.

'Indeed, my dear friend,' said Mr Pecksniff, 'you may well inquire. The heart is not always a royal mint, with patent machinery to work its metal into current coin. Sometimes it throws it out in strange forms, not easily recognized as coin at all. But it is sterling gold. It has at least that merit. It is sterling gold.'

'Is it?' grumbled Jonas, with a doubtful shake of the head.

'Aye!' said Mr Pecksniff, warming with his subject 'it is. To be plain with you, Mr Jonas, if I could find two such sons-in-law as you will one day make to some deserving man, capable of appreciating a nature such as yours, I would - forgetful of myself - bestow upon my daughters portions reaching to the very utmost limit of my means.'

This was strong language, and it was earnestly delivered. But who can wonder that such a man as Mr Pecksniff, after all he had seen and heard of Mr Jonas, should be strong and earnest upon such a theme; a theme that touched even the worldly lips of undertakers with the honey of eloquence!

Mr Jonas was silent, and looked thoughtfully at the landscape. For they were seated on the outside of the coach, at the back, and were travelling down into the country. He accompanied Mr Pecksniff home for a few days' change of air and scene after his recent trials.

'Well,' he said, at last, with captivating bluntness, 'suppose you got one such son-in-law as me, what then?'

Mr Pecksniff regarded him at first with inexpressible surprise; then gradually breaking into a sort of dejected vivacity, said:

'Then well I know whose husband he would be!'

'Whose?' asked Jonas, drily.

'My eldest girl's, Mr Jonas,' replied Pecksniff, with moistening eyes. 'My dear Cherry's; my staff, my scrip, my treasure, Mr Jonas. A hard struggle, but it is in the nature of things! I must one day part with her to a husband. I know it, my dear friend. I am prepared for it.'

'Ecod! you've been prepared for that a pretty long time, I should think,' said Jonas.

'Many have sought to bear her from me,' said Mr Pecksniff. 'All have failed. 'I never will give my hand, papa' - those were her words - 'unless my heart is won.' She has not been quite so happy as she used to be, of late. I don't know why.'

Again Mr Jonas looked at the landscape; then at the coachman; then at the luggage on the roof; finally at Mr Pecksniff.

'I suppose you'll have to part with the other one, some of these days?' he observed, as he caught that gentleman's eye.

'Probably,' said the parent. 'Years will tame down the wildness of my foolish bird, and then it will be caged. But Cherry, Mr Jonas, Cherry -'

'Oh, ah!' interrupted Jonas. 'Years have made her all right enough. Nobody doubts that. But you haven't answered what I asked you. Of course, you're not obliged to do it, you know, if you don't like. You're the best judge.'

There was a warning sulkiness in the manner of this speech, which admonished Mr Pecksniff that his dear friend was not to be trifled with or fenced off, and that he must either return a straight-forward reply to his question, or plainly give him to understand that he declined to enlighten him upon the subject to which it referred. Mindful in this dilemma of the caution old Anthony had given him almost with his latest breath, he resolved to speak to the point, and so told Mr Jonas (enlarging upon the communication as a proof of his great attachment and confidence), that in the case he had put; to wit, in the event of such a man as he proposing for his daughter's hand, he would endow her with a fortune of four thousand pounds.

'I should sadly pinch and cramp myself to do so,' was his fatherly remark; 'but that would be my duty, and my conscience would reward me. For myself, my conscience is my bank. I have a trifle invested there - a mere trifle, Mr Jonas - but I prize it as a store of value, I assure you.'

The good man's enemies would have divided upon this question into two parties. One would have asserted without scruple that if Mr Pecksniff's conscience were his bank, and he kept a running account there, he must have overdrawn it beyond all mortal means of computation. The other would have contended that it was a mere fictitious form; a perfectly blank book; or one in which entries were only made with a peculiar kind of invisible ink to become legible at some indefinite time; and that he never troubled it at all.

'It would sadly pinch and cramp me, my dear friend,' repeated Mr Pecksniff, 'but Providence - perhaps I may be permitted to say a special Providence - has blessed my endeavours, and I could guarantee to make the sacrifice.'

A question of philosophy arises here, whether Mr Pecksniff had or had not good reason to say that he was specially patronized and encouraged in his undertakings. All his life long he had been walking up and down the narrow ways and by-places, with a hook in one hand and a crook in the other, scraping all sorts of valuable odds and ends into his pouch. Now, there being a special Providence in the fall of a sparrow, it follows (so Mr Pecksniff, and only such admirable men,

would have reasoned), that there must also be a special Providence in the alighting of the stone or stick, or other substance which is aimed at the sparrow. And Mr Pecksniff's hook, or crook, having invariably knocked the sparrow on the head and brought him down, that gentleman may have been led to consider himself as specially licensed to bag sparrows, and as being specially seized and possessed of all the birds he had got together. That many undertakings, national as well as individual - but especially the former - are held to be specially brought to a glorious and successful issue, which never could be so regarded on any other process of reasoning, must be clear to all men. Therefore the precedents would seem to show that Mr Pecksniff had (as things go) good argument for what he said and might be permitted to say it, and did not say it presumptuously, vainly, or arrogantly, but in a spirit of high faith and great wisdom.

Mr Jonas, not being much accustomed to perplex his mind with theories of this nature, expressed no opinion on the subject. Nor did he receive his companion's announcement with one solitary syllable, good, bad, or indifferent. He preserved this taciturnity for a quarter of an hour at least, and during the whole of that time appeared to be steadily engaged in subjecting some given amount to the operation of every known rule in figures; adding to it, taking from it, multiplying it, reducing it by long and short division; working it by the rule-of-three direct and inversed; exchange or barter; practice; simple interest; compound interest; and other means of arithmetical calculation. The result of these labours appeared to be satisfactory, for when he did break silence, it was as one who had arrived at some specific result, and freed himself from a state of distressing uncertainty.

'Come, old Pecksniff!' - Such was his jocose address, as he slapped that gentleman on the back, at the end of the stage - 'let's have something!'

'With all my heart,' said Mr Pecksniff.

'Let's treat the driver,' cried Jonas.

'If you think it won't hurt the man, or render him discontented with his station - certainly,' faltered Mr Pecksniff.

Jonas only laughed at this, and getting down from the coach-top with great alacrity, cut a cumbersome kind of caper in the road. After which, he went into the public-house, and there ordered spirituous drink to such an extent, that Mr Pecksniff had some doubts of his perfect sanity, until Jonas set them quite at rest by saying, when the coach could wait no longer:

'I've been standing treat for a whole week and more, and letting you have all the delicacies of the season. YOU shall pay for this Pecksniff.' It was not a joke either, as Mr Pecksniff at first supposed; for he went off to the coach without further ceremony, and left his respected victim to settle the bill.

But Mr Pecksniff was a man of meek endurance, and Mr Jonas was his friend. Moreover, his regard for that gentleman was founded, as we know, on pure esteem, and a knowledge of the excellence of his character. He came out from the tavern with a smiling face, and even went so far as to repeat the performance, on a less expensive scale, at the next ale-house. There was a certain wildness in the spirits of Mr Jonas (not usually a part of his character) which was far from being subdued by these means, and, for the rest of the journey, he was so very buoyant - it may be said, boisterous - that Mr Pecksniff had some difficulty in keeping pace with him.

They were not expected - oh dear, no! Mr Pecksniff had proposed in London to give the girls a surprise, and had said he wouldn't write a word to prepare them on any account, in order that he and Mr Jonas might take them unawares, and just see what they were doing, when they thought their dear papa was miles and miles away. As a consequence of this playful device, there was nobody to meet them at the finger-post, but that was of small consequence, for they had come down by the day coach, and Mr Pecksniff had only a carpetbag, while Mr Jonas had only a portmanteau. They took the portmanteau between them, put the bag upon it, and walked off up the lane without delay; Mr Pecksniff already going on tiptoe as if, without this precaution, his fond children, being then at a distance of a couple of miles or so, would have some filial sense of his approach.

It was a lovely evening in the spring-time of the year; and in the soft stillness of the twilight, all nature was very calm and beautiful. The day had been fine and warm; but at the coming on of night, the air grew cool, and in the mellowing distance smoke was rising gently from the cottage chimneys. There were a thousand pleasant scents diffused around, from young leaves and fresh buds; the cuckoo had been singing all day long, and was but just now hushed; the smell of earth newly-upturned, first breath of hope to the first labourer after his garden withered, was fragrant in the evening breeze. It was a time when most men cherish good resolves, and sorrow for the wasted past; when most men, looking on the shadows as they gather, think of that evening which must close on all, and that to-morrow which has none beyond.

'Precious dull,' said Mr Jonas, looking about. 'It's enough to make a man go melancholy mad.'

'We shall have lights and a fire soon,' observed Mr Pecksniff.

'We shall need 'em by the time we get there,' said Jonas. 'Why the devil don't you talk? What are you thinking of?'

'To tell you the truth, Mr Jonas,' said Pecksniff with great solemnity, 'my mind was running at that moment on our late dear friend, your departed father.'

Mr Jonas immediately let his burden fall, and said, threatening him with his hand:

'Drop that, Pecksniff!'

Mr Pecksniff not exactly knowing whether allusion was made to the subject or the portmanteau, stared at his friend in unaffected surprise.

'Drop it, I say!' cried Jonas, fiercely. 'Do you hear? Drop it, now and for ever. You had better, I give you notice!'

'It was quite a mistake,' urged Mr Pecksniff, very much dismayed; 'though I admit it was foolish. I might have known it was a tender string.'

'Don't talk to me about tender strings,' said Jonas, wiping his forehead with the cuff of his coat. 'I'm not going to be crowed over by you, because I don't like dead company.'

Mr Pecksniff had got out the words 'Crowed over, Mr Jonas!' when that young man, with a dark expression in his countenance, cut him short once more:

'Mind!' he said. 'I won't have it. I advise you not to revive the subject, neither to me nor anybody else. You can take a hint, if you choose as well as another man. There's enough said about it. Come along!'

Taking up his part of the load again, when he had said these words, he hurried on so fast that Mr Pecksniff, at the other end of the portmanteau, found himself dragged forward, in a very inconvenient and ungraceful manner, to the great detriment of what is called by fancy gentlemen 'the bark' upon his shins, which were most unmercifully bumped against the hard leather and the iron buckles. In the course of a few minutes, however, Mr Jonas relaxed his speed, and suffered his companion to come up with him, and to bring the portmanteau into a tolerably straight position.

It was pretty clear that he regretted his late outbreak, and that he mistrusted its effect on Mr Pecksniff; for as often as that gentleman glanced towards Mr Jonas, he found Mr Jonas glancing at him, which was a new source of embarrassment. It was but a short-lived one, though, for Mr Jonas soon began to whistle, whereupon Mr Pecksniff, taking his cue from his friend, began to hum a tune melodiously.

'Pretty nearly there, ain't we?' said Jonas, when this had lasted some time.

'Close, my dear friend,' said Mr Pecksniff.

'What'll they be doing, do you suppose?' asked Jonas.

'Impossible to say,' cried Mr Pecksniff. 'Giddy truants! They may be away from home, perhaps. I was going to - he! he! he! - I was going to propose,' said Mr Pecksniff, 'that we should enter by the back way, and come upon them like a clap of thunder, Mr Jonas.'

It might not have been easy to decide in respect of which of their manifold properties, Jonas, Mr Pecksniff, the carpet-bag, and the portmanteau, could be likened to a clap of thunder. But Mr Jonas giving his assent to this proposal, they stole round into the back yard, and softly advanced towards the kitchen window, through which the mingled light of fire and candle shone upon the darkening night.

Truly Mr Pecksniff is blessed in his children - in one of them, at any rate. The prudent Cherry - staff and scrip, and treasure of her doting father - there she sits, at a little table white as driven snow, before the kitchen fire, making up accounts! See the neat maiden, as with pen in hand, and calculating look addressed towards the ceiling and bunch of keys within a little basket at her side, she checks the housekeeping expenditure! From flat-iron, dish-cover, and warming-pan; from pot and kettle, face of brass footman, and black-leaded stove; bright glances of approbation wink and glow upon her. The very onions dangling from the beam, mantle and shine like cherubs' cheeks. Something of the influence of those vegetables sinks into Mr Pecksniff's nature. He weeps.

It is but for a moment, and he hides it from the observation of his friend - very carefully - by a somewhat elaborate use of his pocket-handkerchief, in fact; for he would not have his weakness known.

'Pleasant,' he murmured, 'pleasant to a father's feelings! My dear girl! Shall we let her know we are here, Mr Jonas?'

'Why, I suppose you don't mean to spend the evening in the stable, or the coach-house,' he returned.

'That, indeed, is not such hospitality as I would show to YOU, my friend,' cried Mr Pecksniff, pressing his hand. And then he took a long breath, and tapping at the window, shouted with stentorian blandness:

'Boh!'

Cherry dropped her pen and screamed. But innocence is ever bold, or should be. As they opened the door, the valiant girl exclaimed in a firm voice, and with a presence of mind which even in that trying moment did not desert her, 'Who are you? What do you want? Speak! or I will call my Pa.'

Mr Pecksniff held out his arms. She knew him instantly, and rushed into his fond embrace.

'It was thoughtless of us, Mr Jonas, it was very thoughtless,' said Pecksniff, smoothing his daughter's hair. 'My darling, do you see that I am not alone!'

Not she. She had seen nothing but her father until now. She saw Mr Jonas now, though; and blushed, and hung her head down, as she gave him welcome.

But where was Merry? Mr Pecksniff didn't ask the question in reproach, but in a vein of mildness touched with a gentle sorrow. She was upstairs, reading on the parlour couch. Ah! Domestic details had no charms for HER. 'But call her down,' said Mr Pecksniff, with a placid resignation. 'Call her down, my love.'

She was called and came, all flushed and tumbled from reposing on the sofa; but none the worse for that. No, not at all. Rather the better, if anything.

'Oh my goodness me!' cried the arch girl, turning to her cousin when she had kissed her father on both cheeks, and in her frolicsome nature had bestowed a supernumerary salute upon the tip of his nose, 'YOU here, fright! Well, I'm very thankful that you won't trouble ME much!'

'What! you're as lively as ever, are you?' said Jonas. 'Oh! You're a wicked one!'

'There, go along!' retorted Merry, pushing him away. 'I'm sure I don't know what I shall ever do, if I have to see much of you. Go along, for gracious' sake!'

Mr Pecksniff striking in here, with a request that Mr Jonas would immediately walk upstairs, he so far complied with the young lady's adjuration as to go at once. But though he had the fair Cherry on his arm, he could not help looking back at her sister, and exchanging some further dialogue of the same bantering description, as they all four ascended to the parlour; where - for the young ladies happened, by good fortune, to be a little later than usual that night - the tea-board was at that moment being set out.

Mr Pinch was not at home, so they had it all to themselves, and were very snug and talkative, Jonas sitting between the two sisters, and displaying his gallantry in that engaging manner which was peculiar to him. It was a hard thing, Mr Pecksniff said, when tea was done, and cleared away, to leave so pleasant a little party, but having some important papers to examine in his own apartment, he must beg them to excuse him for half an hour. With this apology he withdrew, singing a careless strain as he went. He had not been gone five minutes, when Merry, who had been sitting in the window, apart from Jonas and her sister, burst into a half-smothered laugh, and skipped towards the door.

'Hallo!' cried Jonas. 'Don't go.'

'Oh, I dare say!' rejoined Merry, looking back. 'You're very anxious I should stay, fright, ain't you?'

'Yes, I am,' said Jonas. 'Upon my word I am. I want to speak to you.' But as she left the room notwithstanding, he ran out after her, and brought her back, after a short struggle in the passage which scandalized Miss Cherry very much.

'Upon my word, Merry,' urged that young lady, 'I wonder at you! There are bounds even to absurdity, my dear.'

'Thank you, my sweet,' said Merry, pursing up her rosy Lips. 'Much obliged to it for its advice. Oh! do leave me alone, you monster, do!' This entreaty was wrung from her by a new proceeding on the part of Mr Jonas, who pulled her down, all breathless as she was, into a seat beside him on the sofa, having at the same time Miss Cherry upon the other side.

'Now,' said Jonas, clasping the waist of each; 'I have got both arms full, haven't I?'

'One of them will be black and blue to-morrow, if you don't let me go,' cried the playful Merry.

'Ah! I don't mind YOUR pinching,' grinned Jonas, 'a bit.'

'Pinch him for me, Cherry, pray,' said Mercy. 'I never did hate anybody so much as I hate this creature, I declare!' 'No, no, don't say that,' urged Jonas, 'and don't pinch either, because I want to be serious. I say - Cousin Charity - '

'Well! what?' she answered sharply.

'I want to have some sober talk,' said Jonas; 'I want to prevent any mistakes, you know, and to put everything upon a pleasant understanding. That's desirable and proper, ain't it?'

Neither of the sisters spoke a word. Mr Jonas paused and cleared his throat, which was very dry.

'She'll not believe what I am going to say, will she, cousin?' said Jonas, timidly squeezing Miss Charity.

'Really, Mr Jonas, I don't know, until I hear what it is. It's quite impossible!'

'Why, you see,' said Jonas, 'her way always being to make game of people, I know she'll laugh, or pretend to - I know that, beforehand. But you can tell her I'm in earnest, cousin; can't you? You'll confess you know, won't you? You'll be honourable, I'm sure,' he added persuasively.

No answer. His throat seemed to grow hotter and hotter, and to be more and more difficult of control.

'You see, Cousin Charity,' said Jonas, 'nobody but you can tell her what pains I took to get into her company when you were both at the boarding-house in the city, because nobody's so well aware of it, you know. Nobody else can tell her how hard I tried to get to know you better, in order that I might get to know her without seeming to wish it; can they? I always asked you about her, and said where had she gone, and when would she come, and how lively she was, and all that; didn't I, cousin? I know you'll tell her so, if you haven't told her so already, and - and - I dare say you have, because I'm sure you're honourable, ain't you?'

Still not a word. The right arm of Mr Jonas - the elder sister sat upon his right - may have been sensible of some tumultuous throbbing which was not within itself; but nothing else apprised him that his words had had the least effect.

'Even if you kept it to yourself, and haven't told her,' resumed Jonas, 'it don't much matter, because you'll bear honest witness now; won't you? We've been very good friends from the first; haven't we? and of

course we shall be quite friends in future, and so I don't mind speaking before you a bit. Cousin Mercy, you've heard what I've been saying. She'll confirm it, every word; she must. Will you have me for your husband? Eh?'

As he released his hold of Charity, to put this question with better effect, she started up and hurried away to her own room, marking her progress as she went by such a train of passionate and incoherent sound, as nothing but a slighted woman in her anger could produce.

'Let me go away. Let me go after her,' said Merry, pushing him off, and giving him - to tell the truth - more than one sounding slap upon his outstretched face.

'Not till you say yes. You haven't told me. Will you have me for your husband?'

'No, I won't. I can't bear the sight of you. I have told you so a hundred times. You are a fright. Besides, I always thought you liked my sister best. We all thought so.'

'But that wasn't my fault,' said Jonas.

'Yes it was; you know it was.'

'Any trick is fair in love,' said Jonas. 'She may have thought I liked her best, but you didn't.'

'I did!'

'No, you didn't. You never could have thought I liked her best, when you were by.'

'There's no accounting for tastes,' said Merry; 'at least I didn't mean to say that. I don't know what I mean. Let me go to her.'

'Say 'Yes,' and then I will.'

'If I ever brought myself to say so, it should only be that I might hate and tease you all my life.'

'That's as good,' cried Jonas, 'as saying it right out. It's a bargain, cousin. We're a pair, if ever there was one.'

This gallant speech was succeeded by a confused noise of kissing and slapping; and then the fair but much dishevelled Merry broke away, and followed in the footsteps of her sister.

Now whether Mr Pecksniff had been listening - which in one of his character appears impossible; or divined almost by inspiration what the matter was - which, in a man of his sagacity is far more probable; or happened by sheer good fortune to find himself in exactly the right place, at precisely the right time - which, under the special guardianship in which he lived might very reasonably happen; it is quite certain that at the moment when the sisters came together in their own room, he appeared at the chamber door. And a marvellous contrast it was - they so heated, noisy, and vehement; he so calm, so self-possessed, so cool and full of peace, that not a hair upon his head was stirred.

'Children!' said Mr Pecksniff, spreading out his hands in wonder, but not before he had shut the door, and set his back against it. 'Girls! Daughters! What is this?'

'The wretch; the apostate; the false, mean, odious villain; has before my very face proposed to Mercy!' was his eldest daughter's answer.

'Who has proposed to Mercy!' asked Mr Pecksniff.

'HE has. That thing, Jonas, downstairs.'

'Jonas proposed to Mercy?' said Mr Pecksniff. 'Aye, aye! Indeed!'

'Have you nothing else to say?' cried Charity. 'Am I to be driven mad, papa? He has proposed to Mercy, not to me.'

'Oh, fie! For shame!' said Mr Pecksniff, gravely. 'Oh, for shame! Can the triumph of a sister move you to this terrible display, my child? Oh, really this is very sad! I am sorry; I am surprised and hurt to see you so. Mercy, my girl, bless you! See to her. Ah, envy, envy, what a passion you are!'

Uttering this apostrophe in a tone full of grief and lamentation, Mr Pecksniff left the room (taking care to shut the door behind him), and walked downstairs into the parlour. There he found his intended son-in-law, whom he seized by both hands.

'Jonas!' cried Mr Pecksniff. 'Jonas! the dearest wish of my heart is now fulfilled!'

'Very well; I'm glad to hear it,' said Jonas. 'That'll do. I say! As it ain't the one you're so fond of, you must come down with another thousand, Pecksniff. You must make it up five. It's worth that, to keep your treasure to yourself, you know. You get off very cheap that way, and haven't a sacrifice to make.'

The grin with which he accompanied this, set off his other attractions to such unspeakable advantage, that even Mr Pecksniff lost his presence of mind for a moment, and looked at the young man as if he were quite stupefied with wonder and admiration. But he quickly regained his composure, and was in the very act of changing the subject, when a hasty step was heard without, and Tom Pinch, in a state of great excitement, came darting into the room.

On seeing a stranger there, apparently engaged with Mr Pecksniff in private conversation, Tom was very much abashed, though he still looked as if he had something of great importance to communicate, which would be a sufficient apology for his intrusion.

'Mr Pinch,' said Pecksniff, 'this is hardly decent. You will excuse my saying that I think your conduct scarcely decent, Mr Pinch.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' replied Tom, 'for not knocking at the door.'

'Rather beg this gentleman's pardon, Mr Pinch,' said Pecksniff. 'I know you; he does not. - My young man, Mr Jonas.'

The son-in-law that was to be gave him a slight nod - not actively disdainful or contemptuous, only passively; for he was in a good humour.

'Could I speak a word with you, sir, if you please?' said Tom. 'It's rather pressing.'

'It should be very pressing to justify this strange behaviour, Mr Pinch,' returned his master. 'Excuse me for one moment, my dear friend. Now, sir, what is the reason of this rough intrusion?'

'I am very sorry, sir, I am sure,' said Tom, standing, cap in hand, before his patron in the passage; 'and I know it must have a very rude appearance - '

'It HAS a very rude appearance, Mr Pinch.'

'Yes, I feel that, sir; but the truth is, I was so surprised to see them, and knew you would be too, that I ran home very fast indeed, and really hadn't enough command over myself to know what I was doing very well. I was in the church just now, sir, touching the organ for my own amusement, when I happened to look round, and saw a gentleman and lady standing in the aisle listening. They seemed to be strangers, sir, as well as I could make out in the dusk; and I thought I didn't know them; so presently I left off, and said, would they walk up into the organ-loft, or take a seat? No, they said, they wouldn't do that; but they thanked me for the music they had heard. In fact,'

observed Tom, blushing, 'they said, 'Delicious music!' at least, SHE did; and I am sure that was a greater pleasure and honour to me than any compliment I could have had. I - I - beg your pardon sir;' he was all in a tremble, and dropped his hat for the second time 'but I - I'm rather flurried, and I fear I've wandered from the point.'

'If you will come back to it, Thomas,' said Mr Pecksniff, with an icy look, 'I shall feel obliged.'

'Yes, sir,' returned Tom, 'certainly. They had a posting carriage at the porch, sir, and had stopped to hear the organ, they said. And then they said - SHE said, I mean, 'I believe you live with Mr Pecksniff, sir?' I said I had that honour, and I took the liberty, sir,' added Tom, raising his eyes to his benefactor's face, 'of saying, as I always will and must, with your permission, that I was under great obligations to you, and never could express my sense of them sufficiently.'

'That,' said Mr Pecksniff, 'was very, very wrong. Take your time, Mr Pinch.'

'Thank you, sir,' cried Tom. 'On that they asked me - she asked, I mean - 'Wasn't there a bridle road to Mr Pecksniff's house?''

Mr Pecksniff suddenly became full of interest.

'Without going by the Dragon?' When I said there was, and said how happy I should be to show it 'em, they sent the carriage on by the road, and came with me across the meadows. I left 'em at the turnstile to run forward and tell you they were coming, and they'll be here, sir, in - in less than a minute's time, I should say,' added Tom, fetching his breath with difficulty.

'Now, who,' said Mr Pecksniff, pondering, 'who may these people be?'

'Bless my soul, sir!' cried Tom, 'I meant to mention that at first, I thought I had. I knew them - her, I mean - directly. The gentleman who was ill at the Dragon, sir, last winter; and the young lady who attended him.'

Tom's teeth chattered in his head, and he positively staggered with amazement, at witnessing the extraordinary effect produced on Mr Pecksniff by these simple words. The dread of losing the old man's favour almost as soon as they were reconciled, through the mere fact of having Jonas in the house; the impossibility of dismissing Jonas, or shutting him up, or tying him hand and foot and putting him in the coal-cellar, without offending him beyond recall; the horrible discordance prevailing in the establishment, and the impossibility of reducing it to decent harmony with Charity in loud hysterics, Mercy in

the utmost disorder, Jonas in the parlour, and Martin Chuzzlewit and his young charge upon the very doorsteps; the total hopelessness of being able to disguise or feasibly explain this state of rampant confusion; the sudden accumulation over his devoted head of every complicated perplexity and entanglement for his extrication from which he had trusted to time, good fortune, chance, and his own plotting, so filled the entrapped architect with dismay, that if Tom could have been a Gorgon staring at Mr Pecksniff, and Mr Pecksniff could have been a Gorgon staring at Tom, they could not have horrified each other half so much as in their own bewildered persons.

'Dear, dear!' cried Tom, 'what have I done? I hoped it would be a pleasant surprise, sir. I thought you would like to know.'

But at that moment a loud knocking was heard at the hall door.