

## Chapter XXXVIII

### Secret Service

In walking from the city with his sentimental friend, Tom Pinch had looked into the face, and brushed against the threadbare sleeve, of Mr Nadgett, man of mystery to the Anglo-Bengalee Disinterested Loan and Life Assurance Company. Mr Nadgett naturally passed away from Tom's remembrance as he passed out of his view; for he didn't know him, and had never heard his name.

As there are a vast number of people in the huge metropolis of England who rise up every morning not knowing where their heads will rest at night, so there are a multitude who shooting arrows over houses as their daily business, never know on whom they fall. Mr Nadgett might have passed Tom Pinch ten thousand times; might even have been quite familiar with his face, his name, pursuits, and character; yet never once have dreamed that Tom had any interest in any act or mystery of his. Tom might have done the like by him of course. But the same private man out of all the men alive, was in the mind of each at the same moment; was prominently connected though in a different manner, with the day's adventures of both; and formed, when they passed each other in the street, the one absorbing topic of their thoughts.

Why Tom had Jonas Chuzzlewit in his mind requires no explanation. Why Mr Nadgett should have had Jonas Chuzzlewit in his, is quite another thing.

But, somehow or other, that amiable and worthy orphan had become a part of the mystery of Mr Nadgett's existence. Mr Nadgett took an interest in his lightest proceedings; and it never flagged or wavered. He watched him in and out of the Assurance Office, where he was now formally installed as a Director; he dogged his footsteps in the streets; he stood listening when he talked; he sat in coffee-rooms entering his name in the great pocket-book, over and over again; he wrote letters to himself about him constantly; and, when he found them in his pocket, put them in the fire, with such distrust and caution that he would bend down to watch the crumpled tinder while it floated upwards, as if his mind misgave him, that the mystery it had contained might come out at the chimney-pot.

And yet all this was quite a secret. Mr Nadgett kept it to himself, and kept it close. Jonas had no more idea that Mr Nadgett's eyes were fixed on him, than he had that he was living under the daily inspection and report of a whole order of Jesuits. Indeed Mr Nadgett's eyes were seldom fixed on any other objects than the ground, the

clock, or the fire; but every button on his coat might have been an eye, he saw so much.

The secret manner of the man disarmed suspicion in this wise; suggesting, not that he was watching any one, but that he thought some other man was watching him. He went about so stealthily, and kept himself so wrapped up in himself, that the whole object of his life appeared to be, to avoid notice and preserve his own mystery. Jonas sometimes saw him in the street, hovering in the outer office, waiting at the door for the man who never came, or slinking off with his immovable face and drooping head, and the one beaver glove dangling before him; but he would as soon have thought of the cross upon the top of St. Paul's Cathedral taking note of what he did, or slowly winding a great net about his feet, as of Nadgett's being engaged in such an occupation.

Mr Nadgett made a mysterious change about this time in his mysterious life: for whereas he had, until now, been first seen every morning coming down Cornhill, so exactly like the Nadgett of the day before as to occasion a popular belief that he never went to bed or took his clothes off, he was now first seen in Holborn, coming out of Kingsgate Street; and it was soon discovered that he actually went every morning to a barber's shop in that street to get shaved; and that the barber's name was Sweedlepipe. He seemed to make appointments with the man who never came, to meet him at this barber's; for he would frequently take long spells of waiting in the shop, and would ask for pen and ink, and pull out his pocket-book, and be very busy over it for an hour at a time. Mrs Gamp and Mr Sweedlepipe had many deep discourings on the subject of this mysterious customer; but they usually agreed that he had speculated too much and was keeping out of the way.

He must have appointed the man who never kept his word, to meet him at another new place too; for one day he was found, for the first time, by the waiter at the Mourning Coach-Horse, the House-of-call for Undertakers, down in the City there, making figures with a pipe-stem in the sawdust of a clean spittoon; and declining to call for anything, on the ground of expecting a gentleman presently. As the gentleman was not honourable enough to keep his engagement, he came again next day, with his pocket-book in such a state of distention that he was regarded in the bar as a man of large property. After that, he repeated his visits every day, and had so much writing to do, that he made nothing of emptying a capacious leaden inkstand in two sittings. Although he never talked much, still, by being there among the regular customers, he made their acquaintance, and in course of time became quite intimate with Mr Tacker, Mr Mould's foreman; and even with Mr Mould himself, who openly said he was a

long-headed man, a dry one, a salt fish, a deep file, a rasper; and made him the subject of many other flattering encomiums.

At the same time, too, he told the people at the Assurance Office, in his own mysterious way, that there was something wrong (secretly wrong, of course) in his liver, and that he feared he must put himself under the doctor's hands. He was delivered over to Jobling upon this representation; and though Jobling could not find out where his liver was wrong, wrong Mr Nadgett said it was; observing that it was his own liver, and he hoped he ought to know. Accordingly, he became Mr Jobling's patient; and detailing his symptoms in his slow and secret way, was in and out of that gentleman's room a dozen times a day.

As he pursued all these occupations at once; and all steadily; and all secretly; and never slackened in his watchfulness of everything that Mr Jonas said and did, and left unsaid and undone; it is not improbable that they were, secretly, essential parts of some great scheme which Mr Nadgett had on foot.

It was on the morning of this very day on which so much had happened to Tom Pinch, that Nadgett suddenly appeared before Mr Montague's house in Pall Mall - he always made his appearance as if he had that moment come up a trap - when the clocks were striking nine. He rang the bell in a covert under-handed way, as though it were a treasonable act; and passed in at the door, the moment it was opened wide enough to receive his body. That done, he shut it immediately with his own hands.

Mr Bailey, taking up his name without delay, returned with a request that he would follow him into his master's chamber. The chairman of the Anglo-Bengalee Disinterested Loan and Life Assurance Board was dressing, and received him as a business person who was often backwards and forwards, and was received at all times for his business' sake.

'Well, Mr Nadgett?'

Mr Nadgett put his hat upon the ground and coughed. The boy having withdrawn and shut the door, he went to it softly, examined the handle, and returned to within a pace or two of the chair in which Mr Montague sat.

'Any news, Mr Nadgett?'

'I think we have some news at last, sir.'

'I am happy to hear it. I began to fear you were off the scent, Mr Nadgett.'

'No, sir. It grows cold occasionally. It will sometimes. We can't help that.'

'You are truth itself, Mr Nadgett. Do you report a great success?'

'That depends upon your judgment and construction of it,' was his answer, as he put on his spectacles.

'What do you think of it yourself? Have you pleased yourself?'

Mr Nadgett rubbed his hands slowly, stroked his chin, looked round the room, and said, 'Yes, yes, I think it's a good case. I am disposed to think it's a good case. Will you go into it at once?'

'By all means.'

Mr Nadgett picked out a certain chair from among the rest, and having planted it in a particular spot, as carefully as if he had been going to vault over it, placed another chair in front of it; leaving room for his own legs between them. He then sat down in chair number two, and laid his pocket-book, very carefully, on chair number one. He then untied the pocket-book, and hung the string over the back of chair number one. He then drew both the chairs a little nearer Mr Montague, and opening the pocket-book spread out its contents. Finally he selected a certain memorandum from the rest, and held it out to his employer, who, during the whole of these preliminary ceremonies, had been making violent efforts to conceal his impatience.

'I wish you wouldn't be so fond of making notes, my excellent friend,' said Tigg Montague with a ghastly smile. 'I wish you would consent to give me their purport by word of mouth.'

'I don't like word of mouth,' said Mr Nadgett gravely. 'We never know who's listening.'

Mr Montague was going to retort, when Nadgett handed him the paper, and said, with quiet exultation in his tone, 'We'll begin at the beginning, and take that one first, if you please, sir.'

The chairman cast his eyes upon it, coldly, and with a smile which did not render any great homage to the slow and methodical habits of his spy. But he had not read half-a-dozen lines when the expression of his face began to change, and before he had finished the perusal of the paper, it was full of grave and serious attention.

'Number Two,' said Mr Nadgett, handing him another, and receiving back the first. 'Read Number Two, sir, if you please. There is more interest as you go on.'

Tigg Montague leaned backward in his chair, and cast upon his emissary such a look of vacant wonder (not unmingled with alarm), that Mr Nadgett considered it necessary to repeat the request he had already twice preferred; with the view to recalling his attention to the point in hand. Profiting by the hint, Mr Montague went on with Number Two, and afterwards with Numbers Three, and Four, and Five, and so on.

These documents were all in Mr Nadgett's writing, and were apparently a series of memoranda, jotted down from time to time upon the backs of old letters, or any scrap of paper that came first to hand. Loose straggling scrawls they were, and of very uninviting exterior; but they had weighty purpose in them, if the chairman's face were any index to the character of their contents.

The progress of Mr Nadgett's secret satisfaction arising out of the effect they made, kept pace with the emotions of the reader. At first, Mr Nadgett sat with his spectacles low down upon his nose, looking over them at his employer, and nervously rubbing his hands. After a little while, he changed his posture in his chair for one of greater ease, and leisurely perused the next document he held ready as if an occasional glance at his employer's face were now enough and all occasion for anxiety or doubt were gone. And finally he rose and looked out of the window, where he stood with a triumphant air until Tigg Montague had finished.

'And this is the last, Mr Nadgett!' said that gentleman, drawing a long breath.

'That, sir, is the last.'

'You are a wonderful man, Mr Nadgett!'

'I think it is a pretty good case,' he returned as he gathered up his papers. 'It cost some trouble, sir.'

'The trouble shall be well rewarded, Mr Nadgett.' Nadgett bowed. 'There is a deeper impression of Somebody's Hoof here, than I had expected, Mr Nadgett. I may congratulate myself upon your being such a good hand at a secret.'

'Oh! nothing has an interest to me that's not a secret,' replied Nadgett, as he tied the string about his pocket-book, and put it up. 'It always takes away any pleasure I may have had in this inquiry even to make it known to you.'

'A most invaluable constitution,' Tigg retorted. 'A great gift for a gentleman employed as you are, Mr Nadgett. Much better than

discretion; though you possess that quality also in an eminent degree. I think I heard a double knock. Will you put your head out of window, and tell me whether there is anybody at the door?'

Mr Nadgett softly raised the sash, and peered out from the very corner, as a man might who was looking down into a street from whence a brisk discharge of musketry might be expected at any moment. Drawing in his head with equal caution, he observed, not altering his voice or manner:

'Mr Jonas Chuzzlewit!'

'I thought so,' Tigg retorted.

'Shall I go?'

'I think you had better. Stay though! No! remain here, Mr Nadgett, if you please.'

It was remarkable how pale and flurried he had become in an instant. There was nothing to account for it. His eye had fallen on his razors; but what of them!

Mr Chuzzlewit was announced.

'Show him up directly. Nadgett! don't you leave us alone together. Mind you don't, now! By the Lord!' he added in a whisper to himself: 'We don't know what may happen.'

Saying this, he hurriedly took up a couple of hair-brushes, and began to exercise them on his own head, as if his toilet had not been interrupted. Mr Nadgett withdrew to the stove, in which there was a small fire for the convenience of heating curling-irons; and taking advantage of so favourable an opportunity for drying his pocket-handkerchief, produced it without loss of time. There he stood, during the whole interview, holding it before the bars, and sometimes, but not often, glancing over his shoulder.

'My dear Chuzzlewit!' cried Montague, as Jonas entered. 'You rise with the lark. Though you go to bed with the nightingale, you rise with the lark. You have superhuman energy, my dear Chuzzlewit!'

'Ecod!' said Jonas, with an air of langour and ill-humour, as he took a chair, 'I should be very glad not to get up with the lark, if I could help it. But I am a light sleeper; and it's better to be up than lying awake, counting the dismal old church-clocks, in bed.'

'A light sleeper!' cried his friend. 'Now, what is a light sleeper? I often hear the expression, but upon my life I have not the least conception what a light sleeper is.'

'Hallo!' said Jonas, 'Who's that? Oh, old what's-his-name: looking (as usual) as if he wanted to skulk up the chimney.'

'Ha, ha! I have no doubt he does.'

'Well! He's not wanted here, I suppose,' said Jonas. 'He may go, mayn't he?'

'Oh, let him stay, let him stay!' said Tigg. 'He's a mere piece of furniture. He has been making his report, and is waiting for further orders. He has been told,' said Tigg, raising his voice, 'not to lose sight of certain friends of ours, or to think that he has done with them by any means. He understands his business.'

'He need,' replied Jonas; 'for of all the precious old dummies in appearance that I ever saw, he's about the worst. He's afraid of me, I think.'

'It's my belief,' said Tigg, 'that you are Poison to him. Nadgett! give me that towel!'

He had as little occasion for a towel as Jonas had for a start. But Nadgett brought it quickly; and, having lingered for a moment, fell back upon his old post by the fire.

'You see, my dear fellow,' resumed Tigg, 'you are too - what's the matter with your lips? How white they are!'

'I took some vinegar just now,' said Jonas. 'I had oysters for my breakfast. Where are they white?' he added, muttering an oath, and rubbing them upon his handkerchief. 'I don't believe they ARE white.'

'Now I look again, they are not,' replied his friend. 'They are coming right again.'

'Say what you were going to say,' cried Jonas angrily, 'and let my face be! As long as I can show my teeth when I want to (and I can do that pretty well), the colour of my lips is not material.'

'Quite true,' said Tigg. 'I was only going to say that you are too quick and active for our friend. He is too shy to cope with such a man as you, but does his duty well. Oh, very well! But what is a light sleeper?'

'Hang a light sleeper!' exclaimed Jonas pettishly.

'No, no,' interrupted Tigg. 'No. We'll not do that.'

'A light sleeper ain't a heavy one,' said Jonas in his sulky way; 'don't sleep much, and don't sleep well, and don't sleep sound.'

'And dreams,' said Tigg, 'and cries out in an ugly manner; and when the candle burns down in the night, is in an agony; and all that sort of thing. I see!'

They were silent for a little time. Then Jonas spoke:

'Now we've done with child's talk, I want to have a word with you. I want to have a word with you before we meet up yonder to-day. I am not satisfied with the state of affairs.'

'Not satisfied!' cried Tigg. 'The money comes in well.'

'The money comes in well enough,' retorted Jonas, 'but it don't come out well enough. It can't be got at easily enough. I haven't sufficient power; it is all in your hands. Ecod! what with one of your by-laws, and another of your by-laws, and your votes in this capacity, and your votes in that capacity, and your official rights, and your individual rights, and other people's rights who are only you again, there are no rights left for me. Everybody else's rights are my wrongs. What's the use of my having a voice if it's always drowned? I might as well be dumb, and it would be much less aggravating. I'm not a-going to stand that, you know.'

'No!' said Tigg in an insinuating tone.

'No!' returned Jonas, 'I'm not indeed. I'll play old Gooseberry with the office, and make you glad to buy me out at a good high figure, if you try any of your tricks with me.'

'I give you my honour - ' Montague began.

'Oh! confound your honour,' interrupted Jonas, who became more coarse and quarrelsome as the other remonstrated, which may have been a part of Mr Montague's intention; 'I want a little more control over the money. You may have all the honour, if you like; I'll never bring you to book for that. But I'm not a-going to stand it, as it is now. If you should take it into your honourable head to go abroad with the bank, I don't see much to prevent you. Well! That won't do. I've had some very good dinners here, but they'd come too dear on such terms; and therefore, that won't do.'

'I am unfortunate to find you in this humour,' said Tigg, with a remarkable kind of smile; 'for I was going to propose to you - for your



own advantage; solely for your own advantage - that you should venture a little more with us.'

'Was you, by G - ?' said Jonas, with a short laugh.

'Yes. And to suggest,' pursued Montague, 'that surely you have friends; indeed, I know you have; who would answer our purpose admirably, and whom we should be delighted to receive.'

'How kind of you! You'd be delighted to receive 'em, would you?' said Jonas, bantering.

'I give you my sacred honour, quite transported. As your friends, observe!'

'Exactly,' said Jonas; 'as my friends, of course. You'll be very much delighted when you get 'em, I have no doubt. And it'll be all to my advantage, won't it?'

'It will be very much to your advantage,' answered Montague poising a brush in each hand, and looking steadily upon him. 'It will be very much to your advantage, I assure you.'

'And you can tell me how,' said Jonas, 'can't you?'

'SHALL I tell you how?' returned the other.

'I think you had better,' said Jonas. 'Strange things have been done in the Assurance way before now, by strange sorts of men, and I mean to take care of myself.'

'Chuzzlewit!' replied Montague, leaning forward, with his arms upon his knees, and looking full into his face. 'Strange things have been done, and are done every day; not only in our way, but in a variety of other ways; and no one suspects them. But ours, as you say, my good friend, is a strange way; and we strangely happen, sometimes, to come into the knowledge of very strange events.'

He beckoned to Jonas to bring his chair nearer; and looking slightly round, as if to remind him of the presence of Nadgett, whispered in his ear.

From red to white; from white to red again; from red to yellow; then to a cold, dull, awful, sweat-bedabbled blue. In that short whisper, all these changes fell upon the face of Jonas Chuzzlewit; and when at last he laid his hand upon the whisperer's mouth, appalled, lest any syllable of what he said should reach the ears of the third person present, it was as bloodless and as heavy as the hand of Death.

He drew his chair away, and sat a spectacle of terror, misery, and rage. He was afraid to speak, or look, or move, or sit still. Abject, crouching, and miserable, he was a greater degradation to the form he bore, than if he had been a loathsome wound from head to heel.

His companion leisurely resumed his dressing, and completed it, glancing sometimes with a smile at the transformation he had effected, but never speaking once.

'You'll not object,' he said, when he was quite equipped, 'to venture further with us, Chuzzlewit, my friend?'

His pale lips faintly stammered out a 'No.'

'Well said! That's like yourself. Do you know I was thinking yesterday that your father-in-law, relying on your advice as a man of great sagacity in money matters, as no doubt you are, would join us, if the thing were well presented to him. He has money?'

'Yes, he has money.'

'Shall I leave Mr Pecksniff to you? Will you undertake for Mr Pecksniff.'

'I'll try. I'll do my best.' 'A thousand thanks,' replied the other, clapping him upon the shoulder. 'Shall we walk downstairs? Mr Nadgett! Follow us, if you please.'

They went down in that order. Whatever Jonas felt in reference to Montague; whatever sense he had of being caged, and barred, and trapped, and having fallen down into a pit of deepest ruin; whatever thoughts came crowding on his mind even at that early time, of one terrible chance of escape, of one red glimmer in a sky of blackness; he no more thought that the slinking figure half-a-dozen stairs behind him was his pursuing Fate, than that the other figure at his side was his Good Angel.