

Chapter XLII

Continuation Of The Enterprise Of Mr Jonas And His Friend

The doctor's prognostication in reference to the weather was speedily verified. Although the weather was not a patient of his, and no third party had required him to give an opinion on the case, the quick fulfilment of his prophecy may be taken as an instance of his professional tact; for, unless the threatening aspect of the night had been perfectly plain and unmistakable, Mr Jobling would never have compromised his reputation by delivering any sentiments on the subject. He used this principle in Medicine with too much success to be unmindful of it in his commonest transactions.

It was one of those hot, silent nights, when people sit at windows listening for the thunder which they know will shortly break; when they recall dismal tales of hurricanes and earthquakes; and of lonely travellers on open plains, and lonely ships at sea, struck by lightning. Lightning flashed and quivered on the black horizon even now; and hollow murmurings were in the wind, as though it had been blowing where the thunder rolled, and still was charged with its exhausted echoes. But the storm, though gathering swiftly, had not yet come up; and the prevailing stillness was the more solemn, from the dull intelligence that seemed to hover in the air, of noise and conflict afar off.

It was very dark; but in the murky sky there were masses of cloud which shone with a lurid light, like monstrous heaps of copper that had been heated in a furnace, and were growing cold. These had been advancing steadily and slowly, but they were now motionless, or nearly so. As the carriage clattered round the corners of the streets, it passed at every one a knot of persons who had come there - many from their houses close at hand, without hats - to look up at that quarter of the sky. And now a very few large drops of rain began to fall, and thunder rumbled in the distance.

Jonas sat in a corner of the carriage with his bottle resting on his knee, and gripped as tightly in his hand as if he would have ground its neck to powder if he could. Instinctively attracted by the night, he had laid aside the pack of cards upon the cushion; and with the same involuntary impulse, so intelligible to both of them as not to occasion a remark on either side, his companion had extinguished the lamp. The front glasses were down; and they sat looking silently out upon the gloomy scene before them.

They were clear of London, or as clear of it as travellers can be whose way lies on the Western Road, within a stage of that enormous city. Occasionally they encountered a foot-passenger, hurrying to the

nearest place of shelter; or some unwieldy cart proceeding onward at a heavy trot, with the same end in view. Little clusters of such vehicles were gathered round the stable-yard or baiting-place of every wayside tavern; while their drivers watched the weather from the doors and open windows, or made merry within. Everywhere the people were disposed to bear each other company rather than sit alone; so that groups of watchful faces seemed to be looking out upon the night AND THEM, from almost every house they passed.

It may appear strange that this should have disturbed Jonas, or rendered him uneasy; but it did. After muttering to himself, and often changing his position, he drew up the blind on his side of the carriage, and turned his shoulder sulkily towards it. But he neither looked at his companion, nor broke the silence which prevailed between them, and which had fallen so suddenly upon himself, by addressing a word to him.

The thunder rolled, the lightning flashed; the rain poured down like Heaven's wrath. Surrounded at one moment by intolerable light, and at the next by pitchy darkness, they still pressed forward on their journey. Even when they arrived at the end of the stage, and might have tarried, they did not; but ordered horses out immediately. Nor had this any reference to some five minutes' lull, which at that time seemed to promise a cessation of the storm. They held their course as if they were impelled and driven by its fury. Although they had not exchanged a dozen words, and might have tarried very well, they seemed to feel, by joint consent, that onward they must go.

Louder and louder the deep thunder rolled, as through the myriad halls of some vast temple in the sky; fiercer and brighter became the lightning, more and more heavily the rain poured down. The horses (they were travelling now with a single pair) plunged and started from the rills of quivering fire that seemed to wind along the ground before them; but there these two men sat, and forward they went as if they were led on by an invisible attraction.

The eye, partaking of the quickness of the flashing light, saw in its every gleam a multitude of objects which it could not see at steady noon in fifty times that period. Bells in steeples, with the rope and wheel that moved them; ragged nests of birds in cornices and nooks; faces full of consternation in the tilted waggons that came tearing past; their frightened teams ringing out a warning which the thunder drowned; harrows and ploughs left out in fields; miles upon miles of hedge-divided country, with the distant fringe of trees as obvious as the scarecrow in the bean-field close at hand; in a trembling, vivid, flickering instant, everything was clear and plain; then came a flush of red into the yellow light; a change to blue; a brightness so intense that

there was nothing else but light; and then the deepest and profoundest darkness.

The lightning being very crooked and very dazzling may have presented or assisted a curious optical illusion, which suddenly rose before the startled eyes of Montague in the carriage, and as rapidly disappeared. He thought he saw Jonas with his hand lifted, and the bottle clenched in it like a hammer, making as if he would aim a blow at his head. At the same time he observed (or so believed) an expression in his face - a combination of the unnatural excitement he had shown all day, with a wild hatred and fear - which might have rendered a wolf a less terrible companion.

He uttered an involuntary exclamation, and called to the driver, who brought his horses to a stop with all speed.

It could hardly have been as he supposed, for although he had not taken his eyes off his companion, and had not seen him move, he sat reclining in his corner as before.

'What's the matter?' said Jonas. 'Is that your general way of waking out of your sleep?'

'I could swear,' returned the other, 'that I have not closed my eyes!'

'When you have sworn it,' said Jonas, composedly, 'we had better go on again, if you have only stopped for that.'

He uncorked the bottle with the help of his teeth; and putting it to his lips, took a long draught.

'I wish we had never started on this journey. This is not,' said Montague, recoiling instinctively, and speaking in a voice that betrayed his agitation; 'this is not a night to travel in.'

'Ecod! you're right there,' returned Jonas, 'and we shouldn't be out in it but for you. If you hadn't kept me waiting all day, we might have been at Salisbury by this time; snug abed and fast asleep. What are we stopping for?'

His companion put his head out of window for a moment, and drawing it in again, observed (as if that were his cause of anxiety), that the boy was drenched to the skin.

'Serve him right,' said Jonas. 'I'm glad of it. What the devil are we stopping for? Are you going to spread him out to dry?'

'I have half a mind to take him inside,' observed the other with some hesitation.

'Oh! thankee!' said Jonas. 'We don't want any damp boys here; especially a young imp like him. Let him be where he is. He ain't afraid of a little thunder and lightning, I dare say; whoever else is. Go on, driver. We had better have HIM inside perhaps,' he muttered with a laugh; 'and the horses!'

'Don't go too fast,' cried Montague to the postillion; 'and take care how you go. You were nearly in the ditch when I called to you.'

This was not true; and Jonas bluntly said so, as they moved forward again. Montague took little or no heed of what he said, but repeated that it was not a night for travelling, and showed himself, both then and afterwards, unusually anxious.

From this time Jonas recovered his former spirits, if such a term may be employed to express the state in which he had left the city. He had his bottle often at his mouth; roared out snatches of songs, without the least regard to time or tune or voice, or anything but loud discordance; and urged his silent friend to be merry with him.

'You're the best company in the world, my good fellow,' said Montague with an effort, 'and in general irresistible; but to-night - do you hear it?'

'Ecod! I hear and see it too,' cried Jonas, shading his eyes, for the moment, from the lightning which was flashing, not in any one direction, but all around them. 'What of that? It don't change you, nor me, nor our affairs. Chorus, chorus,

It may lighten and storm, Till it hunt the red worm From the grass where the gibbet is driven; But it can't hurt the dead, And it won't save the head That is doom'd to be rifled and riven.

That must be a precious old song,' he added with an oath, as he stopped short in a kind of wonder at himself. 'I haven't heard it since I was a boy, and how it comes into my head now, unless the lightning put it there, I don't know. 'Can't hurt the dead!' No, no. 'And won't save the head!' No, no. No! Ha, ha, ha!'

His mirth was of such a savage and extraordinary character, and was, in an inexplicable way, at once so suited to the night, and yet such a coarse intrusion on its terrors, that his fellow-traveller, always a coward, shrunk from him in positive fear. Instead of Jonas being his tool and instrument, their places seemed to be reversed. But there was reason for this too, Montague thought; since the sense of his

debasement might naturally inspire such a man with the wish to assert a noisy independence, and in that licence to forget his real condition. Being quick enough, in reference to such subjects of contemplation, he was not long in taking this argument into account and giving it its full weight. But still, he felt a vague sense of alarm, and was depressed and uneasy.

He was certain he had not been asleep; but his eyes might have deceived him; for, looking at Jonas now in any interval of darkness, he could represent his figure to himself in any attitude his state of mind suggested. On the other hand, he knew full well that Jonas had no reason to love him; and even taking the piece of pantomime which had so impressed his mind to be a real gesture, and not the working of his fancy, the most that could be said of it was, that it was quite in keeping with the rest of his diabolical fun, and had the same impotent expression of truth in it. 'If he could kill me with a wish,' thought the swindler, 'I should not live long.'

He resolved that when he should have had his use of Jonas, he would restrain him with an iron curb; in the meantime, that he could not do better than leave him to take his own way, and preserve his own peculiar description of good-humour, after his own uncommon manner. It was no great sacrifice to bear with him; 'for when all is got that can be got,' thought Montague, 'I shall decamp across the water, and have the laugh on my side - and the gains.'

Such were his reflections from hour to hour; his state of mind being one in which the same thoughts constantly present themselves over and over again in wearisome repetition; while Jonas, who appeared to have dismissed reflection altogether, entertained himself as before. They agreed that they would go to Salisbury, and would cross to Mr Pecksniff's in the morning; and at the prospect of deluding that worthy gentleman, the spirits of his amiable son-in-law became more boisterous than ever.

As the night wore on, the thunder died away, but still rolled gloomily and mournfully in the distance. The lightning too, though now comparatively harmless, was yet bright and frequent. The rain was quite as violent as it had ever been.

It was their ill-fortune, at about the time of dawn and in the last stage of their journey, to have a restive pair of horses. These animals had been greatly terrified in their stable by the tempest; and coming out into the dreary interval between night and morning, when the glare of the lightning was yet unsubdued by day, and the various objects in their view were presented in indistinct and exaggerated shapes which they would not have worn by night, they gradually became less and less capable of control; until, taking a sudden fright at something by

the roadside, they dashed off wildly down a steep hill, flung the driver from his saddle, drew the carriage to the brink of a ditch, stumbled headlong down, and threw it crashing over.

The travellers had opened the carriage door, and had either jumped or fallen out. Jonas was the first to stagger to his feet. He felt sick and weak, and very giddy, and reeling to a five-barred gate, stood holding by it; looking drowsily about as the whole landscape swam before his eyes. But, by degrees, he grew more conscious, and presently observed that Montague was lying senseless in the road, within a few feet of the horses.

In an instant, as if his own faint body were suddenly animated by a demon, he ran to the horses' heads; and pulling at their bridles with all his force, set them struggling and plunging with such mad violence as brought their hoofs at every effort nearer to the skull of the prostrate man; and must have led in half a minute to his brains being dashed out on the highway.

As he did this, he fought and contended with them like a man possessed, making them wilder by his cries.

'Whoop!' cried Jonas. 'Whoop! again! another! A little more, a little more! Up, ye devils! Hillo!'

As he heard the driver, who had risen and was hurrying up, crying to him to desist, his violence increased.

'Hiilo! Hillo!' cried Jonas.

'For God's sake!' cried the driver. 'The gentleman - in the road - he'll be killed!'

The same shouts and the same struggles were his only answer. But the man darting in at the peril of his own life, saved Montague's, by dragging him through the mire and water out of the reach of present harm. That done, he ran to Jonas; and with the aid of his knife they very shortly disengaged the horses from the broken chariot, and got them, cut and bleeding, on their legs again. The postillion and Jonas had now leisure to look at each other, which they had not had yet.

'Presence of mind, presence of mind!' cried Jonas, throwing up his hands wildly. 'What would you have done without me?'

'The other gentleman would have done badly without ME,' returned the man, shaking his head. 'You should have moved him first. I gave him up for dead.'

'Presence of mind, you croaker, presence of mind' cried Jonas with a harsh loud laugh. 'Was he struck, do you think?'

They both turned to look at him. Jonas muttered something to himself, when he saw him sitting up beneath the hedge, looking vacantly around.

'What's the matter?' asked Montague. 'Is anybody hurt?'

'Ecod!' said Jonas, 'it don't seem so. There are no bones broken, after all.'

They raised him, and he tried to walk. He was a good deal shaken, and trembled very much. But with the exception of a few cuts and bruises this was all the damage he had sustained.

'Cuts and bruises, eh?' said Jonas. 'We've all got them. Only cuts and bruises, eh?'

'I wouldn't have given sixpence for the gentleman's head in half-a-dozen seconds more, for all he's only cut and bruised,' observed the post-boy. 'If ever you're in an accident of this sort again, sir; which I hope you won't be; never you pull at the bridle of a horse that's down, when there's a man's head in the way. That can't be done twice without there being a dead man in the case; it would have ended in that, this time, as sure as ever you were born, if I hadn't come up just when I did.'

Jonas replied by advising him with a curse to hold his tongue, and to go somewhere, whither he was not very likely to go of his own accord. But Montague, who had listened eagerly to every word, himself diverted the subject, by exclaiming: 'Where's the boy?'

'Ecod! I forgot that monkey,' said Jonas. 'What's become of him?' A very brief search settled that question. The unfortunate Mr Bailey had been thrown sheer over the hedge or the five-barred gate; and was lying in the neighbouring field, to all appearance dead.

'When I said to-night, that I wished I had never started on this journey,' cried his master, 'I knew it was an ill-fated one. Look at this boy!'

'Is that all?' growled Jonas. 'If you call THAT a sign of it - '

'Why, what should I call a sign of it?' asked Montague, hurriedly. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean,' said Jonas, stooping down over the body, 'that I never heard you were his father, or had any particular reason to care much about him. Halloo. Hold up there!'

But the boy was past holding up, or being held up, or giving any other sign of life than a faint and fitful beating of the heart. After some discussion the driver mounted the horse which had been least injured, and took the lad in his arms as well as he could; while Montague and Jonas, leading the other horse, and carrying a trunk between them, walked by his side towards Salisbury.

'You'd get there in a few minutes, and be able to send assistance to meet us, if you went forward, post-boy,' said Jonas. 'Trot on!'

'No, no,' cried Montague; 'we'll keep together.'

'Why, what a chicken you are! You are not afraid of being robbed; are you?' said Jonas.

'I am not afraid of anything,' replied the other, whose looks and manner were in flat contradiction to his words. 'But we'll keep together.'

'You were mighty anxious about the boy, a minute ago,' said Jonas. 'I suppose you know that he may die in the meantime?'

'Aye, aye. I know. But we'll keep together.'

As it was clear that he was not to be moved from this determination, Jonas made no other rejoinder than such as his face expressed; and they proceeded in company. They had three or four good miles to travel; and the way was not made easier by the state of the road, the burden by which they were embarrassed, or their own stiff and sore condition. After a sufficiently long and painful walk, they arrived at the Inn; and having knocked the people up (it being yet very early in the morning), sent out messengers to see to the carriage and its contents, and roused a surgeon from his bed to tend the chief sufferer. All the service he could render, he rendered promptly and skillfully. But he gave it as his opinion that the boy was labouring under a severe concussion of the brain, and that Mr Bailey's mortal course was run.

If Montague's strong interest in the announcement could have been considered as unselfish in any degree, it might have been a redeeming trait in a character that had no such lineaments to spare. But it was not difficult to see that, for some unexpressed reason best appreciated by himself, he attached a strange value to the company and presence of this mere child. When, after receiving some assistance from the

surgeon himself, he retired to the bedroom prepared for him, and it was broad day, his mind was still dwelling on this theme.

'I would rather have lost,' he said, 'a thousand pounds than lost the boy just now. But I'll return home alone. I am resolved upon that. Chuzzlewit shall go forward first, and I will follow in my own time. I'll have no more of this,' he added, wiping his damp forehead. 'Twenty-four hours of this would turn my hair grey!'

After examining his chamber, and looking under the bed, and in the cupboards, and even behind the curtains, with unusual caution (although it was, as has been said, broad day), he double-locked the door by which he had entered, and retired to rest. There was another door in the room, but it was locked on the outer side; and with what place it communicated, he knew not.

His fears or evil conscience reproduced this door in all his dreams. He dreamed that a dreadful secret was connected with it; a secret which he knew, and yet did not know, for although he was heavily responsible for it, and a party to it, he was harassed even in his vision by a distracting uncertainty in reference to its import. Incoherently entwined with this dream was another, which represented it as the hiding-place of an enemy, a shadow, a phantom; and made it the business of his life to keep the terrible creature closed up, and prevent it from forcing its way in upon him. With this view Nadgett, and he, and a strange man with a bloody smear upon his head (who told him that he had been his playfellow, and told him, too, the real name of an old schoolmate, forgotten until then), worked with iron plates and nails to make the door secure; but though they worked never so hard, it was all in vain, for the nails broke, or changed to soft twigs, or what was worse, to worms, between their fingers; the wood of the door splintered and crumbled, so that even nails would not remain in it; and the iron plates curled up like hot paper. All this time the creature on the other side - whether it was in the shape of man, or beast, he neither knew nor sought to know - was gaining on them. But his greatest terror was when the man with the bloody smear upon his head demanded of him if he knew this creature's name, and said that he would whisper it. At this the dreamer fell upon his knees, his whole blood thrilling with inexplicable fear, and held his ears. But looking at the speaker's lips, he saw that they formed the utterance of the letter 'J'; and crying out aloud that the secret was discovered, and they were all lost, he awoke.

Awoke to find Jonas standing at his bedside watching him. And that very door wide open.

As their eyes met, Jonas retreated a few paces, and Montague sprang out of bed.

'Heyday!' said Jonas. 'You're all alive this morning.'

'Alive!' the other stammered, as he pulled the bell-rope violently. 'What are you doing here?'

'It's your room to be sure,' said Jonas; 'but I'm almost inclined to ask you what YOU are doing here? My room is on the other side of that door. No one told me last night not to open it. I thought it led into a passage, and was coming out to order breakfast. There's - there's no bell in my room.'

Montague had in the meantime admitted the man with his hot water and boots, who hearing this, said, yes, there was; and passed into the adjoining room to point it out, at the head of the bed.

'I couldn't find it, then,' said Jonas; 'it's all the same. Shall I order breakfast?'

Montague answered in the affirmative. When Jonas had retired, whistling, through his own room, he opened the door of communication, to take out the key and fasten it on the inner side. But it was taken out already.

He dragged a table against the door, and sat down to collect himself, as if his dreams still had some influence upon his mind.

'An evil journey,' he repeated several times. 'An evil journey. But I'll travel home alone. I'll have no more of this.'

His presentiment, or superstition, that it was an evil journey, did not at all deter him from doing the evil for which the journey was undertaken. With this in view, he dressed himself more carefully than usual to make a favourable impression on Mr Pecksniff; and, reassured by his own appearance, the beauty of the morning, and the flashing of the wet boughs outside his window in the merry sunshine, was soon sufficiently inspirited to swear a few round oaths, and hum the fag-end of a song.

But he still muttered to himself at intervals, for all that: 'I'll travel home alone!'