

Chapter XLI

Mr Jonas And His Friend, Arriving At A Pleasant Understanding, Set Forth Upon An Enterprise

The office of the Anglo-Bengalee Disinterested Loan and Life Assurance Company being near at hand, and Mr Montague driving Jonas straight there, they had very little way to go. But the journey might have been one of several hours' duration, without provoking a remark from either; for it was clear that Jonas did not mean to break the silence which prevailed between them, and that it was not, as yet, his dear friend's cue to tempt them into conversation.

He had thrown aside his cloak, as having now no motive for concealment, and with that garment huddled on his knees, sat as far removed from his companion as the limited space in such a carriage would allow. There was a striking difference in his manner, compared with what it had been, within a few minutes, when Tom encountered him so unexpectedly on board the packet, or when the ugly change had fallen on him in Mr Montague's dressing-room. He had the aspect of a man found out and held at bay; of being baffled, hunted, and beset; but there was now a dawning and increasing purpose in his face, which changed it very much. It was gloomy, distrustful, lowering; pale with anger and defeat; it still was humbled, abject, cowardly and mean; but, let the conflict go on as it would, there was one strong purpose wrestling with every emotion of his mind, and casting the whole series down as they arose.

Not prepossessing in appearance at the best of times, it may be readily supposed that he was not so now. He had left deep marks of his front teeth in his nether lip; and those tokens of the agitation he had lately undergone improved his looks as little as the heavy corrugations in his forehead. But he was self-possessed now; unnaturally self-possessed, indeed, as men quite otherwise than brave are known to be in desperate extremities; and when the carriage stopped, he waited for no invitation, but leapt hardily out, and went upstairs.

The chairman followed him; and closing the board-room door as soon as they had entered, threw himself upon a sofa. Jonas stood before the window, looking down into the street; and leaned against the sash, resting his head upon his arms.

'This is not handsome, Chuzzlewit!' said Montague at length. 'Not handsome upon my soul!'

'What would you have me do?' he answered, looking round abruptly; 'What do you expect?'

'Confidence, my good fellow. Some confidence!' said Montague in an injured tone.

'Ecod! You show great confidence in me,' retorted Jonas. 'Don't you?'

'Do I not?' said his companion, raising his head, and looking at him, but he had turned again. 'Do I not? Have I not confided to you the easy schemes I have formed for our advantage; OUR advantage, mind; not mine alone; and what is my return? Attempted flight!'

'How do you know that? Who said I meant to fly?'

'Who said? Come, come. A foreign boat, my friend, an early hour, a figure wrapped up for disguise! Who said? If you didn't mean to jilt me, why were you there? If you didn't mean to jilt me, why did you come back?'

'I came back,' said Jonas, 'to avoid disturbance.'

'You were wise,' rejoined his friend.

Jonas stood quite silent; still looking down into the street, and resting his head upon his arms.

'Now, Chuzzlewit,' said Montague, 'notwithstanding what has passed I will be plain with you. Are you attending to me there? I only see your back.'

'I hear you. Go on!'

'I say that notwithstanding what has passed, I will be plain with you.'

'You said that before. And I have told you once I heard you say it. Go on.'

'You are a little chafed, but I can make allowance for that, and am, fortunately, myself in the very best of tempers. Now, let us see how circumstances stand. A day or two ago, I mentioned to you, my dear fellow, that I thought I had discovered - '

'Will you hold your tongue?' said Jonas, looking fiercely round, and glancing at the door.

'Well, well!' said Montague. 'Judicious! Quite correct! My discoveries being published, would be like many other men's discoveries in this honest world; of no further use to me. You see, Chuzzlewit, how ingenuous and frank I am in showing you the weakness of my own position! To return. I make, or think I make, a certain discovery which

I take an early opportunity of mentioning in your ear, in that spirit of confidence which I really hoped did prevail between us, and was reciprocated by you. Perhaps there is something in it; perhaps there is nothing. I have my knowledge and opinion on the subject. You have yours. We will not discuss the question. But, my good fellow, you have been weak; what I wish to point out to you is, that you have been weak. I may desire to turn this little incident to my account (indeed, I do - I'll not deny it), but my account does not lie in probing it, or using it against you.'

'What do you call using it against me?' asked Jonas, who had not yet changed his attitude.

'Oh!' said Montague, with a laugh. 'We'll not enter into that.'

'Using it to make a beggar of me. Is that the use you mean?'

'No.'

'Ecod,' muttered Jonas, bitterly. 'That's the use in which your account DOES lie. You speak the truth there.'

'I wish you to venture (it's a very safe venture) a little more with us, certainly, and to keep quiet,' said Montague. 'You promised me you would; and you must. I say it plainly, Chuzzlewit, you MUST. Reason the matter. If you don't, my secret is worthless to me: and being so, it may as well become the public property as mine; better, for I shall gain some credit, bringing it to light. I want you, besides, to act as a decoy in a case I have already told you of. You don't mind that, I know. You care nothing for the man (you care nothing for any man; you are too sharp; so am I, I hope); and could bear any loss of his with pious fortitude. Ha, ha, ha! You have tried to escape from the first consequence. You cannot escape it, I assure you. I have shown you that to-day. Now, I am not a moral man, you know. I am not the least in the world affected by anything you may have done; by any little indiscretion you may have committed; but I wish to profit by it if I can; and to a man of your intelligence I make that free confession. I am not at all singular in that infirmity. Everybody profits by the indiscretion of his neighbour; and the people in the best repute, the most. Why do you give me this trouble? It must come to a friendly agreement, or an unfriendly crash. It must. If the former, you are very little hurt. If the latter - well! you know best what is likely to happen then.'

Jonas left the window, and walked up close to him. He did not look him in the face; it was not his habit to do that; but he kept his eyes towards him - on his breast, or thereabouts - and was at great pains to speak slowly and distinctly in reply. Just as a man in a state of conscious drunkenness might be.

'Lying is of no use now,' he said. 'I DID think of getting away this morning, and making better terms with you from a distance.'

'To be sure! to be sure!' replied Montague. 'Nothing more natural. I foresaw that, and provided against it. But I am afraid I am interrupting you.'

'How the devil,' pursued Jonas, with a still greater effort, 'you made choice of your messenger, and where you found him, I'll not ask you. I owed him one good turn before to-day. If you are so careless of men in general, as you said you were just now, you are quite indifferent to what becomes of such a crop-tailed cur as that, and will leave me to settle my account with him in my own manner.'

If he had raised his eyes to his companion's face, he would have seen that Montague was evidently unable to comprehend his meaning. But continuing to stand before him, with his furtive gaze directed as before, and pausing here only to moisten his dry lips with his tongue, the fact was lost upon him. It might have struck a close observer that this fixed and steady glance of Jonas's was a part of the alteration which had taken place in his demeanour. He kept it riveted on one spot, with which his thoughts had manifestly nothing to do; like as a juggler walking on a cord or wire to any dangerous end, holds some object in his sight to steady him, and never wanders from it, lest he trip.

Montague was quick in his rejoinder, though he made it at a venture. There was no difference of opinion between him and his friend on THAT point. Not the least.

'Your great discovery,' Jonas proceeded, with a savage sneer that got the better of him for the moment, 'may be true, and may be false. Whichever it is, I dare say I'm no worse than other men.'

'Not a bit,' said Tigg. 'Not a bit. We're all alike - or nearly so.'

'I want to know this,' Jonas went on to say; 'is it your own? You'll not wonder at my asking the question.'

'My own!' repeated Montague.

'Aye!' returned the other, gruffly. 'Is it known to anybody else? Come! Don't waver about that.'

'No!' said Montague, without the smallest hesitation. 'What would it be worth, do you think, unless I had the keeping of it?'

Now, for the first time, Jonas looked at him. After a pause, he put out his hand, and said, with a laugh:

'Come! make things easy to me, and I'm yours. I don't know that I may not be better off here, after all, than if I had gone away this morning. But here I am, and here I'll stay now. Take your oath!'

He cleared his throat, for he was speaking hoarsely and said in a lighter tone:

'Shall I go to Pecksniff? When? Say when!'

'Immediately!' cried Montague. 'He cannot be enticed too soon.'

'Ecod!' cried Jonas, with a wild laugh. 'There's some fun in catching that old hypocrite. I hate him. Shall I go to-night?'

'Aye! This,' said Montague, ecstatically, 'is like business! We understand each other now! To-night, my good fellow, by all means.'

'Come with me,' cried Jonas. 'We must make a dash; go down in state, and carry documents, for he's a deep file to deal with, and must be drawn on with an artful hand, or he'll not follow. I know him. As I can't take your lodgings or your dinners down, I must take you. Will you come to-night?'

His friend appeared to hesitate; and neither to have anticipated this proposal, nor to relish it very much.

'We can concert our plans upon the road,' said Jonas. 'We must not go direct to him, but cross over from some other place, and turn out of our way to see him. I may not want to introduce you, but I must have you on the spot. I know the man, I tell you.'

'But what if the man knows me?' said Montague, shrugging his shoulders.

'He know!' cried Jonas. 'Don't you run that risk with fifty men a day! Would your father know you? Did I know you? Ecod! You were another figure when I saw you first. Ha, ha, ha! I see the rents and patches now! No false hair then, no black dye! You were another sort of joker in those days, you were! You even spoke different then. You've acted the gentleman so seriously since, that you've taken in yourself. If he should know you, what does it matter? Such a change is a proof of your success. You know that, or you would not have made yourself known to me. Will you come?'

'My good fellow,' said Montague, still hesitating, 'I can trust you alone.'

'Trust me! Ecod, you may trust me now, far enough. I'll try to go away no more - no more!' He stopped, and added in a more sober tone, 'I can't get on without you. Will you come?'

'I will,' said Montague, 'if that's your opinion.' And they shook hands upon it.

The boisterous manner which Jonas had exhibited during the latter part of this conversation, and which had gone on rapidly increasing with almost every word he had spoken, from the time when he looked his honourable friend in the face until now, did not now subside, but, remaining at its height, abided by him. Most unusual with him at any period; most inconsistent with his temper and constitution; especially unnatural it would appear in one so darkly circumstanced; it abided by him. It was not like the effect of wine, or any ardent drink, for he was perfectly coherent. It even made him proof against the usual influence of such means of excitement; for, although he drank deeply several times that day, with no reserve or caution, he remained exactly the same man, and his spirits neither rose nor fell in the least observable degree.

Deciding, after some discussion, to travel at night, in order that the day's business might not be broken in upon, they took counsel together in reference to the means. Mr Montague being of opinion that four horses were advisable, at all events for the first stage, as throwing a great deal of dust into people's eyes, in more senses than one, a travelling chariot and four lay under orders for nine o'clock. Jonas did not go home; observing, that his being obliged to leave town on business in so great a hurry, would be a good excuse for having turned back so unexpectedly in the morning. So he wrote a note for his portmanteau, and sent it by a messenger, who duly brought his luggage back, with a short note from that other piece of luggage, his wife, expressive of her wish to be allowed to come and see him for a moment. To this request he sent for answer, 'she had better;' and one such threatening affirmative being sufficient, in defiance of the English grammar, to express a negative, she kept away.

Mr Montague being much engaged in the course of the day, Jonas bestowed his spirits chiefly on the doctor, with whom he lunched in the medical officer's own room. On his way thither, encountering Mr Nadgett in the outer room, he bantered that stealthy gentleman on always appearing anxious to avoid him, and inquired if he were afraid of him. Mr Nadgett slyly answered, 'No, but he believed it must be his way as he had been charged with much the same kind of thing before.'

Mr Montague was listening to, or, to speak with greater elegance, he overheard, this dialogue. As soon as Jonas was gone he beckoned Nadgett to him with the feather of his pen, and whispered in his ear.

'Who gave him my letter this morning?'

'My lodger, sir,' said Nadgett, behind the palm of his hand.

'How came that about?'

'I found him on the wharf, sir. Being so much hurried, and you not arrived, it was necessary to do something. It fortunately occurred to me, that if I gave it him myself I could be of no further use. I should have been blown upon immediately.'

'Mr Nadgett, you are a jewel,' said Montague, patting him on the back. 'What's your lodger's name?'

'Pinch, sir. Thomas Pinch.'

Montague reflected for a little while, and then asked:

'From the country, do you know?'

'From Wiltshire, sir, he told me.'

They parted without another word. To see Mr Nadgett's bow when Montague and he next met, and to see Mr Montague acknowledge it, anybody might have undertaken to swear that they had never spoken to each other confidentially in all their lives.

In the meanwhile, Mr Jonas and the doctor made themselves very comfortable upstairs, over a bottle of the old Madeira and some sandwiches; for the doctor having been already invited to dine below at six o'clock, preferred a light repast for lunch. It was advisable, he said, in two points of view: First, as being healthy in itself. Secondly as being the better preparation for dinner.

'And you are bound for all our sakes to take particular care of your digestion, Mr Chuzzlewit, my dear sir,' said the doctor smacking his lips after a glass of wine; 'for depend upon it, it is worth preserving. It must be in admirable condition, sir; perfect chronometer-work. Otherwise your spirits could not be so remarkable. Your bosom's lord sits lightly on its throne, Mr Chuzzlewit, as what's-his-name says in the play. I wish he said it in a play which did anything like common justice to our profession, by the bye. There is an apothecary in that drama, sir, which is a low thing; vulgar, sir; out of nature altogether.'

Mr Jobling pulled out his shirt-frill of fine linen, as though he would have said, 'This is what I call nature in a medical man, sir;' and looked at Jonas for an observation.

Jonas not being in a condition to pursue the subject, took up a case of lancets that was lying on the table, and opened it.

'Ah!' said the doctor, leaning back in his chair, 'I always take 'em out of my pocket before I eat. My pockets are rather tight. Ha, ha, ha!'

Jonas had opened one of the shining little instruments; and was scrutinizing it with a look as sharp and eager as its own bright edge.

'Good steel, doctor. Good steel! Eh!'

'Ye-es,' replied the doctor, with the faltering modesty of ownership. 'One might open a vein pretty dexterously with that, Mr Chuzzlewit.'

'It has opened a good many in its time, I suppose?' said Jonas looking at it with a growing interest.

'Not a few, my dear sir, not a few. It has been engaged in a - in a pretty good practice, I believe I may say,' replied the doctor, coughing as if the matter-of-fact were so very dry and literal that he couldn't help it. 'In a pretty good practice,' repeated the doctor, putting another glass of wine to his lips.

'Now, could you cut a man's throat with such a thing as this?' demanded Jonas.

'Oh certainly, certainly, if you took him in the right place,' returned the doctor. 'It all depends upon that.'

'Where you have your hand now, hey?' cried Jonas, bending forward to look at it.

'Yes,' said the doctor; 'that's the jugular.'

Jonas, in his vivacity, made a sudden sawing in the air, so close behind the doctor's jugular that he turned quite red. Then Jonas (in the same strange spirit of vivacity) burst into a loud discordant laugh.

'No, no,' said the doctor, shaking his head; 'edge tools, edge tools; never play with 'em. A very remarkable instance of the skillful use of edge-tools, by the way, occurs to me at this moment. It was a case of murder. I am afraid it was a case of murder, committed by a member of our profession; it was so artistically done.'

'Aye!' said Jonas. 'How was that?'

'Why, sir,' returned Jobling, 'the thing lies in a nutshell. A certain gentleman was found, one morning, in an obscure street, lying in an

angle of a doorway - I should rather say, leaning, in an upright position, in the angle of a doorway, and supported consequently by the doorway. Upon his waistcoat there was one solitary drop of blood. He was dead and cold; and had been murdered, sir.'

'Only one drop of blood!' said Jonas.

'Sir, that man,' replied the doctor, 'had been stabbed to the heart. Had been stabbed to the heart with such dexterity, sir, that he had died instantly, and had bled internally. It was supposed that a medical friend of his (to whom suspicion attached) had engaged him in conversation on some pretence; had taken him, very likely, by the button in a conversational manner; had examined his ground at leisure with his other hand; had marked the exact spot; drawn out the instrument, whatever it was, when he was quite prepared; and - '

'And done the trick,' suggested Jonas.

'Exactly so,' replied the doctor. 'It was quite an operation in its way, and very neat. The medical friend never turned up; and, as I tell you, he had the credit of it. Whether he did it or not I can't say. But, having had the honour to be called in with two or three of my professional brethren on the occasion, and having assisted to make a careful examination of the wound, I have no hesitation in saying that it would have reflected credit on any medical man; and that in an unprofessional person it could not but be considered, either as an extraordinary work of art, or the result of a still more extraordinary, happy, and favourable conjunction of circumstances.'

His hearer was so much interested in this case, that the doctor went on to elucidate it with the assistance of his own finger and thumb and waistcoat; and at Jonas's request, he took the further trouble of going into a corner of the room, and alternately representing the murdered man and the murderer; which he did with great effect. The bottle being emptied and the story done, Jonas was in precisely the same boisterous and unusual state as when they had sat down. If, as Jobling theorized, his good digestion were the cause, he must have been a very ostrich.

At dinner it was just the same; and after dinner too; though wine was drunk in abundance, and various rich meats eaten. At nine o'clock it was still the same. There being a lamp in the carriage, he swore they would take a pack of cards, and a bottle of wine; and with these things under his cloak, went down to the door.

'Out of the way, Tom Thumb, and get to bed!'

This was the salutation he bestowed on Mr Bailey, who, booted and wrapped up, stood at the carriage door to help him in.

'To bed, sir! I'm a-going, too,' said Bailey.

He alighted quickly, and walked back into the hall, where Montague was lighting a cigar; conducting Mr Bailey with him, by the collar.

'You are not a-going to take this monkey of a boy, are you?'

'Yes,' said Montague.

He gave the boy a shake, and threw him roughly aside. There was more of his familiar self in the action, than in anything he had done that day; but he broke out laughing immediately afterwards, and making a thrust at the doctor with his hand, in imitation of his representation of the medical friend, went out to the carriage again, and took his seat. His companion followed immediately. Mr Bailey climbed into the rumble. 'It will be a stormy night!' exclaimed the doctor, as they started.