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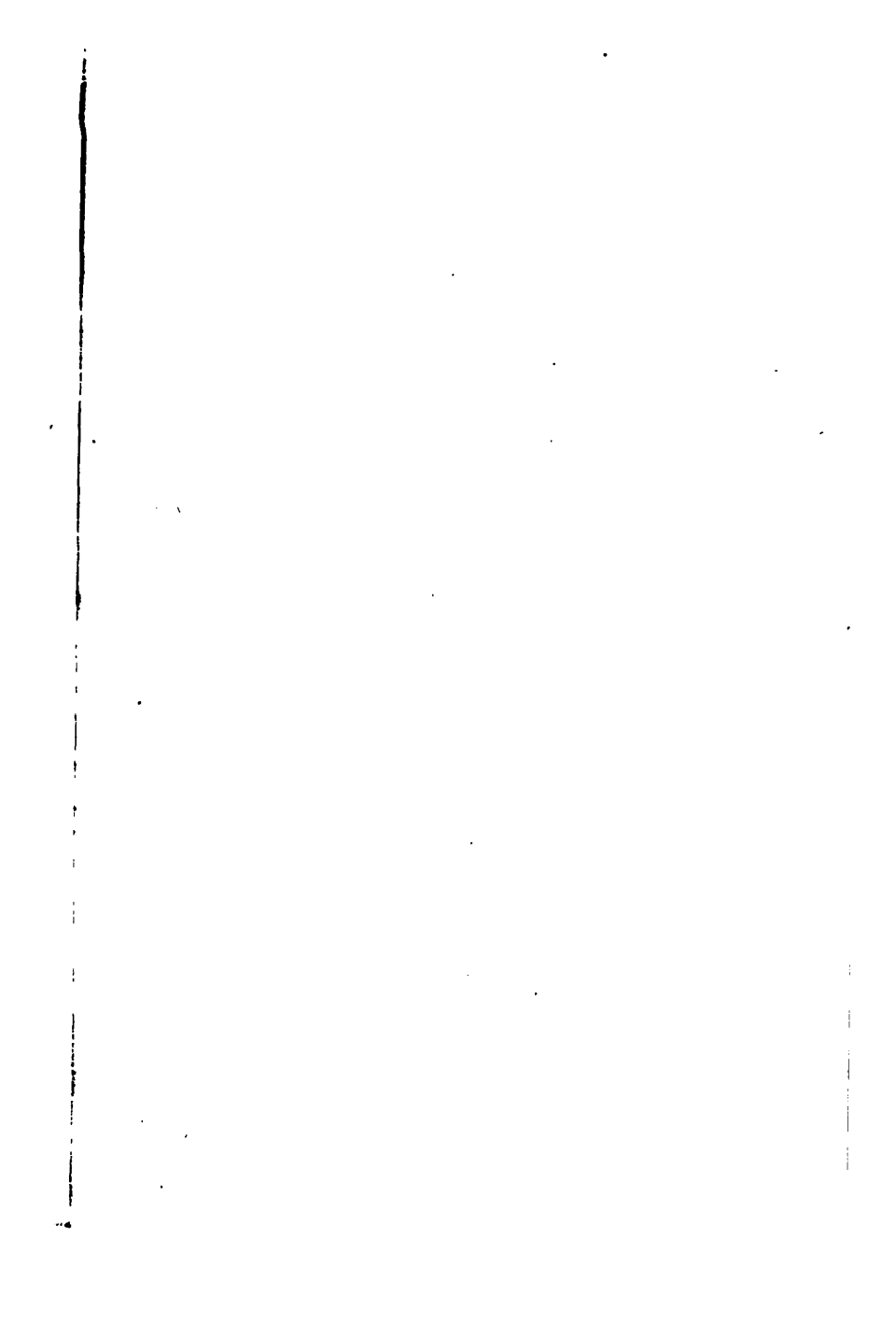
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Our Mutual Friends.

The end of a long Journey

Page 147

NEW YORK: A. S. BENTLEY.

WORKS

YORK:
IRD AND HOUGHTON,
459 BROOME STREET.
1866.



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WORKS
OF
CHARLES DICKENS.

HOUSEHOLD EDITION.

ILLUSTRATED FROM DRAWINGS BY F. O. C. DARLEY AND
JOHN GILBERT.

OUR MUTUAL FRIEND.

VOL. III.

NEW YORK:
PUBLISHED BY HURD AND HOUGHTON,
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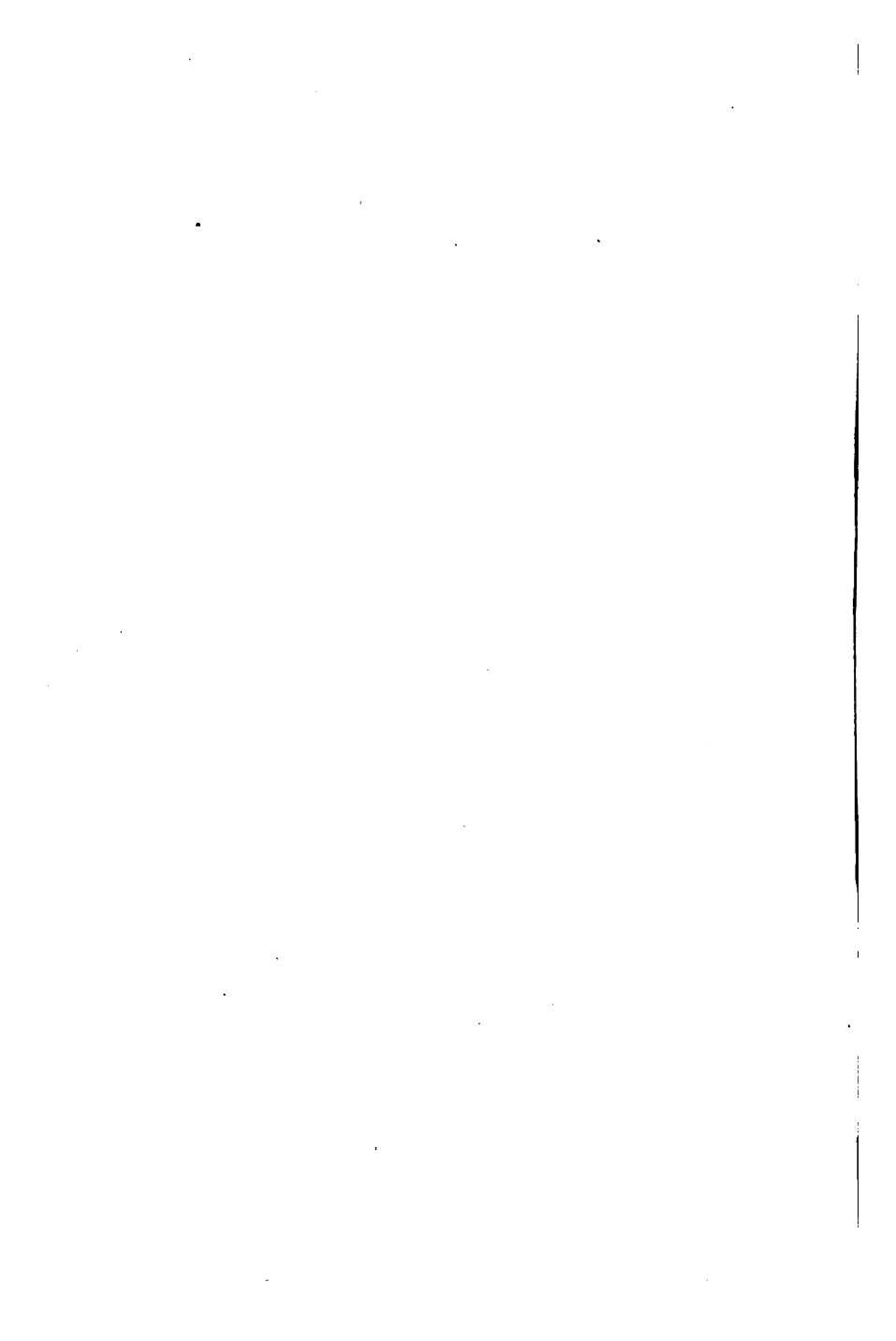
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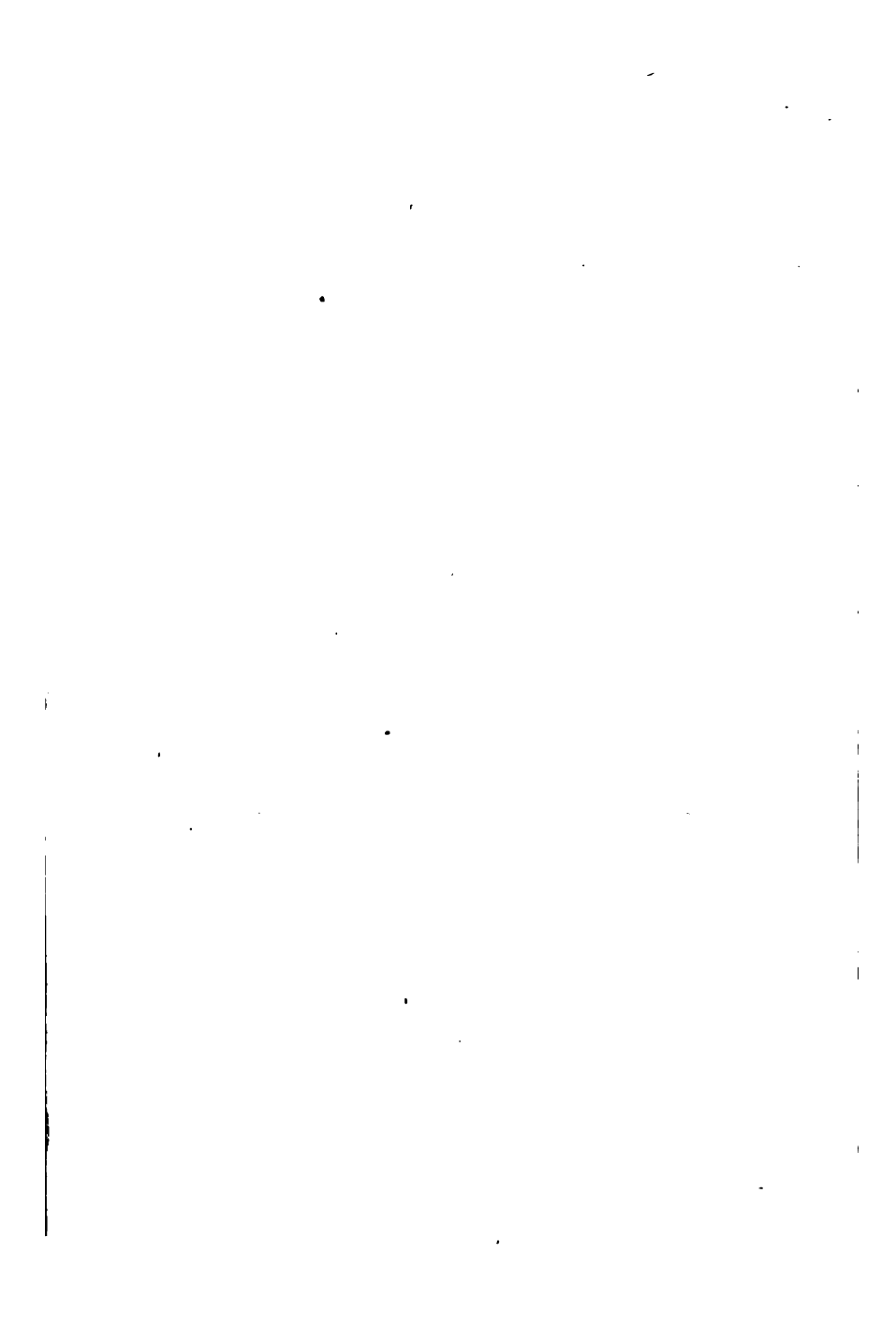
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OUR MUTUAL FRIEND.



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OUR MUTUAL FRIEND.

IN FOUR BOOKS.

BOOK THE THIRD.

A LONG LANE.

CHAPTER I.

LODGERS IN QUEER STREET.

It was a foggy day in London, and the fog was heavy and dark. Animate London, with smarting eyes and irritated lungs, was blinking, wheezing, and choking; inanimate London was a sooty spectre, divided in purpose between being visible and invisible, and so being wholly neither. Gas-lights flared in the shops with a haggard and unblest air, as knowing themselves to be night-creatures that had no business abroad under the sun; while the sun itself, when it was for a few moments dimly indicated through circling eddies of fog, showed as if it had gone out and were collapsing flat and cold. Even in the surrounding country it was a foggy day, but there the fog was gray, whereas in London it was, at about the boundary-line, dark yellow, and a little within it brown, and then browner, and then browner, until at the heart of the City — which call Saint Mary Axe — it was rusty-black. From any point of the high ridge

of land northward, it might have been discerned that the loftiest buildings made an occasional struggle to get their heads above the foggy sea, and especially that the great dome of Saint Paul's seemed to die hard; but this was not perceivable in the streets at their feet, where the whole metropolis was a heap of vapor charged with muffled sound of wheels, and enfolding a gigantic catarrh.

At nine o'clock on such a morning, the place of business of Pubsey and Co. was not the liveliest object even in Saint Mary Axe — which is not a very lively spot — with a sobbing gas-light in the counting-house window, and a burglarious stream of fog creeping in to strangle it through the keyhole of the main door. But the light went out, and the main door opened, and Riah came forth with a bag under his arm.

Almost in the act of coming out at the door, Riah went into the fog, and was lost to the eyes of Saint Mary Axe. But the eyes of this history can follow him westward, by Cornhill, Cheapside, Fleet Street, and the Strand, to Piccadilly and the Albany. Thither he went at his grave and measured pace, staff in hand, skirt at heel; and more than one head, turning to look back at his venerable figure already lost in the mist, supposed it to be some ordinary figure indistinctly seen, which fancy and the fog had worked into that passing likeness.

Arrived at the house in which his master's chambers were on the second floor, Riah proceeded up the stairs, and paused at Fascination Fledgeby's door. Making free with neither bell nor knocker, he struck upon the door with the top of his staff, and, having listened, sat down on the threshold. It was characteristic of his habitual submission, that he sat down on the raw dark stair-

case, as many of his ancestors had probably sat down in dungeons, taking what befell him as it might befall.

After a time, when he had grown so cold as to be faint to blow upon his fingers, he arose and knocked with his staff again, and listened again, and again sat down to wait. Thrice he repeated these actions before his listening ears were greeted by the voice of Fledgeby, calling from his bed, "Hold your row! — I'll come and open the door directly!" But, in lieu of coming directly, he fell into a sweet sleep for some quarter of an hour more, during which added interval Riah sat upon the stairs and waited with perfect patience.

At length the door stood open, and Mr. Fledgeby's retreating drapery plunged into bed again. Following it at a respectful distance, Riah passed into the bed-chamber, where a fire had been sometime lighted, and was burning briskly.

"Why, what time of night do you mean to call it?" inquired Fledgeby, turning away beneath the clothes, and presenting a comfortable rampart of shoulder to the chilled figure of the old man.

"Sir, it is full half-past ten in the morning."

"The deuce it is! Then it must be precious foggy?"

"Very foggy, sir."

"And raw, then?"

"Chill and bitter," said Riah, drawing out a handkerchief, and wiping the moisture from his beard and long gray hair as he stood on the verge of the rug, with his eyes on the acceptable fire.

With a plunge of enjoyment, Fledgeby settled himself afresh.

"Any snow, or sleet, or slush, or anything of that sort?" he asked.

"No, sir, no. Not quite so bad as that. The streets are pretty clean."

"You need n't brag about it," returned Fledgeby, disappointed in his desire to heighten the contrast between his bed and the streets. "But you're always bragging about something. Got the books there?"

"They are here, sir."

"All right. I'll turn the general subject over in my mind for a minute or two, and while I'm about it you can empty your bag and get ready for me."

With another comfortable plunge, Mr. Fledgeby fell asleep again. The old man, having obeyed his directions, sat down on the edge of a chair, and, folding his hands before him, gradually yielded to the influence of the warmth, and dozed. He was roused by Mr. Fledgeby's appearing erect at the foot of the bed, in Turkish slippers, rose-colored Turkish trousers (got cheap from somebody who had cheated some other somebody out of them), and a gown and cap to correspond. In that costume he would have left nothing to be desired, if he had been further fitted out with a bottomless chair, a lantern, and a bunch of matches.

"Now, old'un!" cried Fascination, in his light railery, "what dodgery are you up to next, sitting there with your eyes shut? You ain't asleep. Catch a weasel at it, and catch a Jew!"

"Truly, sir, I fear I nodded," said the old man.

"Not you!" returned Fledgeby, with a cunning look. "A telling move with a good many, I dare say, but it won't put *me* off my guard. Not a bad notion though, if you want to look indifferent in driving a bargain. Oh, you are a dodger!"

The old man shook his head, gently repudiating the

imputation, and suppressed a sigh, and moved to the table at which Mr. Fledgeby was now pouring out for himself a cup of steaming and fragrant coffee from a pot that had stood ready on the hob.* It was an edifying spectacle, — the young man in his easy-chair taking his coffee, and the old man with his gray head bent, standing awaiting his pleasure.

“Now!” said Fledgeby. “Fork out your balances in hand, and prove by figures how you make it out that it ain’t more. First of all, light that candle.”

Riah obeyed, and then taking a bag from his breast, and referring to the sum in the accounts for which they made him responsible, told it out upon the table. Fledgeby told it again with great care, and rang every sovereign.

“I suppose,” he said, taking one up to eye it closely, “you have n’t been lightening any of these; but it’s a trade of your people’s, you know. *You* understand what sweating a pound means; don’t you?”

“Much as you do, sir,” returned the old man, with his hands under opposite cuffs of his loose sleeves, as he stood at the table, deferentially observant of the master’s face. “May I take the liberty to say something?”

“You may,” Fledgeby graciously conceded.

“Do you not, sir — without intending it — of a surety without intending it — sometimes mingle the character I fairly earn in your employment, with the character which it is your policy that I should bear?”

“I don’t find it worth my while to cut things so fine as to go into the inquiry,” Fascination coolly answered.

“Not in justice?”

“Bother justice!” said Fledgeby.

“Not in generosity?”

"Jews and generosity!" said Fledgeby. "That's a good connection! Bring out your vouchers, and don't talk Jerusalem palaver."

The vouchers were produced, and for the next half-hour Mr. Fledgeby concentrated his sublime attention on them. They and the accounts were all found correct, and the books and the papers resumed their places in the bag.

"Next," said Fledgeby, "concerning that bill-broking branch of the business; the branch I like best. What queer bills are to be bought, and at what prices? You have got your list of what's in the market?"

"Sir, a long list," replied Riah, taking out a pocket-book, and selecting from its contents a folded paper, which, being unfolded, became a sheet of foolscap covered with close writing.

"Whew!" whistled Fledgeby, as he took it in his hand. "Queer Street is full of lodgers just at present! These are to be disposed of in parcels, are they?"

"In parcels as set forth," returned the old man, looking over his master's shoulder; "or the lump."

"Half the lump will be waste-paper, one knows beforehand," said Fledgeby. "Can you get it at waste-paper price? That's the question."

Riah shook his head, and Fledgeby cast his small eyes down the list. They presently began to twinkle, and he no sooner became conscious of their twinkling, than he looked up over his shoulder at the grave face above him, and moved to the chimney-piece. Making a desk of it, he stood there with his back to the old man, warming his knees, perusing the list at his leisure, and often returning to some lines of it, as though they were particularly interesting. At those times he glanced in the chim-

ney-glass to see what note the old man took of him. He took none that could be detected, but, aware of his employer's suspicions, stood with his eyes on the ground.

Mr. Fledgeby was thus amiably engaged when a step was heard at the outer door, and the door was heard to open hastily. "Hark! That's your doing, you Pump of Israel," said Fledgeby; "you can't have shut it." Then the step was heard within, and the voice of Mr. Alfred Lamble called aloud, "Are you anywhere here, Fledgeby?" To which Fledgeby, after cautioning Riah in a low voice to take his cue as it should be given him, replied, "Here I am!" and opened his bedroom door.

"Come in!" said Fledgeby. "This gentleman is only Pubsey and Co. of Saint Mary Axe, that I am trying to make terms for an unfortunate friend with in a matter of some dishonored bills. But really Pubsey and Co. are so strict with their debtors, and so hard to move, that I seem to be wasting my time. Can't I make *any* terms with you on my friend's part, Mr. Riah?"

"I am but the representative of another, sir," returned the Jew in a low voice. "I do as I am bidden by my principal. It is not my capital that is invested in the business. It is not my profit that arises therefrom."

"Ha ha!" laughed Fledgeby. "Lamble?"

"Ha ha!" laughed Lamble. "Yes. Of course. We know."

"Devilish good, ain't it, Lamble?" said Fledgeby, unspeakably amused by his hidden joke.

"Always the same, always the same!" said Lamble. "Mr." —

"Riah, Pubsey and Co., Saint Mary Axe," Fledgeby put in, as he wiped away the tears that trickled from his eyes, so rare was his enjoyment of his secret joke.

"Mr. Riah is bound to observe the invariable forms for such cases made and provided," said Lammle.

"He is only the representative of another!" cried Fledgeby. "Does as he is told by his principal! Not his capital that's invested in the business. Oh, that's good! Ha ha ha ha!" Mr. Lammle joined in the laugh and looked knowing; and the more he did both, the more exquisite the secret joke became for Mr. Fledgeby.

"However," said that fascinating gentleman, wiping his eyes again, "if we go on in this way, we shall seem to be almost making game of Mr. Riah, or of Pubsey and Co., Saint Mary Axe, or of somebody; which is far from our intention. Mr. Riah, if you would have the kindness to step into the next room for a few moments while I speak with Mr. Lammle here, I should like to try to make terms with you once again before you go."

The old man, who had never raised his eyes during the whole transaction of Mr. Fledgeby's joke, silently bowed and passed out by the door which Fledgeby opened for him. Having closed it on him, Fledgeby returned to Lammle, standing with his back to the bedroom fire, with one hand under his coat-skirts, and all his whiskers in the other.

"Halloa!" said Fledgeby. "There's something wrong!"

"How do you know it?" demanded Lammle.

"Because you show it," replied Fledgeby in unintentional rhyme.

"Well then; there is," said Lammle; "there is something wrong; the whole thing's wrong."

"I say!" remonstrated Fascination very slowly, and sitting down with his hands on his knees to stare at his glowering friend with his back to the fire.

"I tell you, Fledgeby," repeated Lammle, with a sweep of his right arm, "the whole thing 's wrong. The game 's up."

"What game 's up?" demanded Fledgeby, as slowly as before, and more sternly.

"THE game. OUR game. Read that."

Fledgeby took a note from his extended hand and read it aloud. "Alfred Lammle, Esquire. Sir: Allow Mrs. Podsnap and myself to express our united sense of the polite attentions of Mrs. Alfred Lammle and yourself towards our daughter, Georgiana. Allow us also wholly to reject them for the future, and to communicate our final desire that the two families may become entire strangers. I have the honor to be, Sir, your most obedient and very humble servant, JOHN PODSNAP."

Fledgeby looked at the three blank sides of this note, quite as long and earnestly as at the first expressive side, and then looked at Lammle, who responded with another extensive sweep of his right arm.

"Whose doing is this?" said Fledgeby.

"Impossible to imagine," said Lammle.

"Perhaps," suggested Fledgeby, after reflecting with a very discontented brow, "somebody has been giving you a bad character."

"Or you," said Lammle, with a deeper frown.

Mr. Fledgeby appeared to be on the verge of some mutinous expressions, when his hand happened to touch his nose. A certain remembrance connected with that feature operating as a timely warning, he took it thoughtfully between his thumb and forefinger, and pondered; Lammle meanwhile eyeing him with furtive eyes.

"Well!" said Fledgeby. "This won't improve with talking about. If we ever find out who did it, we'll

mark that person. There's nothing more to be said, except that you undertook to do what circumstances prevent your doing."

"And that you undertook to do what you might have done by this time, if you had made a prompter use of circumstances," snarled Lamble.

"Hah! That," remarked Fledgeby, with his hands in the Turkish trousers, "is matter of opinion."

"Mr. Fledgeby," said Lamble, in a bullying tone, "am I to understand that you in any way reflect upon me, or hint dissatisfaction with me, in this affair?"

"No," said Fledgeby; "provided you have brought my promissory note in your pocket, and now hand it over."

Lamble produced it, not without reluctance. Fledgeby looked at it, identified it, twisted it up, and threw it into the fire. They both looked at it as it blazed, went out, and flew in feathery ash up the chimney.

"Now, Mr. Fledgeby," said Lamble, as before; "am I to understand that you in any way reflect upon me, or hint dissatisfaction with me, in this affair?"

"No," said Fledgeby.

"Finally and unreservedly no?"

"Yes."

"Fledgeby, my hand."

Mr. Fledgeby took it, saying, "And if we ever find out who did this, we'll mark that person. And in the most friendly manner, let me mention one thing more. I don't know what your circumstances are, and I don't ask. You have sustained a loss here. Many men are liable to be involved at times, and you may be, or you may not be. But whatever you do, Lamble, don't—don't—don't, I beg of you—ever fall into the hands of

Pubsey and Co. in the next room, for they are grinders. Regular flayers and grinders, my dear Lammle," repeated Fledgeby with a peculiar relish, "and they'll skin you by the inch, from the nape of your neck to the sole of your foot, and grind every inch of your skin to tooth powder. You have seen what Mr. Riah is. Never fall into his hands, Lammle, I beg of you as a friend!"

Mr. Lammle, disclosing some alarm at the solemnity of this affectionate adjuration, demanded why the devil he ever should fall into the hands of Pubsey and Co.?

"To confess the fact, I was made a little uneasy," said the candid Fledgeby, "by the manner in which that Jew looked at you when he heard your name. I did n't like his eye. But it may have been the heated fancy of a friend. Of course if you are sure that you have no personal security out, which you may not be quite equal to meeting, and which can have got into his hands, it must have been fancy. Still, I did n't like his eye."

The brooding Lammle, with certain white dints coming and going in his palpitating nose, looked as if some tormenting imp were pinching it. Fledgeby, watching him with a twitch in his mean face which did duty there for a smile, looked very like the tormentor who was pinching.

"But I must n't keep him waiting too long," said Fledgeby, "or he'll revenge it on my unfortunate friend. How's your very clever and agreeable wife? She knows we have broken down?"

"I showed her the letter."

"Very much surprised?" asked Fledgeby.

"I think she would have been more so," answered Lammle, "if there had been more go in *you*."

"Oh! — She lays it upon me, then?"

"Mr. Fledgeby, I will not have my words misconstrued."

"Don't break out, Lammle," urged Fledgeby, in a submissive tone, "because there's no occasion. I only asked a question. Then she don't lay it upon me? To ask another question."

"No, sir."

"Very good," said Fledgeby, plainly seeing that she did. "My compliments to her. Good-bye!"

They shook hands, and Lammle strode out pondering. Fledgeby saw him into the fog, and, returning to the fire and musing with his face to it, stretched the legs of the rose-colored Turkish trousers wide apart, and meditatively bent his knees, as if he were going down upon them.

"You have a pair of whiskers, Lammle, which I never liked," murmured Fledgeby, "and which money can't produce; you are boastful of your manners and your conversation; you wanted to pull my nose, and you have let me in for a failure, and your wife says I am the cause of it. I'll bowl you down. I will, though I have no whiskers" — here he rubbed the places where they were due — "and no manners, and no conversation!"

Having thus relieved his noble mind, he collected the legs of the Turkish trousers, straightened himself on his knees, and called out to Riah in the next room, "Halloa, you sir!" At sight of the old man reëntering with a gentleness monstrously in contrast with the character he had given him, Mr. Fledgeby was so tickled again, that he exclaimed, laughing, "Good! Good! Upon my soul it is uncommon good!"

"Now, old 'un," proceeded Fledgeby, when he had had his laugh out, "you'll buy up these lots that I mark with

my pencil — there's a tick there, and a tick there, and a tick there — and I wager twopence you'll afterwards go on squeezing those Christians like the Jew you are. Now, next you'll want a check — or you'll say you want it, though you've capital enough somewhere, if one only knew where, but you'd be peppered and salted and grilled on a gridiron before you'd own to it — and that check I'll write."

When he had unlocked a drawer and taken a key from it to open another drawer, in which was another key that opened another drawer, in which was another key that opened another drawer, in which was the check book; and when he had written the check; and when, reversing the key and drawer process, he had placed his check book in safety again; he beckoned the old man, with the folded check, to come and take it.

"Old'un," said Fledgeby, when the Jew had put it in his pocket-book, and was putting that in the breast of his outer garment; "so much at present for my affairs. Now a word about affairs that are not exactly mine. Where is she?"

"With his hand not yet withdrawn from the breast of his garment, Riah started and paused.

"Oho!" said Fledgeby. "Did n't expect it! Where have you hidden her?"

Showing that he was taken by surprise, the old man looked at his master with some passing confusion, which the master highly enjoyed.

"Is she in the house I pay rent and taxes for in Saint Mary Axe?" demanded Fledgeby.

"No, sir."

"Is she in your garden up atop of that house — gone up to be dead, or whatever the game is?" asked Fledgeby.

"No, sir."

"Where is she then?"

Riah bent his eyes upon the ground, as if considering whether he could answer the question without breach of faith, and then silently raised them to Fledgeby's face, as if he could not.

"Come!" said Fledgeby. "I won't press that just now. But I want to know this, and I will know this, mind you. What are you up to?"

The old man, with an apologetic action of his head and hands, as not comprehending the master's meaning, addressed to him a look of mute inquiry.

"You can't be a gallivanting dodger," said Fledgeby, "for you're a 'regular pity the sorrows,' you know — if you *do* know any Christian rhyme — 'whose trembling limbs have borne him to' — et cetera. You're one of the Patriarchs; you're a shaky old card; and you can't be in love with this Lizzie?"

"Oh, sir!" expostulated Riah. "Oh, sir, sir, sir!"

"Then why," retorted Fledgeby, with some slight tinge of a blush, "don't you out with your reason for having your spoon in the soup at all?"

"Sir, I will tell you the truth. But (your pardon for the stipulation) it is in sacred confidence; it is strictly upon honor."

"Honor too!" cried Fledgeby, with a mocking lip. "Honor among Jews. Well. Cut away."

"It is upon honor, sir?" the other still stipulated, with respectful firmness.

"Oh, certainly. Honor bright," said Fledgeby.

The old man, never bidden to sit down, stood with an earnest hand laid on the back of the young man's easy-chair. The young man sat looking at the fire with a face

of listening curiosity, ready to check him off and catch him tripping.

“Cut away,” said Fledgeby. “Start with your motive.”

“Sir, I have no motive but to help the helpless.”

Mr. Fledgeby could only express the feelings to which this incredible statement gave rise in his breast, by a prodigiously long derisive sniff.

“How I came to know, and much to esteem and to respect, this damsel, I mentioned when you saw her in my poor garden on the house-top,” said the Jew.

“Did you?” said Fledgeby, distrustfully. “Well, perhaps you did, though.”

“The better I knew her, the more interest I felt in her fortunes. They gathered to a crisis. I found her beset by a selfish and ungrateful brother, beset by an unacceptable wooer, beset by the snares of a more powerful lover, beset by the wiles of her own heart.”

“She took to one of the chaps then?”

“Sir, it was only natural that she should incline towards him, for he had many and great advantages. But he was not of her station, and to marry her was not in his mind. Perils were closing round her, and the circle was fast darkening, when I—being as you have said, sir, too old and broken to be suspected of any feeling for her but a father’s—stepped in, and counselled flight. I said, ‘My daughter, there are times of moral danger when the hardest virtuous resolution to form is flight, and when the most heroic bravery is flight.’ She answered, she had had this in her thoughts; but whither to fly without help she knew not, and there were none to help her. I showed her there was one to help her, and it was I. And she is gone.”

"What did you do with her?" asked Fledgeby, feeling his cheek.

"I placed her," said the old man, "at a distance;" with a grave smooth outward sweep from one another of his two open hands at arm's length; "at a distance — among certain of our people, where her industry would serve her, and where she could hope to exercise it unassailed from any quarter."

Fledgeby's eyes had come from the fire to notice the action of his hands when he said "at a distance." Fledgeby now tried (very unsuccessfully) to imitate that action, as he shook his head and said, "Placed her in that direction, did you? Oh, you circular old dodger!"

With one hand across his breast and the other on the easy-chair, Riah, without justifying himself, waited for further questioning. But, that it was hopeless to question him on that one reserved point, Fledgeby, with his small eyes too near together, saw full well.

"Lizzie," said Fledgeby, looking at the fire again, and then looking up. "Humph, Lizzie. You did n't tell me the other name in your garden atop of the house. I'll be more communicative with you. The other name's Hexam."

Riah bent his head in assent.

"Look here, you sir," said Fledgeby. "I have a notion I know something of the inveigling chap, the powerful one. Has he anything to do with law?"

"Nominally, I believe it his calling."

"I thought so. Name anything like Lightwood?"

"Sir, not at all like."

"Come, old 'um," said Fledgeby, meeting his eyes with a wink, "say the name."

"Wrayburn."

"By Jupiter!" cried Fledgeby. "That one, is it? I thought it might be the other, but I never dreamt of that one! I should n't object to your baulking either of the pair, dodger, for they are both conceited enough; but that one is as cool a customer as ever I met with. Got a beard besides, and presumes upon it. Well done, old 'un! Go on and prosper!"

Brightened by this unexpected commendation, Riah asked were there more instructions for him?

"No," said Fledgeby, "you may toddle now, Judah, and grope about on the orders you have got." Dismissed with those pleasing words, the old man took his broad hat and staff, and left the great presence; more as if he were some superior creature benignantly blessing Mr. Fledgeby, than the poor dependant on whom he set his foot. Left alone, Mr. Fledgeby locked his outer door, and came back to his fire.

"Well done you!" - said Fascination to himself. "Slow, you may be; sure, you are!" This he twice or thrice repeated with much complacency, as he again dispersed the legs of the Turkish trousers and bent the knees.

"A tidy shot that, I flatter myself," he then soliloquized. "And a Jew brought down with it! Now, when I heard the story told at Lammle's, I did n't make a jump at Riah. Not a bit of it; I got at him by degrees." Herein he was quite accurate; it being his habit, not to jump, or leap, or make an upward spring, at anything in life, but to crawl at everything.

"I got at him," pursued Fledgeby, feeling for his whisker, "by degrees. If your Lammles or your Lightwoods had got at him anyhow, they would have asked him the question whether he had n't something to do

with that gal's disappearance. I knew a better way of going to work. Having got behind the hedge, and put him in the light, I took a shot at him and brought him down plump. Oh! It don't count for much, being a Jew, in a match against *me*."

Another dry twist in place of a smile, made his face crooked here.

"As to Christians," proceeded Fledgeby, "look out, fellow-Christians, particularly you that lodge in Queer Street! I have got the run of Queer Street now, and you shall see some games there. To work a lot of power over you and you not know it, knowing as you think yourselves, would be almost worth laying out money upon. But when it comes to squeezing a profit out of you into the bargain, it's something like!"

With this apostrophe Mr. Fledgeby appropriately proceeded to divest himself of his Turkish garments, and invest himself with Christian attire. Pending which operation, and his morning ablutions, and his anointing of himself with the last infallible preparation for the production of luxuriant and glossy hair upon the human countenance (quacks being the only sages he believed in besides usurers), the murky fog closed about him and shut him up in his sooty embrace. If it had never let him out any more, the world would have had no irreparable loss, but could have easily replaced him from its stock on hand.

CHAPTER II.

A RESPECTED FRIEND IN A NEW ASPECT.

IN the evening of this same foggy day when the yellow window-blind of Pubsey and Co. was drawn down upon the day's work, Riah the Jew once more came forth into Saint Mary Axe. But this time he carried no bag, and was not bound on his master's affairs. He passed over London Bridge, and returned to the Middlesex shore by that of Westminster, and so, ever wading through the fog, waded to the doorstep of the dolls' dressmaker.

Miss Wren expected him. He could see her through the window by the light of her low fire — carefully banked up with damp cinders that it might last the longer and waste the less when she was out — sitting waiting for him in her bonnet. His tap at the glass roused her from the musing solitude in which she sat, and she came to the door to open it; aiding her steps with a little crutch-stick.

“Good evening, godmother!” said Miss Jenny Wren.

The old man laughed, and gave her his arm to lean on.

“Won't you come in and warm yourself, godmother?” asked Miss Jenny Wren.

“Not if you are ready, Cinderella, my dear.”

“Well!” exclaimed Miss Wren, delighted. “Now you ARE a clever old boy! If we gave prizes at this

establishment (but we only keep blanks), you should have the first silver medal, for taking me up so quick." As she spake thus, Miss Wren removed the key of the house-door from the keyhole and put it in her pocket, and then bustlingly closed the door, and tried it as they both stood on the step. Satisfied that her dwelling was safe, she drew one hand through the old man's arm and prepared to ply her crutch-stick with the other. But the key was an instrument of such gigantic proportions, that before they started Riah proposed to carry it.

"No, no, no! I'll carry it myself," returned Miss Wren. "I'm awfully lopsided, you know, and stowed down in my pocket it'll trim the ship. To let you into a secret, godmother, I wear my pocket on my high side o' purpose."

With that they began their plodding through the fog.

"Yes, it was truly sharp of you, godmother," resumed Miss Wren with great approbation, "to understand me. But, you see, you *are* so like the fairy godmother in the bright little books! You look so unlike the rest of people, and so much as if you had changed yourself into that shape, just this moment, with some benevolent object. Boh!" cried Miss Jenny, putting her face close to the old man's. "I can see your features, godmother, behind the beard."

"Does the fancy go to my changing other objects too, Jenny?"

"Ah! That it does! If you'd only borrow my stick and tap this piece of pavement — this dirty stone that my foot taps — it would start up a coach and six. I say! Let's believe so!"

"With all my heart," replied the good old man.

"And I'll tell you what I must ask you to do, god-

mother. I must ask you to be so kind as give my child a tap, and change him altogether. O my child has been such a bad, bad child of late! It worries me nearly out of my wits. Not done a stroke of work these ten days. Has had the horrors, too, and fancied that four copper-colored men in red wanted to throw him into a fiery furnace."

"But that's dangerous, Jenny."

"Dangerous, godmother? My bad child is always dangerous, more or less. He might" — here the little creature glanced back over her shoulder at the sky — "be setting the house on fire at this present moment. I don't know who would have a child, for my part! It's no use shaking him. I have shaken him till I have made myself giddy. 'Why don't you mind your Commandments and honor your parent, you naughty old boy?' I said to him all the time. But he only whimpered and stared at me."

"What shall be changed, after him?" asked Riah in a compassionately playful voice.

"Upon my word, godmother, I am afraid I must be selfish next, and get you to set me right in the back and the legs. It's a little thing to you with your power, godmother, but it's a great deal to poor weak aching me."

There was no querulous complaining in the words, but they were not the less touching for that.

"And then?"

"Yes, and then — *you* know, godmother. We'll both jump up into the coach and six and go to Lizzie. That reminds me, godmother, to ask you a serious question. You are as wise as wise can be (having been brought up by the fairies), and you can tell me this: Is it better to have had a good thing and lost it, or never to have had it?"

"Explain, god-daughter."

"I feel so much more solitary and helpless without Lizzie now, than I used to feel before I knew her." (Tears were in her eyes as she said so.)

"Some beloved companionship fades out of most lives, my dear," said the Jew, — "that of a wife, and a fair daughter, and a son of promise, has faded out of my own life — but the happiness was."

"Ah!" said Miss Wren thoughtfully, by no means convinced, and chopping the exclamation with that sharp little hatchet of hers; "then I tell you what change I think you had better begin with, godmother. You had better change Is into Was and Was into Is, and keep them so."

"Would that suit your case? Would you not be always in pain then?" asked the old man tenderly.

"Right!" exclaimed Miss Wren with another chop. "You have changed me wiser, godmother. Not," she added with the quaint hitch of her chin and eyes, "that you need be a very wonderful godmother to do that deed."

Thus conversing, and having crossed Westminster Bridge, they traversed the ground that Riah had lately traversed, and new ground likewise; for, when they had recrossed the Thames by way of London Bridge, they struck down by the river and held their still foggier course that way.

But previously, as they were going along, Jenny twisted her venerable friend aside to a brilliantly lighted toy-shop window, and said: "Now look at 'em! All my work!"

This referred to a dazzling semicircle of dolls in all the colors of the rainbow, who were dressed for presen-

tation at court, for going to balls, for going out driving, for going out on horseback, for going out walking, for going to get married, for going to help other dolls to get married, for all the gay events of life.

"Pretty, pretty, pretty!" said the old man with a clap of his hands. "Most elegant taste!"

"Glad you like 'em," returned Miss Wren, loftily. "But the fun is, godmother, how I make the great ladies try my dresses on. Though it's the hardest part of my business, and would be, even if my back were not bad and my legs queer."

He looked at her as not understanding what she said.

"Bless you, godmother," said Miss Wren, "I have to scud about town at all hours. If it was only sitting at my bench, cutting out and sewing, it would be comparatively easy work; but it's the trying on by the great ladies that takes it out of me."

"How, the trying-on?" asked Riah.

"What a mooney godmother you are, after all!" returned Miss Wren. "Look here. There's a Drawing Room, or a grand day in the Park, or a Show, or a Fête, or what you like. Very well. I squeeze among the crowd, and I look about me. When I see a great lady very suitable for my business, I say, 'You'll do, my dear!' and I take particular notice of her, and run home and cut her out and baste her. Then another day, I come scudding back again to try on, and then I take particular notice of her again. Sometimes she plainly seems to say, 'How that little creature is staring!' and sometimes likes it and sometimes don't, but much more often yes than no. All the time I am only saying to myself, 'I must hollow out a bit here; I must slope away there;' and I am making a perfect slave of her,

with making her try on my doll's dress. Evening parties are severer work for me, because there's only a doorway for a full view, and what with hobbling among the wheels of the carriages and the legs of the horses, I fully expect to be run over some night. However, there I have 'em, just the same. When they go bobbing into the hall from the carriage, and catch a glimpse of my little physiognomy poked out from behind a policeman's cape in the rain, I dare say they think I am wondering and admiring with all my eyes and heart, but they little think they're only working for my dolls! There was Lady Belinda Whitrose. I made her do double duty in one night. I said when she came out of the carriage, 'You'll do, my dear!' and I ran straight home and cut her out and basted her. Back I came again, and waited behind the men that called the carriages. Very bad night too. At last, 'Lady Belinda Whitrose's carriage! Lady Belinda Whitrose coming down!' And I made her try on — oh! and take pains about it too — before she got seated. That's Lady Belinda hanging up by the waist, much too near the gas-light for a wax one, with her toes turned in."

When they had plodded on for some time nigh the river, Riah asked the way to a certain tavern called the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters. Following the directions he received, they arrived, after two or three puzzled stoppages for consideration, and some uncertain looking about them, at the door of Miss Abbey Potterson's dominions. A peep through the glass portion of the door revealed to them the glories of the bar, and Miss Abbey herself seated in state on her snug throne, reading the newspaper. To whom, with deference, they presented themselves.

Taking her eyes off her newspaper, and pausing with a suspended expression of countenance, as if she must finish the paragraph in hand before undertaking any other business whatever, Miss Abbey demanded, with some slight asperity: "Now then, what's for you?"

"Could we see Miss Potterson?" asked the old man, uncovering his head.

"You not only could, but you can and you do," replied the hostess.

"Might we speak with you, madam?"

By this time Miss Abbey's eyes had possessed themselves of the small figure of Miss Jenny Wren. For the closer observation of which, Miss Abbey laid aside her newspaper, rose, and, looked over the half-door of the bar. The crutch-stick seemed to entreat for its owner leave to come in and rest by the fire; so Miss Abbey opened the half-door, and said, as though replying to the crutch-stick: "Yes, come in and rest by the fire."

"My name is Riah," said the old man, with courteous action, "and my avocation is in London City. This, my young companion" —

"Stop a bit," interposed Miss Wren. "I'll give the lady my card." She produced it from her pocket with an air, after struggling with the gigantic door-key which had got upon the top of it and kept it down. Miss Abbey, with manifest tokens of astonishment, took the diminutive document, and found it to run concisely thus: —

MISS JENNY WREN,
DOLLS' DRESSMAKER.

Dolls attended at their own residences.

"Lud!" exclaimed Miss Potterson, staring. And dropped the card.

"We take the liberty of coming, my young companion and I, madam," said Riah, "on behalf of Lizzie Hexam."

Miss Potterson was stooping to loosen the bonnet-strings of the dolls' dressmaker. She looked round rather angrily, and said, — "Lizzie Hexam is a very proud young woman."

"She would be so proud," returned Riah, dexterously, "to stand well in your good opinion, that before she quitted London for" —

"For where, in the name of the Cape of Good Hope?" asked Miss Potterson, as though supposing her to have emigrated.

"For the country," was the cautious answer, — "she made us promise to come and show you a paper, which she left in our hands for that special purpose. I am an unserviceable friend of hers, who began to know her after her departure from this neighborhood. She has been for some time living with my young companion, and has been a helpful and a comfortable friend to her. Much needed, madam," he added, in a lower voice. "Believe me; if you knew all, much needed."

"I can believe that," said Miss Abbey, with a softening glance at the little creature.

"And if it's proud to have a heart that never hardens, and a temper that never tires, and a touch that never hurts," Miss Jenny struck in, flushed, "she is proud. And if it's not, she is NOT."

Her set purpose of contradicting Miss Abbey point blank, was so far from offending that dread authority, as to elicit a gracious smile. "You do right, child,"

said Miss Abbey, "to speak well of those who deserve well of you."

"Right or wrong," muttered Miss Wren, inaudibly, with a visible hitch of her chin, "I mean to do it, and you may make up your mind to *that*, old lady."

"Here is the paper, madam," said the Jew, delivering into Miss Potterson's hands the original document drawn up by Rokesmith, and signed by Riderhood. "Will you please to read it?"

"But first of all," said Miss Abbey, "did you ever taste shrub, child?"

Miss Wren shook her head.

"Should you like to?"

"Should if it's good," returned Miss Wren.

"You shall try. And, if you find it good, I'll mix some for you with hot water. Put your poor little feet on the fender. It's a cold, cold night, and the fog clings so." As Miss Abbey helped her to turn her chair, her loosened bonnet dropped on the floor. "Why, what lovely hair!" cried Miss Abbey. "And enough to make wigs for all the dolls in the world. What a quantity!"

"Call *that* a quantity?" returned Miss Wren. "Poof! What do you say to the rest of it?" As she spoke, she untied a band, and the golden stream fell over herself and over the chair, and flowed down to the ground. Miss Abbey's admiration seemed to increase her perplexity. She beckoned the Jew towards her, as she reached down the shrub-bottle from its niche, and whispered, —

"Child, or woman?"

"Child in years," was the answer; "woman in self-reliance and trial."

"You are talking about Me, good people," thought Miss Jenny, sitting in her golden bower, warming her

feet. "I can't hear what you say, but *I* know your tricks and your manners!"

The shrub, when tasted from a spoon, perfectly harmonizing with Miss Jenny's palate, a judicious amount was mixed by Miss Potterson's skilful hands, whereof Riah too partook. After this preliminary, Miss Abbey read the document; and, as often as she raised her eyebrows in so doing, the watchful Miss Jenny accompanied the action with an expressive and emphatic sip of the shrub and water.

"As far as this goes," said Miss Abbey Potterson, when she had read it several times, and thought about it, "it proves (what did n't much need proving) that Rogue Riderhood is a villain. I have my doubts whether he is not the villain who solely did the deed; but I have no expectation of those doubts ever being cleared up now. I believe I did Lizzie's father wrong, but never Lizzie's self; because when things were at the worst I trusted her, had perfect confidence in her, and tried to persuade her to come to me for a refuge. I am very sorry to have done a man wrong, particularly when it can't be undone. Be kind enough to let Lizzie know what I say; not forgetting that if she will come to the Porters, after all, bygones being bygones, she will find a home at the Porters, and a friend at the Porters. She knows Miss Abbey of old, remind her, and she knows what-like the home, and what-like the friend, is likely to turn out. I am generally short and sweet — or short and sour, according as it may be and as opinions vary" — remarked Miss Abbey, "and, that's about all I have got to say, and enough too."

But before the shrub and water were sipped out, Miss Abbey bethought herself that she would like to keep a

copy of the paper by her. "It's not long, sir," said she to Riah, "and perhaps you would n't mind just jotting it down." The old man willingly put on his spectacles, and, standing at the little desk in the corner where Miss Abbey filed her receipts and kept her sample phials (customers' scores were interdicted by the strict administration of the Porters), wrote out the copy in a fair round character. As he stood there, doing his methodical penmanship, his ancient scribelike figure intent upon the work, and the little dolls' dressmaker sitting in her golden bower before the fire, Miss Abbey had her doubts whether she had not dreamed those two rare figures into the bar of the Six Jolly Fellowships, and might not wake with a nod next moment and find them gone.

Miss Abbey had twice made the experiment of shutting her eyes and opening them again, still finding the figures there, when, dreamlike, a confused hubbub arose in the public room. As she started up, and they all three looked at one another, it became a noise of clamoring voices and of the stir of feet; then all the windows were heard to be hastily thrown up, and shouts and cries came floating into the house from the river. A moment more, and Bob Gliddery came clattering along the passage, with the noise of all the nails in his boots condensed into every separate nail.

"What is it?" asked Miss Abbey.

"It's summut run down in the fog, ma'am," answered Bob. "There's ever so many people in the river."

"Tell 'em to put on all the kettles!" cried Miss Abbey. "See that the boiler's full. Get a bath out. Hang some blankets to the fire. Heat some stone bottles. Have your senses about you, you girl down-stairs, and use 'em."

While Miss Abbey partly delivered these directions to Bob — whom she seized by the hair, and whose head she knocked against the wall, as a general injunction to vigilance and presence of mind — and partly hailed the kitchen with them — the company in the public room, jostling one another, rushed out to the causeway, and the outer noise increased.

“Come and look,” said Miss Abbey to her visitors. They all three hurried to the vacated public room, and passed by one of the windows into the wooden verandah overhanging the river.

“Does anybody down there know what has happened?” demanded Miss Abbey, in her voice of authority.

“It’s a steamer, Miss Abbey,” cried one blurred figure in the fog.

“It always *is* a steamer, Miss Abbey,” cried another.

“Them’s her lights, Miss Abbey, wot you see a-blinking yonder,” cried another.

“She’s a-blowing off her steam, Miss Abbey, and that’s what makes the fog and the noise worse, don’t you see?” explained another.

Boats were putting off, torches were lighting up, people were rushing tumultuously to the water’s edge. Some man fell in with a splash, and was pulled out again with a roar of laughter. The drags were called for. A cry for the life-buoy passed from mouth to mouth. It was impossible to make out what was going on upon the river, for every boat that put off sculled into the fog and was lost to view at a boat’s length. Nothing was clear but that the unpopular steamer was assailed with reproaches on all sides. She was the Murderer, bound for Gallows Bay; she was the Manslaughterer, bound for Penal Set-

tlement; her captain ought to be tried for his life; her crew ran down men in row-boats with a relish; she mashed up Thames lightermen with her paddles; she fired property with her funnels; she always was, and she always would be, wreaking destruction upon somebody or something, after the manner of all her kind. The whole bulk of the fog teemed with such taunts, uttered in tones of universal hoarseness. All the while, the steamer's lights moved spectrally a very little, as she lay-to, waiting the upshot of whatever accident had happened. Now, she began burning blue-lights. These made a luminous patch about her, as if she had set the fog on fire, and in the patch — the cries changing their note, and becoming more fitful and more excited — shadows of men and boats could be seen moving, while voices shouted, —“ There !” “ There again !” “ A couple more strokes ahead !” “ Hurrah !” “ Look out !” “ Hold on !” “ Haul in !” and the like. Lastly, with a few tumbling clots of blue fire, the night closed in dark again, the wheels of the steamer were heard revolving, and her lights glided smoothly away in the direction of the sea.

It appeared to Miss Abbey and her two companions that a considerable time had been thus occupied. There was now as eager a set towards the shore beneath the house as there had been from it; and it was only on the first boat of the rush coming in that it was known what had occurred.

“ If that 's Tom Tootle,” Miss Abbey made proclamation, in her most commanding tones, “ let him instantly come underneath here.”

The submissive Tom complied, attended by a crowd.

“ What is it, Tootle ?” demanded Miss Abbey.

“ It's a foreign steamer, miss, run down a wherry.”

CHAPTER III.

THE SAME RESPECTED FRIEND IN MORE ASPECTS
THAN ONE.

IN sooth, it is Riderhood and no other, or it is the outer husk and shell of Riderhood and no other, that is borne into Miss Abbey's first-floor bedroom. Supple to twist and turn as the Rogue has ever been, he is sufficiently rigid now; and not without much shuffling of attendant feet, and tilting of his bier this way and that way, and peril even of his sliding off it and being tumbled in a heap over the balustrades, can he be got up-stairs.

"Fetch a doctor," quoth Miss Abbey. And then, "Fetch his daughter." On both of which errands, quick messengers depart.

The doctor-seeking messenger meets the doctor half-way, coming under convoy of police. Doctor examines the dank carcase, and pronounces, not hopefully, that it is worth while trying to reanimate the same. All the best means are at once in action, and everybody present lends a hand, and a heart and soul. No one has the least regard for the man; with them all, he has been an object of avoidance, suspicion, and aversion; but the spark of life within him is curiously separable from himself now, and they have a deep interest in it, probably because it is life, and they are living and must die.

In answer to the doctor's inquiry how did it happen, and was any one to blame, Tom Tootle gives in his ver-

dict, unavoidable accident and no one to blame but the sufferer. "He was slinking about in his boat," says Tom, "which slinking were, not to speak ill of the dead, the manner of the man, when he come right athwart the steamer's bows and she cut him in two." Mr. Tootle is so far figurative, touching the dismemberment, as that he means the boat, and not the man. For, the man lies whole before them.

Captain Joey, the bottle-nosed regular customer in the glazed hat, is a pupil of the much-respected old school, and (having insinuated himself into the chamber, in the execution of the important service of carrying the drowned man's neck-kerchief) favors the doctor with a sagacious old-scholastic suggestion that the body should be hung up by the heels, "sim'lar," says Captain Joey, "to mutton in a butcher's shop," and should then, as a particularly choice manoeuvre for promoting easy respiration, be rolled upon casks. These scraps of the wisdom of the captain's ancestors are received with such speechless indignation by Miss Abbey, that she instantly seizes the Captain by the collar, and without a single word ejects him, not presuming to remonstrate, from the scene.

There then remain, to assist the doctor and Tom, only those three other regular customers, Bob Glamour, William Williams, and Jonathan (family name of the latter, if any, unknown to mankind), who are quite enough. Miss Abbey having looked in to make sure that nothing is wanted, descends to the bar, and there awaits the result, with the gentle Jew and Miss Jenny Wren.

If you are not gone for good, Mr. Riderhood, it would be something to know where you are hiding at present. This flabby lump of mortality that we work so hard at with such patient perseverance, yields no sign of you.

If you are gone for good, Rogue, it is very solemn, and if you are coming back, it is hardly less so. Nay, in the suspense and mystery of the latter question, involving that of where you may be now, there is a solemnity even added to that of death, making us who are in attendance alike afraid to look on you and to look off you, and making those below start at the least sound of a creaking plank in the floor.

Stay! Did that eyelid tremble? So the doctor, breathing low, and closely watching, asks himself.

No.

Did that nostril twitch?

No.

This artificial respiration ceasing, do I feel any faint flutter under my hand upon the chest?

No.

Over and over again, No. No. But try over and over again, nevertheless.

See! A token of life! An indubitable token of life! The spark may smoulder and go out, or it may glow and expand, but see! The four rough fellows, seeing, shed tears. Neither Riderhood in this world, nor Riderhood in the other, could draw tears from them; but a striving human soul between the two can do it easily.

He is struggling to come back. Now, he is almost here, now he is far away again. Now he is struggling harder to get back. And yet — like us all, when we swoon — like us all, every day of our lives when we wake — he is instinctively unwilling to be restored to the consciousness of this existence, and would be left dormant, if he could.

Bob Gliddery returns with Pleasant Riderhood, who was out when sought for, and hard to find. She has a

shawl over her head, and her first action, when she takes it off weeping, and curtseys to Miss Abbey, is to wind her hair up.

"Thank you, Miss Abbey, for having father here."

"I am bound to say, girl, I did n't know who it was," returns Miss Abbey; "but I hope it would have been pretty much the same if I had known."

Poor Pleasant, fortified with a sip of brandy, is ushered into the first-floor chamber. She could not express much sentiment about her father if she were called upon to pronounce his funeral oration, but she has a greater tenderness for him than he ever had for her, and crying bitterly when she sees him stretched unconscious, asks the doctor, with clasped hands, — "Is there no hope, sir? O poor father! Is poor father dead?"

To which the doctor, on one knee beside the body, busy and watchful, only rejoins without looking round: "Now, my girl, unless you have the self-command to be perfectly quiet, I cannot allow you to remain in the room."

Pleasant, consequently, wipes her eyes with her back-hair, which is in fresh need of being wound up, and having got it out of the way, watches with terrified interest all that goes on. Her natural woman's aptitude soon renders her able to give a little help. Anticipating the doctor's want of this or that, she quietly has it ready for him, and so by degrees is intrusted with the charge of supporting her father's head upon her arm.

It is something so new to Pleasant to see her father an object of sympathy and interest, to find any one very willing to tolerate his society in this world, not to say pressingly and soothingly entreating him to belong to it, that it gives her a sensation she never experienced before. Some hazy idea that if affairs could remain thus

for a long time it would be a respectable change, floats in her mind. Also some vague idea that the old evil is drowned out of him, and that if he should happily come back to resume his occupation of the empty form that lies upon the bed, his spirit will be altered. In which state of mind she kisses the stony lips, and quite believes that the impassive hand she chafes will revive a tender hand, if it revive ever.

Sweet delusion for Pleasant Riderhood. But they minister to him with such extraordinary interest, their anxiety is so keen, their vigilance is so great, their excited joy grows so intense as the signs of life strengthen, that how can she resist it, poor thing! And now he begins to breathe naturally, and he stirs, and the doctor declares him to have come back from that inexplicable journey where he stopped on the dark road, and to be here.

Tom Tootle, who is nearest to the doctor when he says this, grasps the doctor fervently by the hand. Bob Glamour, William Williams, and Jonathan of the no surname, all shake hands with one another round, and with the doctor too. Bob Glamour blows his nose, and Jonathan of the no surname is moved to do likewise, but lacking a pocket-handkerchief abandons that outlet for his emotion. Pleasant sheds tears deserving her own name, and her sweet delusion is at its height.

There is intelligence in his eyes. He wants to ask a question. He wonders where he is. Tell him.

"Father, you were run down on the river, and are at Miss Abbey Potterson's."

He stares at his daughter, stares all around him, closes his eyes, and lies slumbering on her arm.

The short-lived delusion begins to fade. The low,

bad, unimpressible face is coming up from the depths of the river, or what other depths, to the surface again. As he grows warm, the doctor and the four men cool. As his lineaments soften with life, their faces and their hearts harden to him.

"He will do now," says the doctor, washing his hands, and looking at the patient with growing disfavor.

"Many a better man," moralizes Tom Tootle with a gloomy shake of the head, "ain't had his luck."

"It's to be hoped he'll make a better use of his life," says Bob Glamour, "than I expect he will."

"Or than he done afore," adds William Williams.

"But no, not he!" says Jonathan of the no surname, clinching the quartette.

They speak in a low tone because of his daughter, but she sees that they have all drawn off, and that they stand in a group at the other end of the room, shunning him. It would be too much to suspect them of being sorry that he did n't die when he had done so much towards it, but they clearly wish that they had had a better subject to bestow their pains on. Intelligence is conveyed to Miss Abbey in the bar, who reappears on the scene, and contemplates from a distance, holding whispered discourse with the doctor. The spark of life was deeply interesting while it was in abeyance, but now that it has got established in Mr. Riderhood, there appears to be a general desire that circumstances had admitted of its being developed in anybody else, rather than that gentleman.

"However," says Miss Abbey, cheering them up, "you have done your duty like good and true men, and you had better come down and take something at the expense of the Porters."

This they all do, leaving the daughter watching the father. To whom, in their absence, Bob Glidderly presents himself.

"His gills looks rum; don't they?" says Bob, after inspecting the patient.

Pleasant faintly nods.

"His gills 'll look rummer when he wakes; won't they?" says Bob.

Pleasant hopes not. Why?

"When he finds himself here, you know," Bob explains. "Cause Miss Abbey forbid him the house and ordered him out of it. But what you may call the Fates ordered him into it again. Which is rumness; ain't it?"

"He would n't have come here of his own accord," returns poor Pleasant, with an effort at a little pride.

"No," retorts Bob. "Nor he would n't have been let in, if he had."

The short delusion is quite dispelled now. As plainly as she sees on her arm the old father, unimproved, Pleasant sees that everybody there will cut him when he recovers consciousness. "I'll take him away ever so soon as I can," thinks Pleasant with a sigh; "he's best at home."

Presently they all return, and wait for him to become conscious that they will all be glad to get rid of him. Some clothes are got together for him to wear, his own being saturated with water, and his present dress being composed of blankets.

Becoming more and more uncomfortable, as though the prevalent dislike were finding him out somewhere in his sleep and expressing itself to him, the patient at last opens his eyes wide, and is assisted by his daughter to sit up in bed.

"Well, Riderhood," says the doctor, "how do you feel?"

He replies gruffly, "Nothing to boast on." Having, in fact, returned to life in an uncommonly sulky state.

"I don't mean to preach; but I hope," says the doctor, gravely shaking his head, "that this escape may have a good effect upon you, Riderhood."

The patient's discontented growl of a reply is not intelligible; his daughter, however, could interpret, if she would, that what he says is, he "don't want no Poll-Parrotting."

Mr. Riderhood next demands his shirt; and draws it on over his head (with his daughter's help) exactly as if he had just had a Fight.

"Warn't it a steamer?" he pauses to ask her.

"Yes, father."

"I'll have the law on her, bust her! and make her pay for it."

He then buttons his linen very moodily, twice or thrice stopping to examine his arms and hands, as if to see what punishment he has received in the Fight. He then doggedly demands his other garments, and slowly gets them on, with an appearance of great malevolence towards his late opponent and all the spectators. He has an impression that his nose is bleeding, and several times draws the back of his hand across it, and looks for the result, in a pugilistic manner, greatly strengthening that incongruous resemblance.

"Where's my fur cap?" he asks in a surly voice, when he has shuffled his clothes on.

"In the river," somebody rejoins.

"And warn't there no honest man to pick it up? O' course there was though, and to cut off with it arterwards. You are a rare lot, all on you!"

Thus, Mr. Riderhood: taking from the hands of his daughter, with special ill-will, a lent cap, and grumbling as he pulls it down over his ears. Then getting on his unsteady legs, leaning heavily upon her, and growling, "Hold still, can't you? What! You must be a staggering next, must you?" he takes his departure out of the ring in which he has had that little turn-up with Death.

CHAPTER IV.

A HAPPY RETURN OF THE DAY.

MR. and Mrs. Wilfer had seen a full quarter of a hundred more anniversaries of their wedding-day than Mr. and Mrs. Lamble had seen of theirs, but they still celebrated the occasion in the bosom of their family. Not that these celebrations ever resulted in anything particularly agreeable, or that the family was ever disappointed by that circumstance on account of having looked forward to the return of the auspicious day with sanguine anticipations of enjoyment. It was kept morally, rather as a Fast than a Feast, enabling Mrs. Wilfer to hold a sombre darkling state, which exhibited that impressive woman in her choicest colors.

The noble lady's condition on these delightful occasions was one compounded of heroic endurance and heroic forgiveness. Lurid indications of the better marriages she might have made, shone athwart the awful gloom of her composure, and fitfully revealed the cherub as a little monster unaccountably favored by Heaven, who had possessed himself of a blessing for which many of his superiors had sued and contended in vain. So firmly had this his position towards his treasure become established, that when the anniversary arrived, it always found him in an apologetic state. It is not impossible that his modest penitence may have even gone the length of sometimes severely reproving him for that he ever took the liberty of making so exalted a character his wife.

As for the children of the union, their experience of these festivals had been sufficiently uncomfortable to lead them annually to wish, when out of their tenderest years, either that *Ma* had married somebody else instead of much-teased *Pa*, or that *Pa* had married somebody else instead of *Ma*. When there came to be but two sisters left at home, the daring mind of *Bella* on the next of these occasions scaled the height of wondering with droll vexation "what on earth *Pa* ever could have seen in *Ma*, to induce him to make such a little fool of himself as to ask her to have him."

The revolving year now bringing the day round in its orderly sequence, *Bella* arrived in the *Boffin* chariot to assist at the celebration. It was the family custom when the day recurred, to sacrifice a pair of fowls on the altar of *Hymen*; and *Bella* had sent a note beforehand, to intimate that she would bring the votive offering with her. So, *Bella* and the fowls, by the united energies of two horses, two men, four wheels, and a plum-pudding carriage-dog with as uncomfortable a collar on as if he had been *George the Fourth*, were deposited at the door of the parental dwelling. They were there received by *Mrs. Wilfer* in person, whose dignity on this, as on most special occasions, was heightened by a mysterious tooth-ache.

"I shall not require the carriage at night," said *Bella*.
"I shall walk back."

The male domestic of *Mrs. Boffin* touched his hat, and in the act of departure had an awful glare bestowed upon him by *Mrs. Wilfer*, intended to carry deep into his audacious soul the assurance that, whatever his private suspicions might be, male domestics in livery were no rarity there.

"Well, dear Ma," said Bella, "and how do you do?"

"I am as well, Bella," replied Mrs. Wilfer, "as can be expected."

"Dear me, Ma," said Bella; "you talk as if one was just born!"

"That's exactly what Ma has been doing," interposed Lavvy, over the maternal shoulder, "ever since we got up this morning. It's all very well to laugh, Bella, but anything more exasperating it is impossible to conceive."

Mrs. Wilfer, with a look too full of majesty to be accompanied by any words, attended both her daughters to the kitchen, where the sacrifice was to be prepared.

"Mr. Rokesmith," said she, resignedly, "has been so polite as to place his sitting-room at our disposal to-day. You will therefore, Bella, be entertained in the humble abode of your parents, so far in accordance with your present style of living, that there will be a drawing-room for your reception as well as a dining-room. Your papa invited Mr. Rokesmith to partake of our lowly fare. In excusing himself on account of a particular engagement, he offered the use of his apartment."

Bella happened to know that he had no engagement out of his own room at Mr. Boffin's, but she approved of his staying away. "We should only have put one another out of countenance," she thought, "and we do that quite often enough as it is."

Yet she had sufficient curiosity about his room to run up to it with the least possible delay, and make a close inspection of its contents. It was tastefully though economically furnished, and very neatly arranged. There were shelves and stands of books, — English, French, and Italian; and in a portfolio on the writing-table there

were sheets upon sheets of memoranda and calculations in figures, evidently referring to the Boffin property. On that table also, carefully backed with canvas, varnished, mounted, and rolled like a map, was the placard descriptive of the murdered man who had come from afar to be her husband. She shrank from this ghostly surprise, and felt quite frightened as she rolled and tied it up again. Peeping about here and there, she came upon a print, a graceful head of a pretty woman, elegantly framed, hanging in the corner by the easy-chair. "Oh, indeed, sir!" said Bella, after stopping to ruminare before it. "Oh, indeed, sir! I fancy I can guess whom you think *that's* like. But I'll tell you what it's much more like — your impudence!" Having said which she decamped: not solely because she was offended, but because there was nothing else to look at.

"Now, Ma," said Bella, reappearing in the kitchen with some remains of a blush, "you and Lavvy think magnificent me fit for nothing, but I intend to prove the contrary. I mean to be Cook to-day."

"Hold!" rejoined her majestic mother. "I cannot permit it. Cook, in that dress!"

"As for my dress, Ma," returned Bella, merrily searching in a dresser-drawer, "I mean to apron it and towel it all over the front; and as to permission, I mean to do without."

"*You* cook?" said Mrs. Wilfer. "*You*, who never cooked when you were at home?"

"Yes, Ma," returned Bella; "that is precisely the state of the case."

She girded herself with a white apron, and busily with knots and pins contrived a bib to it, coming close and tight under her chin, as if it had caught her round the

neck to kiss her. Over this bib her dimples looked delightful, and under it her pretty figure not less so. "Now, Ma," said Bella, pushing back her hair from her temples with both hands, "what's first?"

"First," returned Mrs. Wilfer solemnly, "if you persist in what I cannot but regard as conduct utterly incompatible with the equipage in which you arrived" —

("Which I do, Ma.")

"First, then, you put the fowls down to the fire."

"To — be — sure!" cried Bella; "and flour them, and twirl them round, and there they go!" sending them spinning at a great rate. "What's next, Ma?"

"Next," said Mrs. Wilfer with a wave of her gloves, expressive of abdication under protest from the culinary throne, "I would recommend examination of the bacon in the saucepan on the fire, and also of the potatoes by the application of a fork. Preparation of the greens will further become necessary if you persist in this unseemly demeanor."

"As of course I do, Ma."

Persisting, Bella gave her attention to one thing and forgot the other, and gave her attention to the other and forgot the third, and remembering the third was distracted by the fourth, and made amends whenever she went wrong by giving the unfortunate fowls an extra spin, which made their chance of ever getting cooked exceedingly doubtful. But it was pleasant cookery too. Meantime Miss Lavinia, oscillating between the kitchen and the opposite room, prepared the dining-table in the latter chamber. This office she (always doing her household spiring with unwillingness) performed in a startling series of whisks and bumps; laying the table-cloth as if she were raising the wind, putting down the glasses

and salt-cellars as if she were knocking at the door, and clashing the knives and forks in a skirmishing manner, suggestive of hand-to-hand conflict.

"Look at Ma," whispered Lavinia to Bella when this was done, and they stood over the roasting fowls. "If one was the most dutiful child in existence (of course on the whole one hopes one is), is n't she enough to make one want to poke her with something wooden, sitting there bolt upright in a corner?"

"Only suppose," returned Bella, "that poor Pa was to sit bolt upright in another corner."

"My dear, he could n't do it," said Lavvy. "Pa would loll directly. But indeed I do not believe there ever was any human creature who could keep so bolt upright as Ma, or put such an amount of aggravation into one back! What's the matter, Ma? Ain't you well, Ma?"

"Doubtless I am very well," returned Mrs. Wilfer, turning her eyes upon her youngest born, with scornful fortitude. "What should be the matter with Me?"

"You don't seem very brisk, Ma," retorted Lavvy the bold.

"Brisk?" repeated her parent, "Brisk? Whence the low expression, Lavinia? If I am uncomplaining, if I am silently contented with my lot, let that suffice for my family."

"Well, Ma," returned Lavvy, "since you will force it out of me, I must respectfully take leave to say that your family are no doubt under the greatest obligations to you for having an annual toothache on your wedding-day, and that it's very disinterested in you, and an immense blessing to them. Still, on the whole, it is possible to be too boastful even of that boon."

"You incarnation of sauciness," said Mrs. Wilfer, "do you speak like that to me? On this day, of all days in the year? Pray do you know what would have become of you, if I had not bestowed my hand upon R. W., your father, on this day?"

"No, Ma," replied Lavvy, "I really do not; and, with the greatest respect for your abilities and information, I very much doubt if you do either."

Whether or no the sharp vigor of this sally on a weak point of Mrs. Wilfer's entrenchments might have routed that heroine for the time, is rendered uncertain by the arrival of a flag of truce in the person of Mr. George Sampson: bidden to the feast as a friend of the family, whose affections were now understood to be in course of transference from Bella to Lavinia, and whom Lavinia kept — possibly in remembrance of his bad taste in having overlooked her in the first instance — under a course of stinging discipline.

"I congratulate you, Mrs. Wilfer," said Mr. George Sampson, who had meditated this neat address while coming along, "on the day." Mrs. Wilfer thanked him with a magnanimous sigh, and again became an unresisting prey to that inscrutable toothache.

"I am surprised," said Mr. Sampson feebly, "that Miss Bella condescends to cook."

Here Miss Lavinia descended on the ill-starred young gentleman with a crushing supposition that at all events it was no business of his. This disposed of Mr. Sampson in a melancholy retirement of spirit, until the cherub arrived, whose amazement at the lovely woman's occupation was great.

However, she persisted in dishing the dinner as well as cooking it, and then sat down, bibless and apronless,

to partake of it as an illustrious guest : Mrs. Wilfer first responding to her husband's cheerful " For what we are about to receive " — with a sepulchral Amen, calculated to cast a damp upon the stoutest appetite.

" But what," said Bella, as she watched the carving of the fowls, " makes them pink inside, I wonder, Pa! Is it the breed ? "

" No, I don't think it's the breed, my dear," returned Pa. " I rather think it is because they are not done."

" They ought to be," said Bella.

" Yes, I am aware they ought to be, my dear," rejoined her father, " but they — ain't."

So, the gridiron was put in requisition, and the good-tempered cherub, who was often as un-cherubically employed in his own family as if he had been in the employment of some of the Old Masters, undertook to grill the fowls. Indeed, except in respect of staring about him (a branch of the public service to which the pictorial cherub is much addicted), this domestic cherub discharged as many odd functions as his prototype ; with the difference, say, that he performed with a blacking-brush on the family's boots, instead of performing on enormous wind instruments and double-basses, and that he conducted himself with cheerful alacrity to much useful purpose, instead of foreshortening himself in the air with the vaguest intentions.

Bella helped him with his supplemental cookery, and made him very happy, but put him in mortal terror too by asking him when they sat down at table again, how he supposed they cooked fowls at the Greenwich dinners, and whether he believed they really were such pleasant dinners as people said ? His secret winks and nods of remonstrance, in reply, made the mischievous Bella laugh

until she choked, and then Lavinia was obliged to slap her on the back, and then she laughed the more.

But her mother was a fine corrective at the other end of the table; to whom her father, in the innocence of his good-fellowship, at intervals appealed with: "My dear, I am afraid you are not enjoying yourself?"

"Why so, R. W.?" she would sonorously reply.

"Because, my dear, you seem a little out of sorts."

"Not at all," would be the rejoinder, in exactly the same tone.

"Would you take a merry-thought, my dear?"

"Thank you. I will take whatever you please, R. W."

"Well, but my dear, do you like it?"

"I like it as well as I like anything, R. W." The stately woman would then, with a meritorious appearance of devoting herself to the general good, pursue her dinner as if she were feeding somebody else on high public grounds.

Bella had brought dessert and two bottles of wine, thus shedding unprecedented splendor on the occasion. Mrs. Wilfer did the honors of the first glass by proclaiming, — "R. W., I drink to you."

"Thank you, my dear. And I to you."

"Pa and Ma!" said Bella.

"Permit me," Mrs. Wilfer interposed, with outstretched glove. "No. I think not. I drank to your papa. If, however, you insist on including me, I can in gratitude offer no objection."

"Why, Lor, Ma," interposed Lavvy the bold, "is n't it the day that made you and Pa one and the same? I have no patience!"

"By whatever other circumstance the day may be marked, it is not the day, Lavinia, on which I will allow

a child of mine to pounce upon me. I beg — nay, command! — that you will not pounce. R. W., it is appropriate to recall that it is for you to command and for me to obey. It is your house, and you are master at your own table. Both our healths!” Drinking the toast with tremendous stiffness.

“I really am a little afraid, my dear,” hinted the cherub meekly, “that you are not enjoying yourself?”

“On the contrary,” returned Mrs. Wilfer, “quite so. Why should I not?”

“I thought, my dear, that perhaps your face might” —

“My face might be a martyrdom, but what would that import, or who should know it, if I smiled?”

And she did smile; manifestly freezing the blood of Mr. George Sampson by so doing. For that young gentleman, catching her smiling eye, was so very much appalled by its expression as to cast about in his thoughts concerning what he had done to bring it down upon himself.

“The mind naturally falls,” said Mrs. Wilfer, “shall I say into a reverie, or shall I say into a retrospect? on a day like this.”

Lavvy, sitting with defiantly folded arms, replied (but not audibly), “For goodness’ sake say whichever of the two you like best, Ma, and get it over.”

“The mind,” pursued Mrs. Wilfer in an oratorical manner, “naturally reverts to Papa and Mamma — I here allude to my parents — at a period before the earliest dawn of this day. I was considered tall; perhaps I was. Papa and Mamma were unquestionably tall. I have rarely seen a finer woman than my mother; never than my father.”

The irrepressible Lavvy remarked aloud, "Whatever grandpapa was, he was n't a female."

"Your grandpapa," retorted Mrs. Wilfer, with an awful look, and in an awful tone, "was what I describe him to have been, and would have struck any of his grandchildren to the earth who presumed to question it. It was one of mamma's cherished hopes that I should become united to a tall member of society. It may have been a weakness, but if so, it was equally the weakness, I believe, of King Frederick of Prussia." These remarks being offered to Mr. George Sampson, who had not the courage to come out for single combat, but lurked with his chest under the table and his eyes cast down, Mrs. Wilfer proceeded, in a voice of increasing sternness and impressiveness, until she should force that skulker to give himself up. "Mamma would appear to have had an indefinable foreboding of what afterwards happened, for she would frequently urge upon me, 'Not a little man. Promise me, my child, not a little man. Never, never, never, marry a little man!' Papa also would remark to me (he possessed extraordinary humor), 'that a family of whales must not ally themselves with sprats.' His company was eagerly sought, as may be supposed, by the wits of the day, and our house was their continual resort. I have known as many as three copperplate engravers exchanging the most exquisite sallies and retorts there, at one time." (Here Mr. Sampson delivered himself captive, and said, with an uneasy movement on his chair, that three was a large number, and it must have been highly entertaining.) "Among the most prominent members of that distinguished circle, was a gentleman measuring six feet four in height. *He was not* an engraver." (Here Mr. Sampson said, with no reason

whatever, Of course not.) "This gentleman was so obliging as to honor me with attentions which I could not fail to understand." (Here Mr. Sampson murmured that when it came to that you could always tell.) "I immediately announced to both my parents that those attentions were misplaced, and that I could not favor his suit. They inquired was he too tall? I replied it was not the stature, but the intellect was too lofty. At our house, I said, the tone was too brilliant, the pressure was too high, to be maintained by me, a mere woman, in every-day domestic life. I well remember mamma's clasping her hands, and exclaiming 'This will end in a little man!'" (Here Mr. Sampson glanced at his host and shook his head with despondency.) "She afterwards went so far as to predict that it would end in a little man whose mind would be below the average, but that was in what I may denominate a paroxysm of maternal disappointment. Within a month," said Mrs. Wilfer, deepening her voice, as if she were relating a terrible ghost-story, "within a month, I first saw R. W. my husband. Within a year I married him. It is natural for the mind to recall these dark coincidences on the present day."

Mr. Sampson at length released from the custody of Mrs. Wilfer's eye, now drew a long breath, and made the original and striking remark that there was no accounting for these sort of presentiments. R. W. scratched his head and looked apologetically all round the table until he came to his wife, when observing her as it were shrouded in a more sombre veil than before, he once more hinted, "My dear, I am really afraid you are not altogether enjoying yourself?" To which she once more replied, "On the contrary, R. W. Quite so."

The wretched Mr. Sampson's position at this agreeable

entertainment was truly pitiable. For, not only was he exposed defenceless to the harangues of Mrs. Wilfer, but he received the utmost contumely at the hands of Lavinia; who, partly to show Bella that she (Lavinia) could do what she liked with him, and partly to pay him off for still obviously admiring Bella's beauty, led him the life of a dog. Illuminated on the one hand by the stately graces of Mrs. Wilfer's oratory, and shadowed on the other by the checks and frowns of the young lady to whom he had devoted himself in his destitution, the sufferings of this young gentleman were distressing to witness. If his mind for the moment reeled under them, it may be urged, in extenuation of its weakness, that it was constitutionally a knock-kneed mind, and never very strong upon its legs.

The rosy hours were thus beguiled until it was time for Bella to have Pa's escort back. The dimples duly tied up in the bonnet-strings and the leave-taking done, they got out into the air, and the cherub drew a long breath as if he found it refreshing.

"Well, dear Pa," said Bella, "the anniversary may be considered over."

"Yes, my dear," returned the cherub, "there's another of 'em gone."

Bella drew his arm closer through hers as they walked along, and gave it a number of consolatory pats. "Thank you, my dear," he said, as if she had spoken; "I am all right, my dear. Well, and how do you get on, Bella?"

"I am not at all improved, Pa."

"Ain't you really though?"

"No, pa. On the contrary, I am worse."

"Lor!" said the cherub.

"I am worse, Pa. I make so many calculations how much a year I must have when I marry, and what is the least I can manage to do with, that I am beginning to get wrinkles over my nose. Did you notice any wrinkles over my nose this evening, Pa?"

Pa laughing at this, Bella gave him two or three shakes.

"You won't laugh, sir, when you see your lovely woman turning haggard. You had better be prepared in time, I can tell you. I shall not be able to keep my greediness for money out of my eyes long, and when you see it there you'll be sorry, and serve you right for not being warned in time. Now, sir, we entered into a bond of confidence. Have you anything to impart?"

"I thought it was you who was to impart, my love."

"Oh! did you indeed, sir? Then why did n't you ask me, the moment we came out? The confidences of lovely women are not to be slighted. However, I forgive you this once, and look here, Pa; that's" — Bella laid the little forefinger of her right glove on her lip, and then laid it on her father's lip — "that's a kiss for you. And now I am going seriously to tell you — let me see how many — four secrets. Mind! Serious, grave, weighty secrets. Strictly between ourselves."

"Number one, my dear?" said her father, settling her arm comfortably and confidentially.

"Number one," said Bella, "will electrify you, Pa. Who do you think has" — she was confused here in spite of her merry way of beginning — "has made an offer to me?"

Pa looked in her face, and looked at the ground, and looked in her face again, and declared he could never guess.

"Mr. Rokesmith."

"You don't tell me so, my dear!"

"Mis—ter Roke—smith, Pa." said Bella, separating the syllables for emphasis. "What do you say to *that*?"

Pa answered quietly with the counter-question, "What did *you* say to that, my love?"

"I said No," returned Bella sharply. "Of course."

"Yes. Of course," said her father, meditating.

"And I told him why I thought it a betrayal of trust on his part, and an affront to me," said Bella.

"Yes. To be sure. I am astonished indeed. I wonder he committed himself without seeing more of his way first. Now I think of it, I suspect he always has admired you though, my dear."

"A hackney coachman may admire me," remarked Bella, with a touch of her mother's loftiness.

"It's highly probable, my love. Number two, my dear?"

"Number two, Pa, is much to the same purpose, though not so preposterous. Mr. Lightwood would propose to me, if I would let him."

"Then I understand, my dear, that you don't intend to let him?"

Bella again saying, with her former emphasis, "Why, of course not!" her father felt himself bound to echo, "Of course not."

"I don't care for him," said Bella.

"That's enough," her father interposed.

"No, Pa, it's *not* enough," rejoined Bella, giving him another shake or two. "Have n't I told you what a mercenary little wretch I am? It only becomes enough when he has no money, and no clients, and no expectations, and no anything but debts."

"Hah!" said the cherub, a little depressed. "Number three, my dear?"

"Number three, Pa, is a better thing. A generous thing, a noble thing, a delightful thing. Mrs. Boffin has herself told me, as a secret, with her own kind lips — and truer lips never opened or closed in this life, I am sure — that they wish to see me well married; and that when I marry with their consent they will portion me most handsomely." Here the grateful girl burst out crying very heartily.

"Don't cry, my darling," said her father, with his hand to his eyes; "it's excusable in me to be a little overcome when I find that my dear favorite child is, after all disappointments, to be so provided for and so raised in the world; but don't *you* cry, don't *you* cry. I am very thankful. I congratulate you with all my heart, my dear." The good soft little fellow, drying his eyes here, Bella put her arms round his neck and tenderly kissed him on the high road, passionately telling him he was the best of fathers and the best of friends, and that on her wedding-morning she would go down on her knees to him and beg his pardon for having ever teased him or seemed insensible to the worth of such a patient, sympathetic, genial, fresh young heart. At every one of her adjectives she redoubled her kisses, and finally kissed his hat off, and then laughed immoderately when the wind took it and he ran after it.

When he had recovered his hat and his breath, and they were going on again once more, said her father then: "Number four, my dear?"

Bella's countenance fell in the midst of her mirth. "After all, perhaps I had better put off number four, Pa. Let me try once more, if for never so short a time, to hope that it may not really be so."

The change in her strengthened the cherub's interest

in number four, and he said quietly, — “May not be so, my dear? May not be how, my dear?”

Bella looked at him pensively, and shook her head.

“And yet I know right well it is so, Pa. I know it only too well.”

“My love,” returned her father, “you make me quite uncomfortable. Have you said No to anybody else, my dear?”

“No, Pa.”

“Yes to anybody?” he suggested, lifting up his eyebrows.

“No, Pa.”

“Is there anybody else who would take his chance between Yes and No, if you would let him, my dear?”

“Not that I know of, Pa.”

“There can’t be somebody who won’t take his chance when you want him to?” said the cherub, as a last resource.

“Why, of course not, Pa,” said Bella, giving him another shake or two.

“No, of course not,” he assented. “Bella, my dear, I am afraid I must either have no sleep to-night, or I must press for number four.”

“Oh, Pa, there is no good in number four! I am so sorry for it, I am so unwilling to believe it, I have tried so earnestly not to see it, that it is very hard to tell, even to you. But Mr. Boffin is being spoilt by prosperity, and is changing every day.”

“My dear Bella, I hope and trust not.”

“I have hoped and trusted not too, Pa; but every day he changes for the worse, and for the worse. Not to me — he is always much the same to me — but to others about him. Before my eye he grows suspicious, capri-

cious, hard, tyrannical, unjust. If ever a good man were ruined by good fortune, it is my benefactor. And yet, Pa, think how terrible the fascination of money is! I see this, and hate this, and dread this, and don't know but that money might make a much worse change in me. And yet I have money always in my thoughts and my desires; and the whole life I place before myself is money, money, money, and what money can make of life!"

CHAPTER V.

THE GOLDEN DUSTMAN FALLS INTO BAD COMPANY.

WERE Bella Wilfer's bright and ready little wits at fault, or was the Golden Dustman passing through the furnace of proof and coming out dross? Ill news travels fast. We shall know full soon.

On that very night of her return from the Happy Return, something chanced which Bella closely followed with her eyes and ears. There was an apartment at the side of the Boffin mansion, known as Mr. Boffin's room. Far less grand than the rest of the house, it was far more comfortable, being pervaded by a certain air of homely snugness, which upholstering despotism had banished to that spot when it inexorably set its face against Mr. Boffin's appeals for mercy in behalf of any other chamber. Thus, although a room of modest situation — for its windows gave on Silas Wegg's old corner — and of no pretensions to velvet, satin, or gilding, it had got itself established in a domestic position analagous to that of an easy dressing-gown or pair of slippers; and whenever the family wanted to enjoy a particularly pleasant fire-side evening, they enjoyed it, as an institution that must be, in Mr. Boffin's room.

Mr. and Mrs. Boffin were reported sitting in this room, when Bella got back. Entering it, she found the Secretary there too; in official attendance it would appear, for he was standing with some papers in his hand by a table

with shaded candles on it, at which Mr. Boffin was seated thrown back in his easy-chair.

"You are busy, sir," said Bella, hesitating at the door.

"Not at all, my dear, not at all. You're one of ourselves. We never make company of you. Come in, come in. Here's the old lady in her usual place."

Mrs. Boffin adding her nod and smile of welcome to Mr. Boffin's words, Bella took her book to a chair in the fireside corner, by Mrs. Boffin's work-table. Mr. Boffin's station was on the opposite side.

"Now, Rokesmith," said the Golden Dustman, so sharply rapping the table to bespeak his attention as Bella turned the leaves of her book, that she started; "where were we?"

"You were saying, sir," returned the Secretary, with an air of some reluctance and a glance towards those others who were present, "that you considered the time had come for fixing my salary."

"Don't be above calling it wages, man," said Mr. Boffin, testily. "What the deuce! I never talked of *my* salary when I was in service."

"My wages," said the Secretary, correcting himself.

"Rokesmith, you are not proud, I hope?" observed Mr. Boffin, eyeing him askance.

"I hope not, sir."

"Because I never was, when I was poor," said Mr. Boffin. "Poverty and pride don't go at all well together. Mind that. How can they go well together? Why it stands to reason. A man, being poor, has nothing to be proud of. It's nonsense."

With a slight inclination of his head, and a look of some surprise, the Secretary seemed to assent by forming the syllables of the word "nonsense" on his lips.

"Now concerning these same wages," said Mr. Boffin. "Sit down."

The Secretary sat down.

"Why did n't you sit down before?" asked Mr. Boffin, distrustfully. "I hope that was n't pride? But about these wages. Now, I've gone into the matter, and I say two hundred a year. What do you think of it? Do you think it's enough?"

"Thank you. It is a fair proposal."

"I don't say, you know," Mr. Boffin stipulated, "but what it may be more than enough. And I'll tell you why, Rokesmith. A man of property, like me, is bound to consider the market-price. At first I did n't enter into that as much as I might have done; but I've got acquainted with other men of property since, and I've got acquainted with the duties of property. I must n't go putting the market-price up, because money may happen not to be an object with me. A sheep is worth so much in the market, and I ought to give it and no more. A secretary is worth so much in the market, and I ought to give it and no more. However, I don't mind stretching a point with you."

"Mr. Boffin, you are very good," replied the Secretary, with an effort.

"Then we put the figure," said Mr. Boffin, "at two hundred a year. Then the figure's disposed of. Now, there must be no misunderstanding regarding what I buy for two hundred a year. If I pay for a sheep, I buy it out and out. Similarly, if I pay for a secretary, I buy *him* out and out."

"In other words, you purchase my whole time?"

"Certainly I do. Look here," said Mr. Boffin, "it ain't that I want to occupy your whole time; you can

take up a book for a minute or two when you've nothing better to do, though I think you'll a'most always find something useful to do. But I want to keep you in attendance. It's convenient to have you at all times ready on the premises. Therefore, betwixt your breakfast and your supper, — on the premises I expect to find you."

The Secretary bowed.

"In bygone days, when I was in service myself," said Mr. Boffin, "I could n't go cutting about at my will and pleasure, and you won't expect to go cutting about at your will and pleasure. You've rather got into a habit of that, lately; but perhaps it was for want of a right specification betwixt us. Now, let there be a right specification betwixt us, and let it be this. If you want leave, ask for it."

Again the Secretary bowed. His manner was uneasy and astonished, and showed a sense of humiliation.

"I'll have a bell," said Mr. Boffin, "hung from this room to yours, and when I want you, I'll touch it. I don't call to mind that I have anything more to say at the present moment."

The Secretary rose, gathered up his papers, and withdrew. Bella's eyes followed him to the door, lighted on Mr. Boffin complacently thrown back in his easy-chair, and drooped over her book.

"I have let that chap, that young man of mine," said Mr. Boffin, taking a trot up and down the room, "get above his work. It won't do. I must have him down a peg. A man of property owes a duty to other men of property, and must look sharp after his inferiors."

Bella felt that Mrs. Boffin was not comfortable, and that the eyes of that good creature sought to discover from her face what attention she had given to this dis-

course, and what impression it had made upon her. For which reason Bella's eyes drooped more engrossedly over her book, and she turned the page with an air of profound absorption in it.

"Noddy," said Mrs. Boffin, after thoughtfully pausing in her work.

"My dear," returned the Golden Dustman, stopping short in his trot.

"Excuse my putting it to you, Noddy, but now really! Have n't you been a little strict with Mr. Rokesmith to-night? Have n't you been a little — just a little little — not quite like your old self?"

"Why, old woman, I hope so," returned Mr. Boffin, cheerfully, if not boastfully.

"Hope so, deary?"

"Our old selves would n't do here, old lady. Have n't you found that out yet? Our old selves would be fit for nothing here but to be robbed and imposed upon. Our old selves were n't people of fortune; our new selves are; it's a great difference."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Boffin, pausing in her work again, softly to draw a long breath and to look at the fire. "A great difference."

"And we must be up to the difference," pursued her husband; "we must be equal to the change; that's what we must be. We've got to hold our own now, against everybody (for everybody's hand is stretched out to be dipped into our pockets), and we have got to recollect that money makes money, as well as makes everything else."

"Mentioning recollecting," said Mrs. Boffin, with her work abandoned, her eyes upon the fire, and her chin upon her hand, "do you recollect, Noddy, how you said to

Mr. Rokesmith when he first came to see us at the Bower, and you engaged him — how you said to him that if it had pleased Heaven to send John Harmon to his fortune safe, we could have been content with the one Mound which was our legacy, and should never have wanted the rest?"

"Ay, I remember, old lady. But we had n't tried what it was to have the rest then. Our new shoes had come home, but we had n't put 'em on. We're wearing 'em now, we're wearing 'em, and must step out accordingly."

Mrs. Boffin took up her work again, and plied her needle in silence.

"As to Rokesmith, that young man of mine," said Mr. Boffin, dropping his voice and glancing towards the door with an apprehension of being overheard by some eaves-dropper there, "it's the same with him as with the footmen. I have found out that you must either scrunch them, or let them scrunch you. If you ain't imperious with 'em, they won't believe in your being any better than themselves, if as good, after the stories (lies mostly) that they have heard of your beginnings. There's nothing betwixt stiffening yourself up, and throwing yourself away; take my word for that, old lady."

Bella ventured for a moment to look stealthily towards him under her eyelashes, and she saw a dark cloud of suspicion, covetousness, and conceit, overshadowing the once open face.

"Hows'ever," said he, "this is n't entertaining to Miss Bella. Is it, Bella?"

A deceiving Bella she was, to look at him with that pensively abstracted air, as if her mind were full of her book, and she had not heard a single word!

"Hah! Better employed than to attend to it," said

Mr. Boffin. "That's right, that's right. Especially as you have no call to be told how to value yourself, my dear."

Coloring a little under this compliment, Bella returned, "I hope, sir, you don't think me vain?"

"Not a bit, my dear," said Mr. Boffin. "But I think it's very creditable in you, at your age, to be so well up with the pace of the world, and to know what to go in for. You are right. Go in for money, my love. Money's the article. You'll make money of your good looks, and of the money Mrs. Boffin and me will have the pleasure of settling upon you, and you'll live and die rich. That's the state to live and die in!" said Mr. Boffin, in an unctuous manner. "R—r—rich!"

There was an expression of distress in Mrs. Boffin's face, as, after watching her husband's, she turned to their adopted girl, and said,—“Don't mind him, Bella, my dear.”

“Eh?” cried Mr. Boffin. “What! Not mind him?”

“I don't mean that,” said Mrs. Boffin, with a worried look, “but I mean, don't believe him to be anything but good and generous, Bella, because he is the best of men. No, I must say that much, Noddy. You are always the best of men.”

She made the declaration as if he were objecting to it: which assuredly he was not in any way.

“And as to you, my dear Bella,” said Mrs. Boffin, still with that distressed expression, “he is so much attached to you, whatever he says, that your own father has not a truer interest in you and can hardly like you better than he does.”

“Says too!” cried Mr. Boffin. “Whatever he says! Why, I say so, openly. Give me a kiss, my dear child,

in saying Good Night, and let me confirm what my old lady tells you. I am very fond of you, my dear, and I am entirely of your mind, and you and I will take care that you shall be rich. These good looks of yours (which you have some right to be vain of, my dear, though you are not, you know) are worth money, and you shall make money of 'em. The money you will have, will be worth money, and you shall make money of that too. There 's a golden ball at your feet. Good night, my dear."

Somehow, Bella was not so well pleased with this assurance and this prospect as she might have been. Somehow, when she put her arms round Mrs. Boffin's neck and said Good Night, she derived a sense of unworthiness from the still anxious face of that good woman and her obvious wish to excuse her husband. "Why, what need to excuse him?" thought Bella, sitting down in her own room. "What he said was very sensible, I am sure, and very true, I am sure. It is only what I often say to myself. Don't I like it then? No, I don't like it, and, though he is my liberal benefactor, I disparage him for it. Then pray," said Bella, sternly putting the question to herself in the looking-glass as usual, "what do you mean by this, you inconsistent little Beast?"

The looking-glass preserving a discreet ministerial silence when thus called upon for explanation, Bella went to bed with a weariness upon her spirit which was more than the weariness of want of sleep. And again in the morning, she looked for the cloud, and for the deepening of the cloud, upon the Golden Dustman's face.

She had begun by this time to be his frequent companion in his morning strolls about the streets, and it was at this time that he made her a party to his engaging in a

curious pursuit. Having been hard at work in one dull enclosure all his life, he had a child's delight in looking at shops. It had been one of the first novelties and pleasures of his freedom, and was equally the delight of his wife. For many years their only walks in London had been taken on Sundays when the shops were shut; and when every day in the week became their holiday, they derived an enjoyment from the variety and fancy and beauty of the display in the windows, which seemed incapable of exhaustion. As if the principal streets were a great Theatre and the play were childishly new to them, Mr. and Mrs. Boffin, from the beginning of Bella's intimacy in their house, had been constantly in the front row, charmed with all they saw, and applauding vigorously. But now, Mr. Boffin's interest began to centre in book-shops; and more than that — for that of itself would not have been much — in one exceptional kind of book.

“Look in here, my dear,” Mr. Boffin would say, checking Bella's arm at a bookseller's window; “you can read at sight, and your eyes are as sharp as they're bright. Now, look well about you, my dear, and tell me if you see any book about a Miser.”

If Bella saw such a book, Mr. Boffin would instantly dart in and buy it. And still, as if they had not found it, they would seek out another book-shop, and Mr. Boffin would say, “Now, look well all round, my dear, for a *Life of a Miser*, or any book of that sort; any *Lives of odd characters who may have been Misers.*”

Bella, thus directed, would examine the window with the greatest attention, while Mr. Boffin would examine her face. The moment she pointed out any book as being entitled *Lives of eccentric personages, Anecdotes*

of strange characters, Records of remarkable individuals, or anything to that purpose, Mr. Boffin's countenance would light up, and he would instantly dart in and buy it. Size, price, quality, were of no account. Any book that seemed to promise a chance of miserly biography, Mr. Boffin purchased without a moment's delay and carried home. Happening to be informed by a bookseller that a portion of the Annual Register was devoted to "Characters," Mr. Boffin at once bought a whole set of that ingenious compilation, and began to carry it home piecemeal, confiding a volume to Bella, and bearing three himself. The completion of this labor occupied them about a fortnight. When the task was done, Mr. Boffin, with his appetite for Misers whetted instead of satiated, began to look out again.

It very soon became unnecessary to tell Bella what to look for, and an understanding was established between her and Mr. Boffin that she was always to look for Lives of Misers. Morning after morning they roamed about the town together, pursuing this singular research. Miserly literature not being abundant, the proportion of failures to successes may have been as a hundred to one; still Mr. Boffin, never wearied, remained as avaricious for misers as he had been at the first onset. It was curious that Bella never saw the books about the house, nor did she ever hear from Mr. Boffin one word of reference to their contents. He seemed to save up his Misers as they had saved up their money. As they had been greedy for it, and secret about it, and had hidden it, so he was greedy for them, and secret about them, and hid them. But beyond all doubt it was to be noticed, and was by Bella very clearly noticed, that, as he pursued the acquisition of those dismal records with the

ardor of Don Quixote for his books of chivalry, he began to spend his money with a more sparing hand. And often when he came out of a shop with some new account of one of those wretched lunatics, she would almost shrink from the sly dry chuckle with which he would take her arm again and trot away. It did not appear that Mrs. Boffin knew of this taste. He made no allusion to it, except in the morning walks when he and Bella were always alone; and Bella, partly under the impression that he took her into his confidence by implication, and partly in remembrance of Mrs. Boffin's anxious face that night, held the same reserve.

While these occurrences were in progress, Mrs. Lamble made the discovery that Bella had a fascinating influence over her. The Lammles, originally presented by the dear Veneerings, visited the Boffins on all grand occasions, and Mrs. Lamble had not previously found this out; but now the knowledge came upon her all at once. It was a most extraordinary thing (she said to Mrs. Boffin); she was foolishly susceptible of the power of beauty, but it was n't altogether that; she never had been able to resist a natural grace of manner, but it was n't altogether that; it was more than that, and there was no name for the indescribable extent and degree to which she was captivated by this charming girl.

This charming girl having the words repeated to her by Mrs. Boffin (who was proud of her being admired, and would have done anything to give her pleasure), naturally recognized in Mrs. Lamble a woman of penetration and taste. Responding to the sentiments, by being very gracious to Mrs. Lamble, she gave that lady the means of so improving her opportunity, as that the captivation became reciprocal, though always wearing

an appearance of greater sobriety on Bella's part than on the enthusiastic Sophronia's. Howbeit, they were so much together that, for a time, the Boffin chariot held Mrs. Lammler oftener than Mrs. Boffin, — a preference of which the latter worthy soul was not in the least jealous, placidly remarking, "Mrs. Lammler is a younger companion for her than I am, and Lor! she's more fashionable."

But between Bella Wilfer and Georgiana Podsnap there was this one difference, among many others, that Bella was in no danger of being captivated by Alfred. She distrusted and disliked him. Indeed, her perception was so quick and her observation so sharp, that after all she mistrusted his wife too, though with her giddy vanity and wilfulness she squeezed the mistrust away into a corner of her mind, and blocked it up there.

Mrs. Lammler took the friendliest interest in Bella's making a good match. Mrs. Lammler said, in a sportive way, she really must show her beautiful Bella what kind of wealthy creatures she and Alfred had on hand, who would as one man fall at her feet enslaved. Fitting occasion made, Mrs. Lammler accordingly produced the most passable of those feverish, boastful, and indefinitely loose gentlemen who were always lounging in and out of the City on questions of the Bourse and Greek and Spanish and India and Mexican and par and premium and discount and three-quarters and seven-eighths. Who in their agreeable manner did homage to Bella as if she were a compound of fine girl, thorough-bred horse, well-built drag, and remarkable pipe. But without the least effect, though even Mr. Fledgeby's attractions were cast into the scale.

"I fear, Bella dear," said Mrs. Lammler one day in the chariot, "that you will be very hard to please."

"I don't expect to be pleased, dear," said Bella, with a languid turn of her eyes.

"Truly, my love," returned Sophronia, shaking her head, and smiling her best smile, it would not be very easy to find a man worthy of your attractions."

"The question is not a man, my dear," said Bella, coolly, "but an establishment."

"My love," returned Mrs. Lamble, "your prudence amazes me — where *did* you study life so well! — you are right. In such a case as yours, the object is a fitting establishment. You could not descend to an inadequate one from Mr. Boffin's house, and even if your beauty alone could not command it, it is to be assumed that Mr. and Mrs. Boffin will" —

"Oh! they have already," Bella interposed.

"No! Have they really?"

A little vexed by a suspicion that she had spoken precipitately, and withal a little defiant of her own vexation, Bella determined not to retreat.

"That is to say," she explained, "they have told me they mean to portion me as their adopted child, if you mean that. But don't mention it."

"Mention it!" replied Mrs. Lamble, as if she were full of awakened feeling at the suggestion of such an impossibility. "Mention it!"

"I don't mind telling you, Mrs. Lamble" — Bella began again.

"My love, say Sophronia, or I must not say Bella."

With a little short, petulant "Oh!" Bella complied. "Oh! — Sophronia then — I don't mind telling you, Sophronia, that I am convinced I have no heart, as people call it; and that I think that sort of thing is nonsense."

"Brave girl!" murmured Mrs. Lamble.

"And so," pursued Bella, "as to seeking to please myself, I don't; except in the one respect I have mentioned. I am indifferent otherwise."

"But you can't help pleasing, Bella," said Mrs. Lammle, rallying her with an arch look and her best smile; "you can't help making a proud and an admiring husband. You may not care to please yourself, and you may not care to please him, but you are not a free agent as to pleasing: you are forced to do that, in spite of yourself, my dear; so it may be a question whether you may not as well please yourself too, if you can."

Now, the very grossness of this flattery put Bella upon proving that she actually did please in spite of herself. She had a misgiving that she was doing wrong — though she had an indistinct foreshadowing that some harm might come of it thereafter, she little thought what consequences it would really bring about — but she went on with her confidence.

"Don't talk of pleasing in spite of one's self, dear," said Bella. "I have had enough of that."

"Ay?" cried Mrs. Lammle. "Am I already corroborated, Bella?"

"Never mind, Sophronia, we will not speak of it any more. Don't ask me about it."

This plainly meaning Do ask me about it, Mrs. Lammle did as she was requested.

"Tell me, Bella. Come, my dear. What provoking burr has been inconveniently attracted to the charming skirts, and with difficulty shaken off?"

"Provoking indeed," said Bella, "and no burr to boast of! But don't ask me."

"Shall I guess?"

"You would never guess. What would you say to our Secretary?"

"My dear! The hermit Secretary, who creeps up and down the back stairs, and is never seen!"

"I don't know about his creeping up and down the back stairs," said Bella, rather contemptuously, "further than knowing that he does no such thing; and as to his never being seen, I should be content never to have seen him, though he is quite as visible as you are. But I pleased *him* (for my sins), and he had the presumption to tell me so."

"The man never made a declaration to you, my dear Bella!"

"Are you sure of that, Sophronia?" said Bella. "I am not. In fact, I am sure of the contrary."

"The man must be mad," said Mrs. Lamble, with a kind of resignation.

"He appeared to be in his senses," returned Bella, tossing her head, "and he had plenty to say for himself. I told him my opinion of his declaration and his conduct, and dismissed him. Of course this has all been very inconvenient to me, and very disagreeable. It has remained a secret, however. That word reminds me to observe, Sophronia, that I have glided on into telling you the secret, and that I rely upon you never to mention it."

"Mention it!" repeated Mrs. Lamble with her former feeling. "Mention it!"

This time Sophronia was so much in earnest that she found it necessary to bend forward in the carriage and give Bella a kiss. A Judas order of kiss; for she thought, while she yet pressed Bella's hand after giving it, "Upon your own showing, you vain heartless girl, puffed up by the doting folly of a dustman, I need have no relenting towards *you*. If my husband, who sends me here, should form any schemes for making *you* a victim,

I should certainly not cross him again." In those very same moments, Bella was thinking, "Why am I always at war with myself? Why have I told, as if upon compulsion, what I knew all along I ought to have withheld? Why am I making a friend of this woman beside me, in spite of the whispers against her that I hear in my heart?"

As usual, there was no answer in the looking-glass when she got home and referred these questions to it. Perhaps if she had consulted some better oracle, the result might have been more satisfactory; but she did not, and all things consequent marched the march before them.

On one point connected with the watch she kept on Mr. Boffin, she felt very inquisitive, and that was the question whether the Secretary watched him too, and followed the sure and steady change in him, as she did? Her very limited intercourse with Mr. Rokesmith rendered this hard to find out. Their communication now at no time extended beyond the preservation of commonplace appearances before Mr. and Mrs. Boffin; and if Bella and the Secretary were ever left alone together by any chance, he immediately withdrew. She consulted his face when she could do so covertly, as she worked or read, and could make nothing of it. He looked subdued; but he had acquired a strong command of feature, and, whenever Mr. Boffin spoke to him in Bella's presence, or whatever revelation of himself Mr. Boffin made, the Secretary's face changed no more than a wall. A slightly knitted brow, that expressed nothing but an almost mechanical attention, and a compression of the mouth, that might have been a guard against a scornful smile—these she saw from morning to night, from day to day, from week to week, monotonous, unvarying, set, as in a piece of sculpture.

The worst of the matter was, that it thus fell out insensibly — and most provokingly, as Bella complained to herself, in her impetuous little manner — that her observation of Mr. Boffin involved a continual observation of Mr. Rokesmith. “Won’t *that* extract a look from him?” “Can it be possible *that* makes no impression on him?” Such questions Bella would propose to herself, often as many times in a day as there were hours in it. Impossible to know. Always the same fixed face.

“Can he be so base as to sell his very nature for two hundred a year?” Bella would think. And then, “But why not? It’s a mere question of price with others besides him. I suppose I would sell mine, if I could get enough for it.” And so she would come round again to the war with herself.

A kind of illegibility, though a different kind, stole over Mr. Boffin’s face. Its old simplicity of expression got masked by a certain craftiness that assimilated even his good-humor to itself. His very smile was cunning, as if he had been studying smiles among the portraits of his misers. Saving an occasional burst of impatience, or coarse assertion of his mastery, his good-humor remained to him, but it had now a sordid alloy of distrust; and though his eyes should twinkle and all his face should laugh, he would sit holding himself in his own arms, as if he had an inclination to hoard himself up, and must always grudgingly stand on the defensive.

What with taking heed of these two faces, and what with feeling conscious that the stealthy occupation must set some mark on her own, Bella soon began to think that there was not a candid or a natural face among them all but Mrs. Boffin’s. None the less because it was far less radiant than of yore, faithfully reflecting in its anxiety

and regret every line of change in the Golden Dustman's.

"Rokesmith," said Mr. Boffin one evening when they were all in his room again, and he and the Secretary had been going over some accounts, "I am spending too much money. Or leastways, you are spending too much for me."

"You are rich, sir."

"I am not," said Mr. Boffin.

The sharpness of the retort was next to telling the Secretary that he lied. But it brought no change of expression into the set face.

"I tell you I am not rich," repeated Mr. Boffin, "and I won't have it."

"You are not rich, sir?" repeated the Secretary, in measured words.

"Well," returned Mr. Boffin, "if I am, that's my business. I am not going to spend at this rate, to please you, or anybody. You would n't like it, if it was your money."

"Even in that impossible case, sir, I" —

"Hold your tongue!" said Mr. Boffin. "You ought n't to like it in any case. There! I did n't mean to be rude, but you put me out so, and after all I'm master. I did n't intend to tell you to hold your tongue. I beg your pardon. Don't hold your tongue. Only, don't contradict. Did you ever come across the Life of Mr. Elwes?" referring to his favorite subject at last.

"The miser?"

"Ah, people called him a miser. People are always calling other people something. Did you ever read about him?"

"I think so."

"He never owned to being rich, and yet he might have bought me twice over. Did you ever hear of Daniel Dancer?"

"Another miser? Yes."

"He was a good 'un," said Mr. Boffin, "and he had a sister worthy of him. They never called themselves rich neither. If they *had* called themselves rich, most likely they would n't have been so."

"They lived and died very miserably. Did they not, sir?"

"No, I don't know that they did," said Mr. Boffin, curtly.

"Then they are not the Misers I mean. Those abject wretches" —

"Don't call names, Rokesmith," said Mr. Boffin.

— "That exemplary brother and sister — lived and died in the foulest and filthiest degradation."

"They pleased themselves," said Mr. Boffin, "and I suppose they could have done no more if they had spent their money. But, however, I ain't going to fling mine away. Keep the expenses down. The fact is, you ain't enough here, Rokesmith. It wants constant attention in the littlest things. Some of us will be dying in a work-house next."

"As the persons you have cited," quietly remarked the Secretary, "thought they would, if I remember, sir."

"And very creditable in 'em too," said Mr. Boffin. "Very independent in 'em! But never mind them just now. Have you given notice to quit your lodgings?"

"Under your direction, I have, sir."

"Then I tell you what," said Mr. Boffin; "pay the quarter's rent — pay the quarter's rent, it'll be the cheapest thing in the end — and come here at once, so that you

may be always on the spot, day and night, and keep the expenses down. You'll charge the quarter's rent to me, and we must try and save it somewhere. You've got some lovely furniture; have n't you?"

"The furniture in my rooms is my own."

"Then we shan't have to buy any for you. In case you was to think it," said Mr. Boffin, with a look of peculiar shrewdness, "so honorably independent in you as to make it a relief to your mind, to make that furniture over to me in the light of a set-off against the quarter's rent, why ease your mind, ease your mind. I don't ask it, but I won't stand in your way if you should consider it due to yourself. As to your room, choose any empty room at the top of the house."

"Any empty room will do for me," said the Secretary.

"You can take your pick," said Mr. Boffin, "and it'll be as good as eight or ten shillings a week added to your income. I won't deduct for it; I look to you to make it up handsomely by keeping the expenses down. Now, if you'll show a light, I'll come to your office-room and dispose of a letter or two."

On that clear, generous face of Mrs. Boffin's, Bella had seen such traces of a pang at the heart while this dialogue was being held, that she had not the courage to turn her eyes to it when they were left alone. Feigning to be intent on her embroidery, she sat plying her needle until her busy hand was stopped by Mrs. Boffin's hand being lightly laid upon it. Yielding to the touch, she felt her hand carried to the good soul's lips, and felt a tear fall on it.

"Oh, my loved husband!" said Mrs. Boffin. "This is hard to see and hear. But, my dear Bella, believe me that in spite of all the change in him, he is the best of men."

He came back, at the moment when Bella had taken the hand comfortingly between her own.

"Eh?" said he, mistrustfully looking in at the door. "What's she telling you?"

"She is only praising you, sir," said Bella.

"Praising me? You are sure? Not blaming me for standing on my own defence against a crew of plunderers, who would suck me dry by driblets? Not blaming me for getting a little hoard together?"

He came up to them, and his wife folded her hands upon his shoulder, and shook her head as she laid it on her hands.

"There, there, there!" urged Mr. Boffin, not unkindly. "Don't take on, old lady."

"But I can't bear to see you so, my dear."

"Nonsense! Recollect we are not our old selves. Recollect, we must scrunch or be scrunched. Recollect, we must hold our own. Recollect, money makes money. Don't you be uneasy, Bella, my child; don't you be doubtful. The more I save, the more you shall have."

Bella thought it was well for his wife that she was musing with her affectionate face on his shoulder; for there was a cunning light in his eyes as he said all this, which seemed to cast a disagreeable illumination on the change in him, and make it morally uglier.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GOLDEN DUSTMAN FALLS INTO WORSE COMPANY.

It had come to pass that Mr. Silas Wegg now rarely attended the minion of fortune and the worm of the hour, at his (the worm's and minion's) own house, but lay under general instructions to await him within a certain margin of hours at the Bower. Mr. Wegg took this arrangement in great dudgeon, because the appointed hours were evening hours, and those he considered precious to the progress of the friendly move. But it was quite in character, he bitterly remarked to Mr. Venus, that the upstart who had trampled on those eminent creatures, Miss Elizabeth, Master George, Aunt Jane, and Uncle Parker should oppress his literary man.

The "Roman Empire" having worked out its destruction, Mr. Boffin next appeared in a cab with Rollin's "Ancient History," which valuable work being found to possess lethargic properties, broke down, at about the period when the whole of the army of Alexander the Macedonian (at that time about forty thousand strong) burst into tears simultaneously, on his being taken with a shivering fit after bathing. The "Wars of the Jews" likewise languishing under Mr. Wegg's generalship, Mr. Boffin arrived in another cab with Plutarch: whose "Lives" he found in the sequel extremely entertaining, though he hoped Plutarch might not expect him to believe them all. What to believe, in the course of his reading, was Mr.

Boffin's chief literary difficulty indeed ; for some time he was divided in his mind between half, all, or none ; at length, when he decided, as a moderate man, to compound with half, the question still remained, which half? And that stumbling-block he never got over.

One evening, when Silas Wegg had grown accustomed to the arrival of his patron in a cab, accompanied by some profane historian charged with unutterable names of incomprehensible peoples, of impossible descent, waging wars any number of years and syllables long, and carrying illimitable hosts and riches about, with the greatest ease, beyond the confines of geography — one evening the usual time passed by, and no patron appeared. After half an hour's grace, Mr. Wegg proceeded to the outer gate, and there executed a whistle, conveying to Mr. Venus, if perchance within hearing, the tidings of his being at home and disengaged. Forth from the shelter of a neighboring wall, Mr. Venus then emerged.

"Brother in arms," said Mr. Wegg, in excellent spirits, "welcome !"

In return, Mr. Venus gave him a rather dry good evening.

"Walk in, brother," said Silas, clapping him on the shoulder, "and take your seat in my chimley-corner ; for what says the ballad ?

'No malice to dread, sir,
And no falsehood to fear,
But truth to delight me, Mr. Venus,
And I forgot what to cheer.
Li toddle dee om dee.
And something to guide,
My ain fireside, sir,
My ain fireside.'"

With this quotation (depending for its neatness rather on

the spirit than the words), Mr. Wegg conducted his guest to his hearth.

"And you come, brother," said Mr. Wegg, in a hospitable glow, "you come like I don't know what — exactly like it — I should n't know you from it — shedding a halo all around you."

"What kind of halo?" asked Mr. Venus.

"'Ope, sir," replied Silas. "That's *your* halo."

Mr. Venus appeared doubtful on the point, and looked rather discontentedly at the fire.

"We'll devote the evening, brother," exclaimed Wegg, "to prosecute our friendly move. And arterwards, crushing a flowing wine-cup — which I allude to brewing rum and water — we'll pledge one another. For what says the Poet?

'And you need n't Mr. Venus be your black bottle,
For surely I'll be mine,
And we'll take a glass with a slice of lemon in it to which you're
partial,
For auld lang syne.'"

This flow of quotation and hospitality in Wegg indicated his observation of some little querulousness on the part of Venus.

"Why, as to the friendly move," observed the last-named gentleman, rubbing his knees peevishly, "one of my objections to it is, that it *don't* move."

"Rome, brother," returned Wegg, — "a city which (it may not be generally known) originated in twins and a wolf, and ended in Imperial marble, — was n't built in a day."

"Did I say it was?" asked Venus.

"No, you did not, brother. Well inquired."

"But I do say," proceeded Venus, "that I am taken from among my trophies of anatomy, am called upon to

exchange my human wariouſ for mere coal-aſhes wariouſ, and nothing comes of it. I think I muſt give up."

"No, ſir!" remonſtrated Wegg, enthuſiaſtically. "No ſir!

'Charge, Cheſter, charge,
On, Mr. Venus, on!'

Never ſay die, ſir! A man of your mark!"

"It's not ſo much ſaying it that I object to," returned Mr. Venus, "as doing it. And having got to do it whether or no, I can't afford to waſte my time on groping for nothing in cinders."

"But think how little time you have given to the move, ſir, after all," urged Wegg. "Add the evenings ſo occupied together, and what do they come to? And you, ſir, harmonizer with myſelf in opinions, views, and feelings; you with the patience to fit together on wires the whole framework of ſociety — I allude to the human ſkelinton — you to give in ſo ſoon!"

"I don't like it," returned Mr. Venus moodily, as he put his head between his knees and ſtuck up his duſty hair. "And there's no encouragement to go on."

"Not them Mounds without," ſaid Mr. Wregg, extending his right hand with an air of ſolemn reaſoning, "encouragement? Not them Mounds now looking down upon us?"

"They're too big," grumbled Venus. "What's a ſcratch here and a ſcrape there, a poke in this place and a dig in the other, to them? Beſides; what have we found?"

"What *have* we found?" cried Wegg, delighted to be able to acquieſce. "Ah! There I grant you, comrade. Nothing. But on the contrary, comrade, what *may* we find? There you'll grant me. Anything."

"I don't like it," pettishly returned Venus as before. "I came into it without enough consideration. And besides again. Isn't your own Mr. Boffin well acquainted with the Mounds? And was n't he well acquainted with the deceased and his ways? And has he ever showed any expectation of finding anything?"

At that moment wheels were heard.

"Now, I should be loath," said Mr. Wegg, with an air of patient injury, "to think so ill of him as to suppose him capable of coming at this time of night. And yet it sounds like him."

A ring at the yard bell.

"It *is* him," said Mr. Wegg, "and he *is* capable of it. I am sorry, because I could have wished to keep up a little lingering fragment of respect for him."

Here Mr. Boffin was heard lustily calling at the yard gate, "Halloa! Wegg! Halloa!"

"Keep your seat, Mr. Venus," said Wegg. "He may not stop." And then called out, "Halloa, sir! Halloa! I'm with you directly, sir! Half a minute, Mr. Boffin. Coming, sir, as fast as my leg will bring me!" And so with a show of much cheerful alacrity stumped out to the gate with a light, and there, through the window of a cab, descried Mr. Boffin inside, blocked up with books.

"Here! lend a hand, Wegg," said Mr. Boffin excitedly; "I can't get out till the way is cleared for me. This is the 'Annual Register,' Wegg, in a cab-full of wollumes. Do you know him?"

"Know the Animal Register, sir?" returned the Imposter, who had caught the name imperfectly. "For a trifling wager, I think I could find any Animal in him, blindfold, Mr. Boffin."

“And here’s Kirby’s ‘Wonderful Museum,’” said Mr. Boffin, “and Caulfield’s ‘Characters,’ and Wilson’s. Such Characters, Wegg, such Characters! I must have one or two of the best of ’em to-night. It’s amazing what places they used to put the guineas in, wrapped up in rags. Catch hold of that pile of wollumes, Wegg, or it’ll bulge out and burst into the mud. Is there any one about to help?”

“There’s a friend of mine, sir, that had the intention of spending the evening with me when I gave you up — much against my will — for the night.”

“Call him out,” cried Mr. Boffin in a bustle; “get him to bear a hand. Don’t drop that one under your arm. It’s Dancer. Him and his sister made pies of a dead sheep they found when they were out a-walking. Where’s your friend? “Oh, here’s your friend. Would you be so good as help Wegg and myself with these books? But don’t take ‘Jemmy Taylor of Southwark,’ nor yet ‘Jemmy Wood of Gloucester.’ These are the two Jemmys. I’ll carry them myself.”

Not ceasing to talk and bustle, in a state of great excitement, Mr. Boffin directed the removal and arrangement of the books, appearing to be in some sort beside himself until they were all deposited on the floor, and the cab was dismissed.

“There!” said Mr. Boffin, gloating over them. “There they are, like the four-and-twenty fiddlers — all of a row. Get on your spectacles, Wegg; I know where to find the best of ’em, and we’ll have a taste at once of what we have got before us. What’s your friend’s name?”

Mr. Wegg presented his friend as Mr. Venus.

“Eh?” cried Mr. Boffin, catching at the name. “Of Clerkenwell?”

"Of Clerkenwell, sir," said Mr. Venus.

"Why, I've heard of you," cried Mr. Boffin. "I heard of you in the old man's time. You knew him. Did you ever buy anything of him?" With piercing eagerness.

"No, sir," returned Venus.

"But he showed you things; did n't he?"

Mr. Venus, with a glance at his friend, replied in the affirmative.

"What did he show you?" asked Mr. Boffin, putting his hands behind him, and eagerly advancing his head. "Did he show you boxes, little cabinets, pocket-books, parcels, anything locked or sealed, anything tied up?"

Mr. Venus shook his head.

"Are you a judge of china?"

Mr. Venus again shook his head.

"Because if he had ever showed you a teapot, I should be glad to know of it," said Mr. Boffin. And then, with his right hand at his lips, repeated thoughtfully, "a Teapot, a Teapot," and glanced over the books on the floor, as if he knew there was something interesting connected with a teapot, somewhere among them.

Mr. Wegg and Mr. Venus looked at one another wonderingly; and Mr. Wegg, in fitting on his spectacles, opened his eyes wide, over their rims, and tapped the side of his nose, as an admonition to Venus to keep himself generally wide awake.

"A Teapot," repeated Mr. Boffin, continuing to muse and survey the books; "a Teapot, a Teapot. Are you ready, Wegg?"

"I am at your service, sir," replied that gentleman taking his usual seat on the usual settle, and poking his wooden leg under the table before it. "Mr. Venus,

would you make yourself useful, and take a seat beside me, sir, for the conveniency of snuffing the candles?"

Venus complying with the invitation while it was yet being given, Silas pegged at him with his wooden leg, to call his particular attention to Mr. Boffin standing musing before the fire, in the space between the two settles.

"Hem! Ahem!" coughed Mr. Wegg, to attract his employer's attention. Would you wish to commence with an Animal, sir — from the Register?"

"No," said Mr. Boffin, "no, Wegg." With that, producing a little book from his breast-pocket, he handed it with great care to the literary gentleman, and inquired, "What do you call that, Wegg?"

"This, sir," replied Silas, adjusting his spectacles, and referring to the title-page, "is Merryweather's 'Lives and Anecdotes of Misers.' Mr. Venus, would you make yourself useful and draw the candles a little nearer, sir?" This to have a special opportunity of bestowing a stare upon his comrade.

"Which of 'em have you got in that lot?" asked Mr. Boffin. "Can you find out pretty easy?"

"Well, sir," replied Silas, turning to the table of contents and slowly fluttering the leaves of the book, "I should say they must be pretty well all here, sir; here's a large assortment, sir; my eye catches John Overs, sir, John Little, sir, Dick Jarrel, John Elwes, the Rev. Mr. Jones of Blewbury, Vulture Hopkins, Daniel Dancer" —

"Give us Dancer, Wegg," said Mr. Boffin.

With another stare at his comrade, Silas sought and found the place.

"Page a hundred and nine, Mr. Boffin. Chapter eight. Contents of chapter, 'His birth and estate. His garments and outward appearance. Miss Dancer and

her feminine graces. The Miser's Mansion. The finding of a Treasure. The Story of the Mutton Pies. A Miser's Idea of Death. Bob, the Miser's cur. Griffiths and his Master. How to turn a Penny. A substitute for a Fire. The Advantages of keeping a Snuff-box. The Miser dies without a Shirt. The Treasures of a Dunghill' —

"Eh? What's that?" demanded Mr. Boffin.

"The Treasures, sir," repeated Silas, reading very distinctly, "'of a Dunghill.' Mr. Venus, sir, would you oblige with the snuffers?" This, to secure attention to his adding with his lips only, "Mounds!"

Mr. Boffin drew an arm-chair into the space where he stood, and said, seating himself and slyly rubbing his hands:

"Give us Dancer."

Mr. Wegg pursued the biography of that eminent man through its various phases of avarice and dirt, through Miss Dancer's death on a sick regimen of cold dumpling, and through Mr. Dancer's keeping his rags together with a hayband, and warming his dinner by sitting upon it, down to the consolatory incident of his dying naked in a sack. After which he read on as follows:

"The house, or rather the heap of ruins, in which Mr. Dancer lived, and which at his death devolved to the right of Captain Holmes, was a most miserable, decayed building, for it had not been repaired for more than half a century."

(Here Mr. Wegg eyed his comrade and the room in which they sat, which had not been repaired for a long time.)

"But though poor in external structure, the ruinous fabric was very rich in the interior. It took many weeks

to explore its whole contents; and Captain Holmes found it a very agreeable task to dive into the miser's secret hoards.' ”

(Here Mr. Wegg repeated “secret hoards,” and pegged his comrade again.)

“ ‘One of Mr. Dancer's richest escreteires was found to be a dung-heap in the cowhouse; a sum but little short of two thousand five hundred pounds was contained in this rich piece of manure; and in an old jacket, carefully tied, and strongly nailed down to the manger, in bank-notes and gold were found five hundred pounds more.’ ”

(Here Mr. Wegg's wooden leg started forward under the table, and slowly elevated itself as he read on.)

“ ‘Several bowls were discovered filled with guineas and half-guineas; and at different times on searching the corners of the house they found various parcels of bank-notes. Some were crammed into the crevices of the wall; ’ ”

(Here Mr. Venus looked at the wall.)

“ ‘Bundles were hid under the cushions and covers of the chairs; ’ ”

(Here Mr. Venus looked under himself on the settle.)

“ ‘Some were reposing snugly at the back of the drawers; and notes amounting to six hundred pounds were found neatly doubled up in the inside of an old teapot. In the stable the Captain found jugs full of old dollars and shillings. The chimney was not left unsearched, and paid very well for the trouble; for in nineteen different holes, all filled with soot, were found various sums of money, amounting together to more than two hundred pounds.’ ”

On the way to this crisis Mr. Wegg's wooden leg had

gradually elevated itself more and more, and he had nudged Mr. Venus with his opposite elbow deeper and deeper, until at length the preservation of his balance became incompatible with the two actions, and he now dropped over sideways upon that gentleman, squeezing him against the settle's edge. Nor did either of the two, for some few seconds, make any effort to recover himself; both remaining in a kind of pecuniary swoon.

But the sight of Mr. Boffin sitting in the arm-chair hugging himself, with his eyes upon the fire, acted as a restorative. Counterfeiting a sneeze to cover their movements, Mr. Wegg, with a spasmodic "Tish-ho!" pulled himself and Mr. Venus up in a masterly manner.

"Let's have some more," said Mr. Boffin, hungrily.

"John Elwes is the next, sir. Is it your pleasure to take John Elwes?"

"Ah!" said Mr. Boffin. "Let's hear what John did."

He did not appear to have hidden anything, so went off rather flatly. But an exemplary lady named Wilcocks, who had stowed away gold and silver in a pickle-pot in a clock-case, a canister-full of treasure in a hole under her stairs, and a quantity of money in an old rat-trap, revived the interest. To her succeeded another lady, claiming to be a pauper, whose wealth was found wrapped up in little scraps of paper and old rag. To her, another lady, apple-woman by trade, who had saved a fortune of ten thousand pounds and hidden it "here and there, in cracks and corners, behind bricks and under the flooring." To her, a French gentleman, who had crammed up his chimney, rather to the detriment of its drawing powers, "a leather valise, containing twenty thousand francs, gold coins, and a large quantity of

precious stones," as discovered by a chimneysweep after his death. By these steps Mr. Wegg arrived at a concluding instance of the human Magpie:—

"Many years ago, there lived at Cambridge a miserly old couple of the name of Jardine: they had two sons: the father was a perfect miser, and at his death one thousand guineas were discovered secreted in his bed. The two sons grew up as parsimonious as their sire. When about twenty years of age, they commenced business at Cambridge as drapers, and they continued there until their death. The establishment of the Messrs. Jardine was the most dirty of all the shops in Cambridge. Customers seldom went in to purchase, except perhaps out of curiosity. The brothers were most disreputable-looking beings; for, although surrounded with gay apparel as their staple in trade, they wore the most filthy rags themselves. It is said that they had no bed, and, to save the expense of one, always slept on a bundle of packing-cloths under the counter. In their house-keeping they were penurious in the extreme. A joint of meat did not grace their board for twenty years. Yet when the first of the brothers died, the other, much to his surprise, found large sums of money which had been secreted even from him."

"There!" cried Mr. Boffin. "Even from him, you see! There was only two of 'em, and yet one of 'em hid from the other."

Mr. Venus, who since his introduction to the French gentleman, had been stooping to peer up the chimney, had his attention recalled by the last sentence, and took the liberty of repeating it.

"Do you like it?" asked Mr. Boffin, turning suddenly.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

Do you like what Wegg's been a-reading?"

Mr. Venus answered that he found it extremely interesting.

"Then come again," said Mr. Boffin, "and hear some more. Come when you like; come the day after tomorrow, half an hour sooner. There's plenty more; there's no end to it."

Mr. Venus expressed his acknowledgments, and accepted the invitation.

"It's wonderful what's been hid, at one time and another," said Mr. Boffin, ruminating; "truly wonderful."

"Meaning, sir," observed Wegg, with a propitiatory face to draw him out, and with another peg at his friend and brother, "in the way of money?"

"Money," said Mr. Boffin. "Ah! And papers."

Mr. Wegg, in a languid transport, again dropped over on Mr. Venus, and again recovering himself, masked his emotions with a sneeze.

"Tish-ho! Did you say papers too, sir? Been hidden, sir?"

"Hidden and forgot," said Mr. Boffin. "Why, the bookseller that sold me the 'Wonderful Museum'—where's the 'Wonderful Museum'?" He was on his knees on the floor in a moment, groping eagerly among the books.

"Can I assist you, sir?" asked Wegg.

"No, I have got it; here it is," said Mr. Boffin, dusting it with the sleeve of his coat. "Wollume four. I know it was the fourth wollume, that the bookseller read it to me out of. Look for it, Wegg."

Silas took the book and turned the leaves.

"Remarkable petrification, sir?"

"No, that's not it," said Mr. Boffin. "It can't have been a petrification."

"Memoirs of General John Reid, commonly called The Walking Rushlight, sir? With portrait?"

"No, nor yet him," said Mr. Boffin.

"Remarkable case of a person who swallowed a crown-piece, sir?"

"To hide it?" asked Mr. Boffin.

"Why, no, sir," replied Wegg, consulting the text, "it appears to have been done by accident. Oh! This next must be it. 'Singular discovery of a will, lost twenty-one years.'"

"That's it!" cried Mr. Boffin. "Read that."

"'A most extraordinary case,'" read Silas Wegg aloud, "'was tried at the last Maryborough assizes in Ireland. It was briefly this. Robert Baldwin, in March 1782, made his will, in which he devised the lands now in question to the children of his youngest son; soon after which his faculties failed him, and he became altogether childish and died, above eighty years old. The defendant, the eldest son, immediately afterwards gave out that his father had destroyed the will; and no will being found, he entered into possession of the lands in question, and so matters remained for twenty-one years, the whole family during all that time believing that the father had died without a will. But after twenty-one years the defendant's wife died, and he very soon afterwards, at the age of seventy-eight, married a very young woman: which caused some anxiety to his two sons, whose poignant expressions of this feeling so exasperated their father, that he in his resentment executed a will to disinherit his eldest son, and in his fit of anger showed it to his second son, who instantly determined

to get at it, and destroy it, in order to preserve the property to his brother. With this view, he broke open his father's desk, where he found — not his father's will which he sought after, but the will of his grandfather, which was then altogether forgotten in the family.'”

“There!” said Mr. Boffin. “See what men put away and forget, or mean to destroy, and don't!” He then added in a slow tone, “As—ton—ish—ing!” And as he rolled his eyes all round the room, Wegg and Venus likewise rolled their eyes all round the room. And then Wegg, singly, fixed his eyes on Mr. Boffin looking at the fire again; as if he had a mind to spring upon him and demand his thoughts or his life.

“However, time's up for to-night,” said Mr. Boffin, waving his hand after a silence. “More, the day after to-morrow. Range the books upon the shelves, Wegg. I dare say Mr. Venus will be so kind as help you.”

While speaking, he thrust his hand into the breast of his outer coat, and struggled with some object there that was too large to be got out easily. What was the stupefaction of the friendly movers when this object at last emerging, proved to be a much dilapidated dark lantern!

Without at all noticing the effect produced by this little instrument, Mr. Boffin stood it on his knee, and, producing a box of matches, deliberately lighted the candle in the lantern, blew out the kindled match, and cast the end into the fire. “I'm going, Wegg,” he then announced, “to take a turn about the place and round the yard. I don't want you. Me and this same lantern have taken hundreds — thousands — of such turns in our time together.”

“But I could n't think, sir — not on any account, I could n't,” — Wegg was politely beginning, when Mr.

Boffin, who had risen and was going towards the door, stopped.

"I have told you that I don't want you, Wegg."

Wegg looked intelligently thoughtful, as if that had not occurred to his mind until he now brought it to bear on the circumstance. He had nothing for it but to let Mr. Boffin go out and shut the door behind him. But, the instant he was on the other side of it, Wegg clutched Venus with both hands, and said in a choking whisper, as if he were being strangled, —

"Mr. Venus, he must be followed, he must be watched, he must n't be lost sight of for a moment."

"Why must n't he?" asked Venus, also strangling.

"Comrade, you might have noticed I was a little elevated in spirits when you come in to-night. I've found something."

"What have you found?" asked Venus, clutching him with both hands, so that they stood interlocked like a couple of preposterous gladiators.

"There's no time to tell you now. I think he must have gone to look for it. We must have an eye upon him instantly."

Releasing each other, they crept to the door, opened it softly, and peeped out. It was a cloudy night, and the black shadow of the Mounds made the dark yard darker. "If not a double swindler," whispered Wegg, "why a dark lantern? We could have seen what he was about, if he had carried a light one. Softly, this way."

Cautiously along the path that was bordered by fragments of crockery set in ashes, the two stole after him. They could hear him at his peculiar trot, crushing the loose cinders as he went. "He knows the place by heart," muttered Silas, "and don't need to turn his lan-

tern on, confound him!" But he did turn it on, almost in that same instant, and flashed its light upon the first of the Mounds.

"Is that the spot?" asked Venus, in a whisper.

"He's warm," said Silas in the same tone. "He's precious warm. He's close. I think he must be going to look for it. What's that he's got in his hand?"

"A shovel," answered Venus. "And he knows how to use it, remember, fifty times as well as either of us."

"If he looks for it and misses it, partner," suggested Wegg, "what shall we do?"

"First of all, wait till he does," said Venus.

Discreet advice too, for he darkened his lantern again, and the mound turned black. After a few seconds, he turned the light on once more, and was seen standing at the foot of the second mound, slowly raising the lantern little by little until he held it up at arm's length, as if he were examining the condition of the whole surface.

"That can't be the spot too?" said Venus.

"No," said Wegg, "he's getting cold."

"It strikes me," whispered Venus, "that he wants to find out whether any one has been groping about there."

"Hush!" returned Wegg, "he's getting colder and colder. Now he's freezing!"

This exclamation was elicited by his having turned the lantern off again, and on again, and being visible at the foot of the third mound.

"Why, he's going up it!" said Venus.

"Shovel and all!" said Wegg.

At a nimbler trot, as if the shovel over his shoulder stimulated him by reviving old associations, Mr. Boffin ascended the "serpentining walk," up the Mound which he had described to Silas Wegg on the occasion of their

beginning to decline and fall. On striking into it he turned his lantern off. The two followed him, stooping low, so that their figures might make no mark in relief against the sky when he should turn his lantern on again. Mr. Venus took the lead, towing Mr. Wegg, in order that his refractory leg might be promptly extricated from any pitfalls it should dig for itself. They could just make out that the Golden Dustman stopped to breathe. Of course they stopped too, instantly.

"This is his own Mound," whispered Wegg, as he recovered his wind, "this one."

"Why, all three are his own," returned Venus.

"So he thinks; but he's used to call this his own, because it's the one first left to him; the one that was his legacy when it was all he took under the will."

"When he shows his light," said Venus, keeping watch upon his dusky figure all the time, "drop lower and keep closer."

He went on again, and they followed again. Gaining the top of the Mound, he turned on his light — but only partially — and stood it on the ground. A bare lopsided weatherbeaten pole was planted in the ashes there, and had been there many a year. Hard by this pole, his lantern stood: lighting a few feet of the lower part of it and a little of the ashy surface around, and then casting off a purposeless little clear trail of light into the air.

"He can never be going to dig up the pole!" whispered Venus as they dropped low and kept close.

"Perhaps it's holler and full of something," whispered Wegg.

He was going to dig, with whatsoever object, for he tucked up his cuffs and spat on his hands, and then went

at it like an old digger as he was. He had no design upon the pole, except that he measured a shovel's length from it before beginning; nor was it his purpose to dig deep. Some dozen or so of expert strokes sufficed. Then he stopped, looked down into the cavity, bent over it, and took out what appeared to be an ordinary case-bottle: one of those squat, high-shouldered, short-necked glass bottles which the Dutchman is said to keep his Courage in. As soon as he had done this, he turned off his lantern, and they could hear that he was filling up the hole in the dark. The ashes being easily moved by a skilful hand, the spies took this as a hint to make off in good time. Accordingly, Mr. Venus slipped past Mr. Wegg and towed him down. But Mr. Wegg's descent was not accomplished without some personal inconvenience, for his self-willed leg sticking into the ashes about half-way down, and time pressing, Mr. Venus took the liberty of hauling him from his tether by the collar; which occasioned him to make the rest of the journey on his back, with his head enveloped in the skirts of his coat, and his wooden leg coming last, like a drag. So flustered was Mr. Wegg by this mode of travelling, that when he was set on the level ground with his intellectual developments uppermost, he was quite unconscious of his bearings, and had not the least idea where his place of residence was to be found, until Mr. Venus shoved him into it. Even then he staggered round and round, weakly staring about him, until Mr. Venus with a hard brush brushed his senses into him and the dust out of him.

Mr. Boffin came down leisurely, for this brushing process had been well accomplished, and Mr. Venus had had time to take his breath, before he reappeared. That he had the bottle somewhere about him could not be doubted;

where, was not so clear. He wore a large rough coat, buttoned over, and it might be in any one of half a dozen pockets.

“What’s the matter, Wegg?” said Mr. Boffin. “You are as pale as a candle.”

Mr. Wegg replied, with literal exactness, that he felt as if he had had a turn.

“Bile,” said Mr. Boffin, blowing out the light in the lantern, shutting it up, and stowing it away in the breast of his coat as before. “Are you subject to bile, Wegg?”

Mr. Wegg again replied, with strict adherence to truth, that he did n’t think he had ever had a similar sensation in his head, to anything like the same extent.

“Physic yourself to-morrow, Wegg,” said Mr. Boffin, “to be in order for next night. By the by, this neighborhood is going to have a loss, Wegg.”

“A loss, sir?”

“Going to lose the Mounds.”

The friendly movers made such an obvious effort not to look at one another, that they might as well have stared at one another with all their might.

“Have you parted with them, Mr. Boffin?” asked Silas.

“Yes; they’re going. Mine’s as good as gone already.”

“You mean the little one of the three, with the pole atop, sir.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Boffin, rubbing his ear in his old way, with that new touch of craftiness added to it. “It has fetched a penny. It’ll begin to be carted off to-morrow.”

“Have you been out to take leave of your old friend, sir?” asked Silas, jocosely.

"No," said Mr. Boffin. "What the devil put that in your head?"

He was so sudden and rough, that Wegg, who had been hovering closer and closer to his skirts, despatching the back of his hand on exploring expeditions in search of the bottle's surface, retired two or three paces.

"No offence, sir," said Wegg, humbly. "No offence."

Mr. Boffin eyed him as a dog might eye another dog who wanted his bone; and actually retorted with a low growl, as the dog might have retorted.

"Good-night," he said, after having sunk into a moody silence, with his hands clasped behind him, and his eyes suspiciously wandering about Wegg. — "No! stop there. I know the way out, and I want no light."

Avarice, and the evening's legends of avarice, and the inflammatory effect of what he had seen, and perhaps the rush of his ill-conditioned blood to his brain in his descent, wrought Silas Wegg to such a pitch of insatiable appetite, that when the door closed he made a swoop at it and drew Venus along with him.

"He must n't go," he cried. "We must n't let him go? He has got that bottle about him. We must have that bottle."

"Why, you would n't take it by force?" said Venus, restraining him.

"Would n't I? Yes I would. I'd take it by any force, I'd have it at any price! Are you so afraid of one old man as to let him go, you coward?"

"I am so afraid of you, as not to let *you* go," muttered Venus, sturdily, clasping him in his arms.

"Did you hear him?" retorted Wegg. "Did you hear him say that he was resolved to disappoint us? Did you hear him say, you cur, that he was going to have the

Mounds cleared off, when no doubt the whole place will be rummaged? If you have n't the spirit of a mouse to defend your rights, I have. Let me go after him."

As in his wildness he was making a strong struggle for it, Mr. Venus deemed it expedient to lift him, throw him, and fall with him; well knowing that, once down, he would not be up again easily with his wooden leg. So they both rolled on the floor, and, as they did so, Mr. Boffin shut the gate.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FRIENDLY MOVE TAKES UP A STRONG POSITION.

THE friendly movers sat upright on the floor, panting and eying one another, after Mr. Boffin had slammed the gate and gone away. In the weak eyes of Venus, and in every reddish dust-colored hair in his shock of hair, there was a marked distrust of Wegg and an alertness to fly at him on perceiving the smallest occasion. In the hard-grained face of Wegg, and in his stiff knotty figure, (he looked like a German wooden toy,) there was expressed a politic conciliation, which had no spontaneity in it. Both were flushed, flustered, and rumped, by the late scuffle; and Wegg, in coming to the ground, had received a humming knock on the back of his devoted head, which caused him still to rub it with an air of having been highly — but disagreeably — astonished. Each was silent for some time, leaving it to the other to begin.

“Brother,” said Wegg, at length breaking the silence, “you were right, and I was wrong. I forgot myself.”

Mr. Venus knowingly cocked his shock of hair, as rather thinking Mr. Wegg had remembered himself, in respect of appearing without any disguise.

“But comrade,” pursued Wegg, “it was never your lot to know Miss Elizabeth, Master George, Aunt Jane, nor Uncle Parker.”

Mr. Venus admitted that he had never known those

distinguished persons, and added, in effect, that he had never so much as desired the honor of their acquaintance.

“Don’t say that, comrade!” retorted Wegg: “No, don’t say that! Because, without having known them, you never can fully know what it is to be stimulated to frenzy by the sight of the Usurper.”

Offering these excusatory words as if they reflected great credit on himself, Mr. Wegg impelled himself with his hands towards a chair in a corner of the room, and there, after a variety of awkward gambols, attained a perpendicular position. Mr. Venus also rose.

“Comrade,” said Wegg, “take a seat. Comrade, what a speaking countenance is yours!”

Mr. Venus involuntarily smoothed his countenance, and looked at his hand, as if to see whether any of its speaking properties came off.

“For clearly do I know, mark you,” pursued Wegg, pointing his words with his forefinger, — “clearly do I know what question your expressive features puts to me.”

“What question?” said Venus.

“The question,” returned Wegg, with a sort of joyful affability, “why I did n’t mention sooner, that I had found something. Says your speaking countenance to me: ‘Why did n’t you communicate that, when I first come in this evening? Why did you keep it back till you thought Mr. Boffin had come to look for the article?’ Your speaking countenance,” said Wegg, “puts it plainer than language. Now, you can’t read in my face what answer I give?”

“No, I can’t,” said Venus.

“I knew it! And why not?” returned Wegg, with the same joyful candor. “Because I lay no claims to a

speaking countenance. Because I am well aware of my deficiencies. All men are not gifted alike. But I can answer in words. And in what words? These. I wanted to give you a delightful sap—pur—IZE!”

Having thus elongated and emphasized the word Surprise, Mr. Wegg shook his friend and brother by both hands, and then clapped him on both knees, like an affectionate patron who entreated him not to mention so small a service as that which it had been his happy privilege to render.

“Your speaking countenance,” said Wegg, “being answered to it ssatisfaction, only asks then, ‘What have you found?’ Why, I hear it say the words!”

“Well?” retorted Venus snappishly, after waiting in vain. “If you hear it say the words, why don’t you answer it?”

“Hear me out!” said Wegg. “I’m agoing to. Hear me out! Man and brother, partner in feelings equally with undertakings and actions, I have found a cash-box.”

“Where?”

—“Hear me out!” said Wegg. (He tried to reserve whatever he could, and, whenever disclosure was forced upon him, broke into a radiant gush of Hear me out.) “On a certain day, sir” —

“When?” said Venus bluntly.

“N—no,” returned Wegg, shaking his head at once observantly, thoughtfully, and playfully. “No, sir! That’s not your expressive countenance which asks that question. That’s your voice; merely your voice. To proceed. On a certain day, sir, I happened to be walking in the yard — taking my lonely round — for in the words of a friend of my own family, the author of ‘All’s Well’ arranged as a duet, —

Deserted, as you will remember, Mr. Venus, by the waning moon,
 When stars, it will occur to you before I mention it, proclaim night's
 cheerless noon,
 On tower, fort, or tented ground,
 The sentry walks his lonely round,
 The sentry walks:'

— under those circumstances, sir, I happened to be walking in the yard early one afternoon, and happened to have an iron rod in my hand, with which I have been sometimes accustomed to beguile the monotony of a literary life, when I struck it against an object not necessary to trouble you by naming" —

"It is necessary. What object?" demanded Venus, in a wrathful tone.

—"Hear me out!" said Wegg. "The Pump.— When I struck it against the Pump, and found, not only that the top was loose and opened with a lid, but that something in it rattled. That something, comrade, I discovered to be a small flat oblong cash-box. Shall I say it was disappointingly light?"

"There were papers in it," said Venus.

"There your expressive countenance speaks indeed!" cried Wegg. "A paper. The box was locked, tied up, and sealed, and on the outside was a parchment label, with the writing, 'MY WILL, JOHN HARMON, TEMPORARILY DEPOSITED HERE.'"

"We must know its contents," said Venus.

—"Hear me out!" cried Wegg. "I said so, and I broke the box open."

"Without coming to me!" exclaimed Venus.

"Exactly so, sir!" returned Wegg, blandly and buoyantly. "I see I take you with me! Hear, hear, hear! Resolved, as your discriminating good sense perceives, that if you was to have a sap—pur—ize, it should be

a complete one! Well, sir. And so, as you have honored me by anticipating, I examined the document. Regularly executed, regularly witnessed, very short. Inasmuch as he has never made friends, and has ever had a rebellious family, he, John Harmon, gives to Nicodemus Boffin the Little Mound, which is quite enough for him, and gives the whole rest and residue of his property to the Crown."

"The date of the will that has been proved must be looked to," remarked Venus. "It may be later than this one."

—"Hear me out!" cried Wegg. "I said so. I paid a shilling (never mind your sixpence of it) to look up that will. Brother, that will is dated months before this will. And now, as a fellow-man, and as a partner in a friendly move," added Wegg, benignantly taking him by both hands again, and clapping him on both knees again, "say, have I completed my labor of love to your perfect satisfaction, and are you sap—pur—ized?"

Mr. Venus contemplated his fellow-man and partner with doubting eyes, and then rejoined stiffly, —

"This is great news indeed, Mr. Wegg. There's no denying it. But I could have wished you had told it me before you got your fright to-night, and I could have wished you had ever asked me as your partner what we were to do, before you thought you were dividing a responsibility."

—"Hear me out!" cried Wegg. "I knew you was agoing to say so. But alone I bore the anxiety, and alone I'll bear the blame!" This with an air of great magnanimity.

"Now," said Venus. "Let's see this will and this box."

“Do I understand, brother,” returned Wegg with considerable reluctance, “that it is your wish to see this will and this —”

Mr. Venus smote the table with his hand.

— “Hear me out!” said Wegg. “Hear me out! I’ll go and fetch ’em.”

After being some time absent, as if in his covetousness he could hardly make up his mind to produce the treasure to his partner, he returned with an old leathern hat-box, into which he had put the other box, for the better preservation of commonplace appearances, and for the disarming of suspicion. “But I don’t half like opening it here,” said Silas in a low voice, looking around: “he might come back, he may not be gone; we don’t know what he may be up to, after what we’ve seen.”

“There’s something in that,” assented Venus. “Come to my place.”

Jealous of the custody of the box, and yet fearful of opening it under the existing circumstances, Wegg hesitated. “Come, I tell you,” repeated Venus, chafing, “to my place.” Not very well seeing his way to a refusal, Mr. Wegg then rejoined in a gush, — “Hear me out! — Certainly.” So he locked up the Bower, and they set forth; Mr. Venus taking his arm, and keeping it with remarkable tenacity.

They found the usual dim light burning in the window of Mr. Venus’s establishment, imperfectly disclosing to the public the usual pair of preserved frogs, sword in hand, with their point of honor still unsettled. Mr. Venus had closed his shop-door on coming out, and now opened it with the key and shut it again as soon as they were within; but not before he had put up and barred the shutters of the shop-window. “No one can get in

without being let in," said he then, "and we could n't be more snug than here." So he raked together the yet warm cinders in the rusty grate, and made a fire, and trimmed the candle on the little counter. As the fire cast its flickering gleams here and there upon the dark greasy walls, the Hindoo baby, the African baby, the articulated English baby, the assortment of skulls, and the rest of the collection, came starting to their various stations as if they had all been out, like their master, and were punctual in a general rendezvous to assist at the secret. The French gentleman had grown considerably since Mr. Wegg last saw him, being now accommodated with a pair of legs and a head, though his arms were yet in abeyance. To whomsoever the head had originally belonged, Silas Wegg would have regarded it as a personal favor if he had not cut quite so many teeth.

Silas took his seat in silence on the wooden box before the fire, and Venus dropping into his low chair produced from among his skeleton hands, his tea-tray and tea-cups, and put the kettle on. Silas inwardly approved of these preparations, trusting they might end in Mr. Venus's diluting his intellect.

"Now, sir," said Venus, "all is safe and quiet. Let us see this discovery."

With still reluctant hands, and not without several glances towards the skeleton hands, as if he mistrusted that a couple of them might spring forth and clutch the document, Wegg opened the hat-box and revealed the cash-box, opened the cash-box and revealed the will. He held a corner of it tight, while Venus, taking hold of another corner, searchingly and attentively read it.

"Was I correct in my account of it, partner?" said Mr. Wegg at length.

"Partner, you were," said Mr. Venus.

Mr. Wegg thereupon made an easy, graceful movement, as though he would fold it up; but Mr. Venus held on by his corner.

"No, sir," said Mr. Venus, winking his weak eyes and shaking his head. "No, partner. The question is now brought up, who is going to take care of this. Do you know who is going to take care of this, partner?"

"I am," said Wegg.

"Oh dear no, partner," retorted "Venus. "That's a mistake. I am. Now look here, Mr. Wegg. I don't want to have any words with you, and still less do I want to have any anatomical pursuits with you."

"What do you mean?" said Wegg, quickly.

"I mean, partner," replied Venus, slowly, "that it's hardly possible for a man to feel in a more amiable state towards another man than I do towards you at this present moment. But I am on my own ground, I am surrounded by the trophies of my art, and my tools is very handy."

"What do you mean, Mr. Venus?" asked Wegg again.

"I am surrounded, as I have observed," said Mr. Venus, placidly, "by the trophies of my art. They are numerous, my stock of human wariouis is large, the shop is pretty well crammed, and I don't just now want any more trophies of my art. But I like my art, and I know how to exercise my art."

"No man better," assented Mr. Wegg, with a somewhat staggered air.

"There's the Miscellanies of several human specimens," said Venus, "(though you might n't think it,) in the box on which you're sitting. There's the Miscel-

lanies of several human specimens, in the lovely compo-
one behind the door;" with a nod towards the French
gentleman. "It still wants a pair of arms. I *don't* say
that I'm in any hurry for 'em."

"You must be wandering in your mind, partner,"
Silas remonstrated.

"You'll excuse me if I wander," returned Venus;
"I am sometimes rather subject to it. I like my art,
and I know how to exercise my art, and I mean to have
the keeping of this document."

"But what has that got to do with your art, partner?"
asked Wegg, in an insinuating tone.

Mr. Venus winked his chronically-fatigued eyes both
at once, and adjusting the kettle on the fire, remarked to
himself, in a hollow voice, "She'll bile in a couple of
minutes."

Silas Wegg glanced at the kettle, glanced at the
shelves, glanced at the French gentleman behind the
door, and shrank a little as he glanced at Mr. Venus
winking his red eyes, and feeling in his waistcoat-pocket
— as for a lancet, say — with his unoccupied hand.
He and Venus were necessarily seated close together, as
each held a corner of the document, which was but a
common sheet of paper.

"Partner," said Wegg, even more insinuatingly than
before, "I propose that we cut it in half, and each keep
a half."

Venus shook his shock of hair, as he replied, "It
would n't do to mutilate it, partner. It might seem to
be cancelled."

"Partner," said Wegg, after a silence, during which
they had contemplated one another, "don't your speaking
countenance say that you're agoing to suggest a middle
course?"

Venus shook his shock of hair as he replied, "Partner, you have kept this paper from me once. You shall never keep it from me again. I offer you the box and the label to take care of, but I'll take care of the paper."

Silas hesitated a little longer, and then suddenly releasing his corner, and resuming his buoyant and benignant tone, exclaimed, "What's life without trustfulness! What's a fellow-man without honor! You're welcome to it, partner, in a spirit of trust and confidence."

Continuing to wink his red eyes both together, — but in a self-communing way, and without any show of triumph, — Mr. Venus folded the paper now left in his hand, and locked it in a drawer behind him, and pocketed the key. He then proposed "A cup of tea, partner?" To which Mr. Wegg returned, "Thank'ee, partner," and the tea was made and poured out.

"Next," said Venus, blowing at his tea in his saucer, and looking over it at his confidential friend, "comes the question, What's the course to be pursued?"

On this head, Silas Wegg had much to say. Silas had to say That, he would beg to remind his comrade, brother, and partner, of the impressive passages they had read that evening; of the evident parallel in Mr. Boffin's mind between them and the late owner of the Bower, and the present circumstances of the Bower; of the bottle; and of the box. That, the fortunes of his brother and comrade, and of himself, were evidently made, inasmuch as they had but to put their price upon this document, and get that price from the minion of fortune and the worm of the hour: who now appeared to be less of a minion and more of a worm than had been previously supposed. That, he considered it plain that such price was statable in a single expressive word, and that the word was

“Halves!” That, the question then arose when “Halves!” should be called. That, here he had a plan of action to recommend, with a conditional clause. That, the plan of action was that they should lie by with patience; that, they should allow the Mounds to be gradually levelled and cleared away, while retaining to themselves their present opportunity of watching the process,— which would be, he conceived, to put the trouble and cost of daily digging and delving upon somebody else, while they might nightly turn such complete disturbance of the dust to the account of their own private investigations,— and that, when the Mounds were gone, and they had worked those chances for their own joint benefit solely, they should then, and not before, explode on the minion and worm. But here came the conditional clause, and to this he entreated the special attention of his comrade, brother, and partner. It was not to be borne that the minion and worm should carry off any of that property which was now to be regarded as their own property. When he, Mr. Wegg, had seen the minion surreptitiously making off with that bottle, and its precious contents unknown, he had looked upon him in the light of a mere robber, and, as such, would have despoiled him of his ill-gotten gain, but for the judicious interference of his comrade, brother, and partner. Therefore, the conditional clause he proposed was, that, if the minion should return in his late sneaking manner, and if, being closely watched, he should be found to possess himself of anything, no matter what, the sharp sword impending over his head should be instantly shown him, he should be strictly examined as to what he knew or suspected, should be severely handled by them his masters, and should be kept in a state of abject moral bondage and slavery until the time when

they should see fit to permit him to purchase his freedom at the price of half his possessions. If, said Mr. Wegg by way of peroration, he had erred in saying only "Halves!" he trusted to his comrade, brother, and partner not to hesitate to set him right, and to reprove his weakness. It might be more according to the rights of things, to say Two-thirds; it might be more according to the rights of things, to say Three-fourths. On those points he was ever open to correction.

Mr. Venus, having wafted his attention to this discourse over three successive saucers of tea, signified his concurrence in the views advanced. Inspired hereby, Mr. Wegg extended his right hand, and declared it to be a hand which never yet. Without entering into more minute particulars. Mr. Venus, sticking to his tea, briefly professed his belief, as polite forms required of him, that it *was* a hand which never yet. But contented himself with looking at it, and did not take it to his bosom.

"Brother," said Wegg, when this happy understanding was established, "I should like to ask you something. You remember the night when I first looked in here, and found you floating your powerful mind in tea?"

Still swilling tea, Mr. Venus nodded assent.

"And there you sit, sir," pursued Wegg, with an air of thoughtful admiration, "as if you had never left off! There you sit, sir, as if you had an unlimited capacity of assimilating the flagrant article! There you sit, sir, in the midst of your works, looking as if you'd been called upon for 'Home, Sweet Home,' and was obleeing the company!

'A exile from home splendour dazzles in vain,
O give you your lowly Preparations again,
The birds stuffed so sweetly that can't be expected to come at your
call,
Give you these with the peace of mind dearer than all.
Home, Home, Home, sweet Home!'

— Be it ever," added Mr. Wegg in prose as he glanced about the shop, — "ever so ghastly, all things considered there's no place like it."

"You said you'd like to ask something; but you have n't asked it," remarked Venus, very unsympathetic in manner.

"Your peace of mind," said Wegg, offering condolence, "your peace of mind was in a poor way that night. *How's it going on? Is it looking up at all?*"

"She does not wish," replied Mr. Venus with a comical mixture of indignant obstinacy and tender melancholy, "to regard herself, nor yet to be regarded, in that particular light. There's no more to be said."

"Ah, dear me, dear me!" exclaimed Wegg with a sigh, but eying him while pretending to keep him company in eying the fire, "such is Woman! And I remember you said that night, sitting there as I sat here — said that night when your peace of mind was first laid low, that you had taken an interest in these very affairs. Such is coincidence!"

"Her father," rejoined Venus, and then stopped to swallow more tea, — "her father was mixed up in them."

"You did n't mention her name, sir, I think?" observed Wegg, pensively. "No, you did n't mention her name that night."

"Pleasant Riderhood."

"In—deed!" cried Wegg. "Pleasant Riderhood. There's something moving in the name. Pleasant. Dear me! Seems to express what she might have been, if she had n't made that unpleasant remark, — and what she ain't, in consequence of having made it. Would it at all pour balm into your wounds, Mr. Venus, to inquire how you came acquainted with her?"

“I was down at the water-side,” said Venus, taking another gulp of tea and mournfully winking at the fire, — “looking for parrots,” — taking another gulp and stopping.

Mr. Wegg hinted, to jog his attention, “You could hardly have been out parrot-shooting, in the British climate, sir?”

“No, no, no,” said Venus fretfully. “I was down at the water-side, looking for parrots brought home by sailors, to buy for stuffing.”

“Ay, ay, ay, sir!”

— “And looking for a nice pair of rattlesnakes, to articulate for a Museum, — when I was doomed to fall in with her and deal with her. It was just at the time of that discovery in the river. Her father had seen the discovery being towed in the river. I made the popularity of the subject a reason for going back to improve the acquaintance, and I have never since been the man I was. My very bones is rendered flabby by brooding over it. If they could be brought to me loose, to sort, I should hardly have the face to claim 'em as mine. To such an extent have I fallen off under it.”

Mr. Wegg, less interested than he had been, glanced at one particular shelf in the dark.

“Why, I remember, Mr. Venus,” he said in a tone of friendly commiseration, “(for I remember every word that falls from you, sir), — I remember that you said that night, you had got up there — and then your words was, ‘Never mind.’”

— “The parrot that I bought of her,” said Venus, with a despondent rise and fall of his eyes. “Yes; there it lies on its side, dried up; except for its plumage, very like myself. I’ve never had the heart to prepare it, and I never shall have now.”

With a disappointed face, Silas mentally consigned this parrot to regions more than tropical, and, seeming for the time to have lost his power of assuming an interest in the woes of Mr. Venus, fell to tightening his wooden leg as a preparation for departure: its gymnastic performances of that evening having severely tried its constitution.

After Silas had left the shop, hat-box in hand, and had left Mr. Venus to lower himself to oblivion-point with the requisite weight of tea, it greatly preyed on his ingenuous mind that he had taken this artist into partnership at all. He bitterly felt that he had overreached himself in the beginning, by grasping at Mr. Venus's mere straws of hints, now shown to be worthless for his purpose. Casting about for ways and means of dissolving the connection without loss of money, reproaching himself for having been betrayed into an avowal of his secret, and complimenting himself beyond measure on his purely accidental good luck, he beguiled the distance between Clerkenwell and the mansion of the Golden Dustman.

For, Silas Wegg felt it to be quite out of the question that he could lay his head upon his pillow in peace, without first hovering over Mr. Boffin's house in the superior character of its Evil Genius. Power (unless it be the power of intellect or virtue) has ever the greatest attraction for the lowest natures; and the mere defiance of the unconscious house-front, with his power to strip the roof off the inhabiting family like the roof of a house of cards, was a treat which had a charm for Silas Wegg.

As he hovered on the opposite side of the street, exulting, the carriage drove up.

"There'll shortly be an end of *you*," said Wegg, threatening it with the hat-box. "*Your* varnish is fading."

Mrs. Boffin descended and went in.

"Look out for a fall, my Lady Dustwoman," said Wegg.

Bella lightly descended, and ran in after her.

"How brisk we are!" said Wegg. "You won't run so gayly to your old shabby home, my girl. You'll have to go there, though."

A little while, and the Secretary came out.

"I was passed over for you," said Wegg. "But you had better provide yourself with another situation, young man."

Mr. Boffin's shadow passed upon the blinds of three large windows as he trotted down the room, and passed again as he went back.

"Yoop!" cried Wegg. "You're there, are you? Where's the bottle? You would give your bottle for my box, Dustman!"

Having now composed his mind for slumber, he turned homeward. Such was the greed of the fellow, that his mind had shot beyond halves, two thirds, three fourths, and gone straight to spoliation of the whole. "Though that would n't quite do," he considered, growing cooler as he got away. "That's what would happen to him if he did n't buy us up. We should get nothing by that."

We so judge others by ourselves, that it had never come into his head before, that he might not buy us up, and might prove honest, and prefer to be poor. It caused him a slight tremor as it passed; but a very slight one, for the idle thought was gone directly.

"He's grown too fond of money for that," said Wegg; "he's grown too fond of money." The burden fell into a strain or tune as he stumped along the pavements. All the way home he stumped it out of the rattling streets,

piano with his own foot, and *forte* with his wooden leg, "He's GROWN too FOND of MONEY for THAT, he's GROWN too FOND of MONEY."

Even next day Silas soothed himself with this melodious strain, when he was called out of bed at daybreak, to set open the yard-gate and admit the train of carts and horses that came to carry off the little Mound. And all day long, as he kept unwinking watch on the slow process which promised to protract itself through many days and weeks, whenever (to save himself from being choked with dust) he patrolled a little cinderous beat he established for the purpose, without taking his eyes from the diggers, he still stumped to the tune: "He's GROWN too FOND of MONEY for THAT, he's GROWN too FOND of MONEY."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE END OF A LONG JOURNEY.

THE train of carts and horses came and went all day from dawn to nightfall, making little or no daily impression on the heap of ashes, though, as the days passed on, the heap was seen to be slowly melting. My lords and gentlemen and honorable boards, when you in the course of your dust-shovelling and cinder-raking have piled up a mountain of pretentious failure, you must off with your honorable coats for the removal of it, and fall to the work with the power of all the queen's horses and all the queen's men, or it will come rushing down and bury us alive.

Yes, verily, my lords and gentlemen and honorable boards, adapting your Catechism to the occasion, and by God's help so you must. For when we have got things to the pass that with an enormous treasure at disposal to relieve the poor, the best of the poor detest our mercies, hide their heads from us, and shame us by starving to death in the midst of us, it is a pass impossible of prosperity, impossible of continuance. It may not be so written in the Gospel according to Podsnappery; you may not "find these words" for the text of a sermon, in the Returns of the Board of Trade; but they have been the truth since the foundations of the universe were laid, and they will be the truth until the foundations of the universe are shaken by the Builder. This boastful han-

diwork of ours, which fails in its terrors for the professional pauper, the sturdy breaker of windows and the rampart tearer of clothes, strikes with a cruel and a wicked stab at the stricken sufferer, and is a horror to the deserving and unfortunate. We must mend it, lords and gentlemen and honorable boards, or in its own evil hour it will mar every one of us.

Old Betty Higden fared upon her pilgrimage as many ruggedly honest creatures, women and men, fare on their toiling way along the roads of life. Patiently to earn a spare bare living, and quietly to die, untouched by workhouse hands — this was her highest sublunary hope.

Nothing had been heard of her at Mr. Boffin's house since she trudged off. The weather had been hard and the roads had been bad, and her spirit was up. A less stanch spirit might have been subdued by such adverse influences; but the loan for her little outfit was in no part prepaid, and it had gone worse with her than she had foreseen, and she was put upon proving her case and maintaining her independence.

Faithful soul! When she had spoken to the Secretary of that "deadness that steals over me at times," her fortitude had made too little of it. Oftener and ever oftener, it came stealing over her; darker and ever darker, like the shadow of advancing Death. That the shadow should be deep as it came on, like the shadow of an actual presence, was in accordance with the laws of the physical world, for all the Light that shone on Betty Higden lay beyond Death.

The poor old creature had taken the upward course of the river Thames as her general track; it was the track in which her last home lay, and of which she had last

had local love and knowledge. She had hovered for a little while in the near neighborhood of her abandoned dwelling, and had sold, and knitted and sold, and gone on. In the pleasant towns of Chertsey, Walton, Kingston, and Staines, her figure came to be quite well known for some short weeks, and then again passed on.

She would take her stand in market-places, where there were such things, on market-days; at other times, in the busiest (that was seldom very busy) portion of the little quiet High Street; at still other times she would explore the outlying roads for great houses, and would ask leave at the Lodge to pass in with her basket, and would not often get it. But ladies in carriages would frequently make purchases from her trifling stock, and were usually pleased with her bright eyes and her hopeful speech. In these and her clean dress originated a fable that she was well to do in the world: one might say, for her station, rich. As making a comfortable provision for its subject which costs nobody anything, this class of fable has long been popular.

In those pleasant little towns on Thames, you may hear the fall of the water over the weirs, or even, in still weather, the rustle of the rushes; and from the bridge you may see the young river, dimpled like a young child, playfully gliding away among the trees, unpolluted by the defilements that lie in wait for it on its course, and as yet out of hearing of the deep summons of the sea. It were too much to pretend that Betty Higden made out such thoughts; no; but she heard the tender river whispering to many like herself, "Come to me, come to me! When the cruel shame and terror you have so long fled from, most beset you, come to me! I am the Relieving Officer appointed by eternal ordinance to do

my work ; I am not held in estimation according as I shirk it. My breast is softer than the pauper-nurse's ; death in my arms is peacefuller than among the pauperwards. Come to me !”

There was abundant place for gentler fancies too, in her untutored mind. Those gentlefolks and their children inside those fine houses, could they think, as they looked out at her, what it was to be really hungry, really cold ? Did they feel any of the wonder about her, that she felt about them ? Bless the dear laughing children ! If they could have seen sick Johnny in her arms, would they have cried for pity ? If they could have seen dead Johnny on that little bed, would they have understood it ? Bless the dear children for his sake, anyhow ! So with the humbler houses in the little street, the inner firelight shining on the panes as the outer twilight darkened. When the families gathered in-doors there, for the night, it was only a foolish fancy to feel as if it were a little hard in them to close the shutter and blacken the flame. So with the lighted shops, and speculations whether their masters and mistresses taking tea in a perspective of back-parlor, — not so far within but that the flavor of tea and toast came out, mingled with the glow of light, into the street, — ate or drank or wore what they sold, with the greater relish because they dealt in it. So with the churchyard on a branch of the solitary way to the night's sleeping-place. “ Ah me ! The dead and I seem to have it pretty much to ourselves in the dark and in this weather ! But so much the better for all who are warmly housed at home.” The poor soul envied no one in bitterness, and grudged no one anything.

But, the old abhorrence grew stronger on her as she

grew weaker, and it found more sustaining food than she did in her wanderings. Now, she would light upon the shameful spectacle of some desolate creature — or some wretched ragged groups of either sex, or of both sexes, with children among them, huddled together like the smaller vermin for a little warmth — lingering and lingering on a doorstep, while the appointed evader of the public trust did his dirty office of trying to weary them out and so get rid of them. Now, she would light upon some poor decent person, like herself, going afoot on a pilgrimage of many weary miles to see some worn-out relative or friend who had been charitably clutched off to a great blank barren Union House, as far from old home as the County Jail (the remoteness of which is always its worst punishment for small rural offenders), and in its dietary, and in its lodging, and in its tending of the sick, a much more penal establishment. Sometimes she would hear a newspaper read out, and would learn how the Registrar-General cast up the units that had within the last week died of want and of exposure to the weather; for which that Recording Angel seemed to have a regular fixed place in his sum, as if they were its half-pence. All such things she would hear discussed, as we, my lords and gentlemen and honorable boards, in our unapproachable magnificence never hear them, and from all such things she would fly with the wings of raging Despair.

This is not to be received as a figure of speech. Old Betty Higden, however tired, however footsore, would start up and be driven away by her awakened horror of falling into the hands of Charity. It is a remarkable Christian improvement, to have made a pursuing Fury of the Good Samaritan; but it was so in this case, and it is a type of many, many, many.

Two incidents united to intensify the old unreasoning abhorrence — granted in a previous place to be unreasoning, because the people always are unreasoning, and invariably make a point of producing all their smoke without fire.

One day she was sitting in a market-place on a bench outside an inn, with her little wares for sale, when the deadness that she strove against came over her so heavily that the scene departed from before her eyes; when it returned, she found herself on the ground, her head supported by some good-natured market-women, and a little crowd about her.

“Are you better now, mother?” asked one of the women. “Do you think you can do nicely now?”

“Have I been ill then?” asked old Betty.

“You have had a faint like,” was the answer, “or a fit. It ain’t that you’ve been a-struggling, mother, but you’ve been stiff and numbed.”

“Ah!” said Betty, recovering her memory. “It’s the numbness. Yes. It comes over me at times.”

Was it gone? the women asked her.

“It’s gone now,” said Betty. “I shall be stronger than I was afore. Many thanks to ye, my dears, and when you come to be as old as I am, may others do as much for you!”

They assisted her to rise, but she could not stand yet, and they supported her when she sat down again upon the bench.

“My head’s a bit light, and my feet are a bit heavy,” said old Betty, leaning her face drowsily on the breast of the woman who had spoken before. “They’ll both come nat’ral in a minute. There’s nothing more the matter.”

"Ask her," said some farmers standing by, who had come out from their market-dinner, "who belongs to her."

"Are there any folks belonging to you, mother?" said the woman.

"Yes, sure," answered Betty. I heerd the gentleman say it, but I could n't answer quick enough. There's plenty belonging to me. Don't ye fear for me, my dear."

"But are any of 'em near here?" said the men's voices; the women's voices chiming in when it was said, and prolonging the strain.

"Quite near enough," said Betty, rousing herself. "Don't ye be afeard of me, neighbors."

"But you are not fit to travel. Where are you going?" was the next compassionate chorus she heard.

"I'm a-going to London when I've sold out all," said Betty, rising with difficulty. "I've right good friends in London. I want for nothing. I shall come to no harm. Thankye. Don't ye be afeard for me."

A well-meaning by-stander, yellow-leggined and purple-faced, said hoarsely over his red comforter, as she rose to her feet, that she "ought n't to be let to go."

"For the Lord's love don't meddle with me!" cried old Betty, all her fears crowding on her. "I am quite well now, and I must go this minute."

She caught up her basket as she spoke, and was making an unsteady rush away from them, when the same by-stander checked her with his hand on her sleeve, and urged her to come with him and see the parish-doctor. Strengthening herself by the utmost exercise of her resolution, the poor trembling creature shook him off, almost fiercely, and took to flight. Nor did she feel safe until

she had set a mile or two of by-road between herself and the market-place, and had crept into a copse, like a hunted animal, to hide and recover breath. Not until then for the first time did she venture to recall how she had looked over her shoulder before turning out of the town, and had seen the sign of the White Lion hanging across the road, and the fluttering market-booths, and the old gray church, and the little crowd gazing after her but not attempting to follow her.

The second frightening incident was this. She had been again as bad, and had been for some days better, and was travelling along by a part of the road where it touched the river, and in wet seasons was so often overflowed by it that there were tall white posts set up to mark the way. A barge was being towed towards her, and she sat down on the bank to rest and watch it. As the tow-rope was slackened by a turn of the stream and dipped into the water, such a confusion stole into her mind that she thought she saw the forms of her dead children and dead grandchildren peopling the barge, and waving their hands to her in solemn measure; then, as the rope tightened and came up, dropping diamonds, it seemed to vibrate into two parallel ropes and strike her, with a twang, though it was far off. When she looked again, there was no barge, no river, no daylight, and a man whom she had never before seen held a candle close to her face.

"Now, Missis," said he; "where did you come from and where are you going to?"

The poor soul confusedly asked the counter-question where she was?

"I am the Lock," said the man.

"The Lock?"

"I am the Deputy Lock, on job, and this is the Lock-house. (Lock or Deputy Lock, it's all one, while the t'other man's in the hospital). What's your Parish?"

"Parish!" She was up from the truckle-bed directly, wildly feeling about her for her basket, and gazing at him in affright.

"You'll be asked the question down town," said the man. "They won't let you be more than a Casual there. They'll pass you on to your settlement, Misses, with all speed. You're not in a state to be let come upon strange parishes'ceptin as a Casual."

"'T was the deadness again!" murmured Betty Higden, with her hand to her head.

"It was the deadness, there's not a doubt about it," returned the man. "I should have thought the deadness was a mild word for it, if it had been named to me when we brought you in. Have you got any friends, Missis?"

"The best of friends, Master."

"I should recommend your looking 'em up if you consider 'em game to do anything for you," said the Deputy Lock. "Have you got any money?"

"Just a morsel of money, sir."

"Do you want to keep it?"

"Sure I do!"

"Well, you know," said the Deputy Lock, shrugging his shoulders with his hands in his pockets, and shaking his head in a sulkily ominous manner, "the parish authorities down town will have it out of you, if you go on, you may take your Alfred David."

"Then I'll not go on."

"They'll make you pay, as fur as your money will go," pursued the Deputy, "for your relief as a Casual and for your being passed to your Parish."

“Thank ye kindly Master, for your warning, thank ye for your shelter, and good-night.”

“Stop a bit,” said the Deputy, striking in between her and the door. “Why are you all of a shake, and what’s your hurry, Missis?”

“Oh, Master, Master,” returned Betty Higden, “I’ve fought against the Parish and fled from it, all my life, and I want to die free of it!”

“I don’t know,” said the Deputy, with deliberation, “as I ought to let you go. I’m a honest man as gets my living by the sweat of my brow, and I may fall into trouble by letting you go. I’ve fell into trouble afore now, by George, and I know what it is, and it’s made me careful. You might be took with your deadness again, half a mile off—or half of half a quarter, for the matter of that—and then it would be asked, Why did that there honest Deputy Lock let her go, instead of putting her safe with the Parish? That’s what a man of his character ought to have done, it would be argueyfied,” said the Deputy Lock, cunningly harping on the strong string of her terror; “he ought to have handed her over safe to the Parish. That was to be expected of a man of his merits.”

As he stood in the doorway, the poor old careworn, wayworn woman burst into tears, and clasped her hands, as if in a very agony she prayed to him.

“As I’ve told you, Master, I’ve the best of friends. This letter will show how true I spoke, and they will be thankful for me.”

The Deputy Lock opened the letter with a grave face, which underwent no change as he eyed its contents. But it might have done, if he could have read them.

“What amount of small change, Missis,” he said, with an abstracted air, after a little meditation, “might you call a morsel of money?”

Hurriedly emptying her pocket, old Betty laid down on the table a shilling, and two sixpenny pieces, and a few pence.

“If I was to let you go instead of handing you safe to the Parish,” said the Deputy, counting the money with his eyes, “might it be your own free wish to leave that there behind you?”

“Take it, Master, take it, and welcome and thankful!”

“I’m a man,” said the Deputy, giving her back the letter, and pocketing the coins, one by one, “as earns his living by the sweat of his brow;” here he drew his sleeve across his forehead, as if this particular portion of his humble gains were the result of sheer hard labor and virtuous industry; “and I won’t stand in your way. Go where you like.”

She was gone out of the Lock-house as soon as he gave her this permission, and her tottering steps were on the road again. But, afraid to go back and afraid to go forward; seeing what she fled from, in the sky-glare of the lights of the little town before her, and leaving a confused horror of it everywhere behind her, as if she had escaped it in every stone of every market-place; she struck off by side ways, among which she got bewildered and lost. That night she took refuge from the Samaritan in his latest accredited form, under a farmer’s rick; and if—worth thinking of, perhaps, my fellow-Christians—the Samaritan had, in the lonely night, “passed by on the other side,” she would have most devoutly thanked High Heaven for her escape from him. -

The morning found her afoot again, but fast declining as to the clearness of her thoughts, though not as to the steadiness of her purpose. Comprehending that her strength was quitting her, and that the struggle of her

life was almost ended, she could neither reason out the means of getting back to her protectors, nor even form the idea. The overmastering dread, and the proud stubborn resolution it engendered in her to die undegraded, were the two distinct impressions left in her failing mind. Supported only by a sense that she was bent on conquering in her life-long fight, she went on.

The time was come, now, when the wants of this little life were passing away from her. She could not have swallowed food, though a table had been spread for her in the next field. The day was cold and wet, but she scarcely knew it. She crept on, poor soul, like a criminal afraid of being taken, and felt little beyond the terror of falling down while it was yet daylight, and being found alive. She had no fear that she would live through another night.

Sewn in the breast of her gown, the money to pay for her burial was still intact. If she could wear through the day, and then lie down to die under cover of the darkness, she would die independent. If she were captured previously, the money would be taken from her as a pauper who had no right to it, and she would be carried to the accursed workhouse. Gaining her end, the letter would be found in her breast, along with the money, and the gentlefolks would say when it was given back to them, "She prized it, did old Betty Higden; she was true to it; and while she lived, she would never let it be disgraced by falling into the hands of those that she held in horror." Most illogical, inconsequential, and light-headed, this; but travellers in the valley of the shadow of death are apt to be light-headed; and worn-out old people of low estate have a trick of reasoning as indifferently as they live, and doubtless would appreciate our

Poor Law more philosophically on an income of ten thousand a year.

So, keeping to by-ways and shunning human approach, this troublesome old woman hid herself, and fared on all through the dreary day. Yet so unlike was she to vagrant hiders in general, that sometimes, as the day advanced, there was a bright fire in her eyes, and a quicker beating at her feeble heart, as though she said exultingly, "The Lord will see me through it!"

By what visionary hands she was led along upon that journey of escape from the Samaritan; by what voices, hushed in the grave, she seemed to be addressed; how she fancied the dead child in her arms again, and times innumerable adjusted her shawl to keep it warm; what infinite variety of forms of tower and roof and steeple the trees took; how many furious horsemen rode at her, crying, "There she goes! Stop! Stop, Betty Higden!" and melted away as they came close; be these things left untold. Faring on and hiding, hiding and faring on, the poor harmless creature, as though she were a murderess and the whole country were up after her, wore out the day, and gained the night.

"Water-meadows, or such like," she had sometimes murmured, on the day's pilgrimage, when she had raised her head and taken any note of the real objects about her. There now arose in the darkness a great building, full of lighted windows. Smoke was issuing from a high chimney in the rear of it, and there was the sound of a water-wheel at the side. Between her and the building lay a piece of water, in which the lighted windows were reflected, and on its nearest margin was a plantation of trees. "I humbly thank the Power and the Glory," said Betty Higden, holding up her withered hands, "that I have come to my journey's end!"

She crept among the trees to the trunk of a tree whence she could see, beyond some intervening trees and branches, the lighted windows, both in their reality and their reflection in the water. She placed her orderly little basket at her side, and sank upon the ground, supporting herself against the tree. It brought to her mind the foot of the Cross, and she committed herself to Him who died upon it. Her strength held out to enable her to arrange the letter in her breast, so as that it could be seen that she had a paper there. It had held out for this, and it departed when this was done.

"I am safe here," was her last benumbed thought. "When I am found dead at the foot of the Cross, it will be by some of my own sort; some of the working people who work among the lights yonder. I cannot see the lighted windows now, but they are there. I am thankful for all!"

.
The darkness gone, and a face bending down.

"It cannot be the boofer lady?"

"I don't understand what you say. Let me wet your lips again with this brandy. I have been away to fetch it. Did you think that I was long gone?"

It is as the face of a woman, shaded by a quantity of rich dark hair. It is the earnest face of a woman who is young and handsome. But all is over with me on earth, and this must be an Angel.

"Have I been long dead?"

"I don't understand what you say. Let me wet your lips again. I hurried all I could, and brought no one back with me, lest you should die of the shock of strangers."

"Am I not dead?"

"I cannot understand what you say. Your voice is so low and broken that I cannot hear you. Do you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean Yes?"

"Yes."

"I was coming from my work just now, along the path outside (I was up with the night-hands last night), and I heard a groan, and found you lying here."

"What work, deary?"

"Did you ask what work? At the paper-mill."

"Where is it?"

"Your face is turned up to the sky, and you can't see it. It is close by. You can see my face, here, between you and the sky?"

"Yes."

"Dare I lift you?"

"Not yet."

"Not even lift your head to get it on my arm? I will do it by very gentle degrees. You shall hardly feel it."

"Not yet. Paper. Letter."

"This paper in your breast?"

"Bless ye!"

"Let me wet your lips again. Am I to open it? To read it?"

"Bless ye!"

She reads it with surprise, and looks down with a new expression and an added interest on the motionless face she kneels beside.

"I know these names. I have heard them often."

"Will you send it, my dear?"

"I cannot understand you. Let me wet your lips

again, and your forehead. There. O poor thing, poor thing!" These words through her fast-dropping tears. "What was it that you asked me? Wait till I bring my ear quite close."

"Will you send it, my dear?"

"Will I send it to the writers? Is that your wish? Yes, certainly."

"You'll not give it up to any one but them?"

"No."

"As you must grow old in time, and come to your dying hour, my dear, you'll not give it up to any one but them?"

"No. Most solemnly."

"Never to the Parish!" with a convulsed struggle.

"No. Most solemnly."

"Nor let the Parish touch me, nor yet so much as look at me!" with another struggle.

"No. Faithfully."

A look of thankfulness and triumph lights the worn old face. The eyes, which have been darkly fixed upon the sky, turn with meaning in them towards the compassionate face from which the tears are dropping, and a smile is on the aged lips as they ask:

"What is your name, my dear?"

"My name is Lizzie Hexam."

"I must be sore disfigured. Are you afraid to kiss me?"

The answer is, the ready pressure of her lips upon the cold but smiling mouth.

"Bless ye! *Now* lift me, my love."

Lizzie Hexam very softly raised the weather-stained gray head, and lifted her as high as Heaven.

CHAPTER IX.

SOMEBODY BECOMES THE SUBJECT OF A PREDICTION

“WE GIVE THEE HEARTY THANKS FOR THAT IT HATH PLEASED THEE TO DELIVER THIS OUR SISTER OUT OF THE MISERIES OF THIS SINFUL WORLD.’” So read the Reverend Frank Milvey in a not untroubled voice, for his heart misgave him that all was not quite right between us and our sister — or say our sister in Law — Poor Law — and that we sometimes read these words in an awful manner, over our Sister and our Brother too.

And Sloppy — on whom the brave deceased had never turned her back until she ran away from him, knowing that otherwise he would not be separated from her — Sloppy could not in his conscience as yet find the hearty thanks required of it. Selfish in Sloppy, and yet excusable, it may be humbly hoped, because our sister had been more than his mother.

The words were read above the ashes of Betty Higden, in a corner of a churchyard near the river; in a churchyard so obscure that there was nothing in it but grass-mounds, not so much as one single tombstone. It might not be to do an unreasonably great deal for the diggers and hewers, in a registering age, if we ticketed their graves at the common charge; so that a new generation might know which was which: so that the soldier, sailor, emigrant, coming home, should be able to identify the resting-place of father, mother, playmate, or

betrotted. For, we turn up our eyes and say that we are all alike in death, and we might turn them down and work the saying out in this world, so far. It would be sentimental, perhaps? But how say ye, my lords and gentlemen and honorable boards, shall we not find good standing-room left for a little sentiment, if we look into our crowds?

Near unto the Reverend Frank Milvey, as he read, stood his little wife, John Rokesmith the Secretary, and Bella Wilfer. These, over and above Sloppy, were the mourners at the lowly grave. Not a penny had been added to the money sewn in her dress: what her honest spirit had so long projected, was fulfilled.

"I've took it in my head," said Sloppy, laying it, inconsolable, against the church-door, when all was done, — "I've took it in my wretched head that I might have sometimes turned a little harder for her, and it cuts me deep to think so now."

The Reverend Frank Milvey, comforting Sloppy, expounded to him how the best of us were more or less remiss in our turnings at our respective Mangles — some of us very much so — and how we were all a halting, failing, feeble, and inconstant crew.

"*She* warn't, sir," said Sloppy, taking this ghostly counsel rather ill, in behalf of his late benefactress. Let us speak for ourselves, sir. She went through with whatever duty she had to do. She went through with me, she went through with the Minders, she went through with herself, she went through with everything. O Mrs. Higden, Mrs. Higden, you was a woman and a mother and a mangler in a million million!"

With those heartfelt words, Sloppy removed his dejected head from the church-door, and took it back to the grave in the corner, and laid it down there, and wept

alone. "Not a very poor grave," said the Reverend Frank Milvey, brushing his hand across his eyes, "when it has that homely figure on it. Richer, I think, than it could be made by most of the sculpture in Westminster Abbey!"

They left him undisturbed, and passed out at the wicket-gate. The water-wheel of the paper-mill was audible there, and seemed to have a softening influence on the bright wintry scene. They had arrived but a little while before, and Lizzie Hexam now told them the little she could add to the letter in which she had enclosed Mr. Rokesmith's letter and had asked for their instructions. This was merely how she had heard the groan, and what had afterwards passed, and how she had obtained leave for the remains to be placed in that sweet, fresh, empty store-room of the mill from which they had just accompanied them to the churchyard, and how the last requests had been religiously observed.

"I could not have done it all, or nearly all, of myself," said Lizzie. "I should not have wanted the will; but I should not have had the power, without our managing partner."

"Surely not the Jew who received us?" said Mrs. Milvey.

("My dear," observed her husband in parenthesis, "why not?")

"The gentleman certainly is a Jew," said Lizzie, "and the lady, his wife, is a Jewess, and I was first brought to their notice by a Jew. But I think there cannot be kinder people in the world."

"But suppose they try to convert you!" suggested Mrs. Milvey, bristling in her good little way, as a clergyman's wife.

"To do what, ma'am?" asked Lizzie, with a modest smile.

"To make you change your religion," said Mrs. Milvey.

Lizzie shook her head, still smiling. "They have never asked me what my religion is. They asked me what my story was, and I told them. They asked me to be industrious and faithful, and I promised to be so. They most willingly and cheerfully do their duty to all of us who are employed here, and we try to do ours to them. Indeed they do much more than their duty to us, for they are wonderfully mindful of us in many ways."

"It is easy to see you're a favorite, my dear," said little Mrs. Milvey, not quite pleased.

"It would be very ungrateful in me to say I am not," returned Lizzie, "for I have been already raised to a place of confidence here. But that makes no difference in their following their own religion and leaving all of us to ours. They never talk of theirs to us, and they never talk of ours to us. If I was the last in the mill, it would be just the same. They never asked me what religion that poor thing had followed."

"My dear," said Mrs. Milvey, aside to the Reverend Frank, "I wish you would talk to her."

"My dear," said the Reverend Frank aside to his good little wife, "I think I will leave it to somebody else. The circumstances are hardly favorable. There are plenty of talkers going about, my love, and she will soon find one."

While this discourse was interchanging, both Bella and the Secretary observed Lizzie Hexam with great attention. Brought face to face for the first time with the daughter of his supposed murderer, it was natural

that John Harmon should have his own secret reasons for a careful scrutiny of her countenance and manner. Bella knew that Lizzie's father had been falsely accused of the crime which had had so great an influence on her own life and fortunes; and her interest, though it had no secret springs, like that of the Secretary, was equally natural. Both had expected to see something very different from the real Lizzie Hexam, and thus it fell out that she became the unconscious means of bringing them together.

For, when they had walked on with her to the little house in the clean village by the paper-mill, where Lizzie had a lodging with an elderly couple employed in the establishment, and when Mrs. Milvey and Bella had been up to see her room and had come down, the mill-bell rang. This called Lizzie away for the time, and left the Secretary and Bella standing rather awkwardly in the small street; Mrs. Milvey being engaged in pursuing the village children, and her investigations whether they were in danger of becoming children of Israel; and the Reverend Frank being engaged — to say the truth — in evading that branch of his spiritual functions, and getting out of sight surreptitiously.

Bella at length said :

“ Had n't we better talk about the commission we have undertaken, Mr. Rokesmith ? ”

“ By all means,” said the Secretary.

“ I suppose,” faltered Bella, “ that we *are* both commissioned, or we should n't both be here ? ”

“ I suppose so,” was the Secretary's answer.

“ When I proposed to come with Mr. and Mrs. Milvey,” said Bella, “ Mrs. Boffin urged me to do so, in order that I might give her my small report — it's not

worth anything, Mr. Rokesmith, except for it's being a woman's—which indeed with you may be a fresh reason for it's being worth nothing—of Lizzie Hexam."

"Mr. Boffin," said the Secretary, "directed me to come for the same purpose."

As they spoke they were leaving the little street and emerging on the wooded landscape by the river.

"You think well of her, Mr. Rokesmith?" pursued Bella, conscious of making all the advances.

"I think highly of her."

"I am so glad of that! Something quite refined in her beauty, is there not?"

"Her appearance is very striking."

"There is a shade of sadness upon her that is quite touching. At least I—I am not setting up my own poor opinion, you know, Mr. Rokesmith," said Bella, excusing and explaining herself in a pretty shy way; "I am consulting you."

"I noticed that sadness. I hope it may not," said the Secretary in a lower voice, "be the result of the false accusation which has been retracted."

When they had passed on a little further without speaking, Bella, after stealing a glance or two at the Secretary, suddenly said:

"Oh, Mr. Rokesmith, don't be hard with me, don't be stern with me; be magnanimous! I want to talk with you on equal terms."

The Secretary as suddenly brightened, and returned: "Upon my honor I had no thought but for you. I forced myself to be constrained, lest you might misinterpret my being more natural. There. It's gone."

"Thank you," said Bella, holding out her little hand. "Forgive me."

"No!" cried the Secretary, eagerly. "Forgive *me!*" For there were tears in her eyes, and they were prettier in his sight (though they smote him on the heart rather reproachfully too) than any other glitter in the world.

When they had walked a little further:

"You were going to speak to me," said the Secretary, with the shadow so long on him quite thrown off and cast away, "about Lizzie Hexam. So was I going to speak to you, if I could have begun."

"Now that you *can* begin, sir," returned Bella, with a look as if she italicized the word by putting one of her dimples under it, "what were you going to say?"

"You remember, of course, that in her short letter to Mrs. Boffin — short, but containing everything to the purpose — she stipulated that either her name, or else her place of residence, must be kept strictly a secret among us."

Bella nodded Yes.

"It is my duty to find out why she made that stipulation. I have it in charge from Mr. Boffin to discover, and I am very desirous for myself to discover, whether that retracted accusation still leaves any stain upon her. I mean whether it places her at any disadvantage towards any one, even towards herself."

"Yes," said Bella, nodding thoughtfully; "I understand. That seems wise and considerate."

"You may not have noticed, Miss Wilfer, that she has the same kind of interest in you, that you have in her. Just as you are attracted by her beauty — by her appearance and manner, she is attracted by yours."

"I certainly have *not* noticed it," returned Bella, again italicizing with the dimple, "and I should have given her credit for" —

The Secretary with a smile held up his hand, so plainly interposing "not for better taste," that Bella's color deepened over the little piece of coquetry she was checked in.

"And so," resumed the Secretary, "if you would speak with her alone before we go away from here, I feel quite sure that a natural and easy confidence would arise between you. Of course you would not be asked to betray it; and of course you would not, if you were. But if you do not object to put this question to her — to ascertain for us her own feeling in this one matter — you can do so at a far greater advantage than I or any else could. Mr. Boffin is anxious on the subject. And I am," added the Secretary after a moment, "for a special reason, very anxious."

"I shall be happy, Mr. Rokesmith," returned Bella, "to be of the least use; for I feel, after the serious scene of to-day, that I am useless enough in this world."

"Don't say that," urged the Secretary.

"Oh, but I mean that," said Bella, raising her eyebrows.

"No one is useless in this world," retorted the Secretary, "who lightens the burden of it for any one else."

"But I assure you I *don't*, Mr. Rokesmith," said Bella, half crying.

"Not for your father?"

"Dear, loving, self-forgetting, easily-satisfied Pa! Oh, yes! He thinks so."

"It is enough if he only thinks so," said the Secretary. "Excuse the interruption: I don't like to hear you depreciate yourself."

"But *you* once depreciated *me*, sir," thought Bella, pouting, "and I hope you may be satisfied with the consequences you brought upon your head!" However, she

said nothing to that purpose; she even said something to a different purpose.

“Mr. Rokesmith, it seems so long since we spoke together naturally, that I am embarrassed in approaching another subject. Mr. Boffin. You know I am very grateful to him; don't you? You know I feel a true respect for him, and am bound to him by the strong ties of his own generosity; now don't you?”

“Unquestionably. And also that you are his favorite companion.”

“That makes it,” said Bella, “so very difficult to speak of him. But —. Does he treat you well?”

“You see how he treats me,” the Secretary answered, with a patient and yet proud air.

“Yes, and I see it with pain,” said Bella, very energetically.

The Secretary gave her such a radiant look, that if he had thanked her a hundred times, he could not have said as much as the look said.

“I see it with pain,” repeated Bella, “and it often makes me miserable. Miserable, because I cannot bear to be supposed to approve of it, or have any indirect share in it. Miserable, because I cannot bear to be forced to admit to myself that Fortune is spoiling Mr. Boffin.”

“Miss Wilfer,” said the Secretary, with a beaming face, “if you could know with what delight I make the discovery that Fortune is not spoiling *you*, you would know that it more than compensates me for any slight at any other hands.”

“Oh, don't speak of *me*,” said Bella, giving herself an impatient little slap with her glove. “You don't know me as well as” —

"As you know yourself?" suggested the Secretary, finding that she stopped. "Do you know yourself?"

"I know quite enough of myself," said Bella, with a charming air of being inclined to give herself up as a bad job, "and I don't improve upon acquaintance. But Mr. Boffin."

"That Mr. Boffin's manner to me, or consideration for me, is not what it used to be," observed the Secretary, "must be admitted. It is too plain to be denied."

"Are you disposed to deny it, Mr. Rokesmith?" asked Bella, with a look of wonder.

"Ought I not to be glad to do so, if I could: though it were only for my own sake?"

"Truly," returned Bella, "it must try you very much, and — you must please promise me that you won't take ill what I am going to add, Mr. Rokesmith?"

"I promise it with all my heart."

— "And it must sometimes, I should think," said Bella, hesitating, "a little lower you in your own estimation?"

Assenting with a movement of his head, though not at all looking as if it did, the Secretary replied:

"I have very strong reasons, Miss Wilfer, for bearing with the drawbacks of my position in the house we both inhabit. Believe that they are not all mercenary, although I have, through a series of strange fatalities, faded out of my place in life. If what you see with such a gracious and good sympathy is calculated to rouse my pride, there are other considerations (and those you do not see) urging me to quiet endurance. The latter are by far the stronger."

"I think I have noticed, Mr. Rokesmith," said Bella, looking at him with curiosity, as not quite making him

out, "that you repress yourself, and force yourself to act a passive part."

"You are right. I repress myself and force myself to act a part. It is not in tameness of spirit that I submit. I have a settled purpose."

"And a good one, I hope," said Bella.

"And a good one, I hope," he answered, looking steadily at her.

"Sometimes I have fancied, sir," said Bella, turning away her eyes, "that your great regard for Mrs. Boffin is a very powerful motive with you."

"You are right again; it is. I would do anything for her, bear anything for her. There are no words to express how I esteem that good, good woman."

"As I do too! May I ask you one thing more, Mr. Rokesmith?"

"Anything more."

"Of course you see that she really suffers, when Mr. Boffin shows how he is changing?"

"I see it, every day, as you see it, and am grieved to give her pain."

"To give her pain?" said Bella, repeating the phrase quickly, with her eyebrows raised.

"I am generally the unfortunate cause of it."

"Perhaps she says to you, as she often says to me, that he is the best of men, in spite of all."

"I often overhear her, in her honest and beautiful devotion to him, saying so to you," returned the Secretary, with the same steady look, "but I cannot assert that she ever says so to me."

Bella met the steady look for a moment with a wistful, musing little look of her own, and then, nodding her pretty head several times, like a dimpled philosopher (of

the very best school) who was moralizing on Life, heaved a little sigh, and gave up things in general for a bad job, as she had previously been inclined to give up herself.

But, for all that, they had a very pleasant walk. The trees were bare of leaves, and the river was bare of water-lilies; but the sky was not bare of its beautiful blue, and the water reflected it, and a delicious wind ran with the stream, touching the surface crisply. Perhaps the old mirror was never yet made by human hands, which, if all the images it has in its time reflected could pass across its surface again, would fail to reveal some scene of horror or distress. But the great serene mirror of the river seemed as if it might have reproduced all it had ever reflected between those placid banks, and brought nothing to the light save what was peaceful, pastoral, and blooming.

So, they walked, speaking of the newly filled-up grave, and of Johnny, and of many things. So, on their return, they met brisk Mrs. Milvey coming to seek them, with the agreeable intelligence that there was no fear for the village children, there being a Christian school in the village, and no worse Judaical interference with it than to plant its garden. So, they got back to the village as Lizzie Hexam was coming from the paper-mill, and Bella detached herself to speak with her in her own home.

"I am afraid it is a poor room for you," said Lizzie, with a smile of welcome, as she offered the post of honor by the fireside.

"Not so poor as you think, my dear," returned Bella, "if you knew all." Indeed, though attained by some wonderful winding narrow stairs, which seemed to have been erected in a pure white chimney, and though very low in the ceiling, and very rugged in the floor, and

rather blinking as to the proportions of its lattice window, it was a pleasanter room than that despised chamber once at home, in which Bella had first bemoaned the miseries of taking lodgers.

The day was closing as the two girls looked at one another by the fireside. The dusky room was lighted by the fire. The grate might have been the old brazier, and the glow might have been the old hollow down by the flare.

"It's quite new to me," said Lizzie, "to be visited by a lady so nearly of my own age, and so pretty as you. It's a pleasure to me to look at you."

"I have nothing left to begin with," returned Bella, blushing, "because I was going to say that it was a pleasure to me to look at you, Lizzie. But we can begin without a beginning, can't we?"

Lizzie took the pretty little hand that was held out in as pretty a little frankness.

"Now, dear," said Bella, drawing her chair a little nearer, and taking Lizzie's arm as if they were going out for a walk, "I am commissioned with something to say, and I dare say I shall say it wrong, but I won't if I can help it. It is in reference to your letter to Mr. and Mrs. Boffin, and this is what it is. Let me see. Oh yes! This is what it is."

With this exordium, Bella set forth that request of Lizzie's touching secrecy, and delicately spoke of that false accusation and its retractation, and asked might she beg to be informed whether it had any bearing, near or remote, on such request. "I feel, my dear," said Bella, quite amazing herself by the business-like manner in which she was getting on, "that the subject must be a painful one to you, but I am mixed up in it also; for —

I don't know whether you may know it or suspect it — I am the willed-away girl who was to have been married to the unfortunate gentleman, if he had been pleased to approve of me. So I was dragged into the subject without my consent, and you were dragged into it without your consent, and there is very little to choose between us."

"I had no doubt," said Lizzie, "that you were the Miss Wilfer I have often heard named. Can you tell me who my unknown friend is?"

"Unknown friend, my dear?" said Bella.

"Who caused the charge against poor father to be contradicted, and sent me the written paper?"

Bella had never heard of him. Had no notion who he was.

"I should have been glad to thank him," returned Lizzie. "He has done a great deal for me. I must hope that he will let me thank him some day. You asked me has it anything to do" —

"It or the accusation itself," Bella put in.

"Yes. Has either anything to do with my wishing to live quite secret and retired here? No."

As Lizzie Hexam shook her head in giving this reply, and as her glance sought the fire, there was a quiet resolution in her folded hands, not lost on Bella's bright eyes.

"Have you lived much alone?" asked Bella.

"Yes. It's nothing new to me. I used to be always alone many hours together, in the day and in the night, when poor father was alive."

"You have a brother, I have been told?"

"I have a brother, but he is not friendly with me. He is a very good boy though, and has raised himself by his industry. I don't complain of him."

As she said it, with her eyes upon the fire-glow, there was an instantaneous escape of distress into her face. Bella seized the moment to touch her hand.

"Lizzie, I wish you would tell me whether you have any friend of your own sex and age."

"I have lived that lonely kind of life, that I have never had one," was the answer.

"Nor I neither," said Bella. "Not that my life has been lonely, for I could have sometimes wished it lonelier, instead of having Ma going on like the Tragic Muse with a face-ache in majestic corners, and Lavvy being spiteful — though of course I am very fond of them both. I wish you could make a friend of me, Lizzie. Do you think you could? I have no more of what they call character, my dear, than a canary-bird, but I know I am trustworthy."

The wayward, playful, affectionate nature, giddy for want of the weight of some sustaining purpose, and capricious because it was always fluttering among little things, was yet a captivating one. To Lizzie it was so new, so pretty, at once so womanly and so childish, that it won her completely. And when Bella said again, "Do you think you could, Lizzie?" with her eyebrows raised, her head inquiringly on one side, and an odd doubt about it in her own bosom, Lizzie showed beyond all question that she thought she could.

"Tell me, my dear," said Bella, "what is the matter, and why you live like this."

Lizzie presently began, by way of prelude, "You must have many lovers" — when Bella checked her with a little scream of astonishment.

"My dear, I have n't one!"

"Not one?"

"Well! Perhaps one," said Bella. "I am sure I don't know. I *had* one, but what he may think about it at the present time I can't say. Perhaps I have half a one (of course I don't count that Idiot, George Sampson). However, never mind me. I want to hear about you."

"There is a certain man," said Lizzie, "a passionate and angry man, who says he loves me, and who I must believe does love me. He is the friend of my brother. I shrank from him within myself when my brother first brought him to me; but the last time I saw him he terrified me more than I can say." There she stopped.

"Did you come here to escape from him, Lizzie?"

"I came here immediately after he so alarmed me."

"Are you afraid of him here?"

"I am not timid generally, but I am always afraid of him. I am afraid to see a newspaper, or to hear a word spoken of what is done in London, lest he should have done some violence."

"Then you are not afraid of him for yourself, dear?" said Bella, after pondering on the words.

"I should be even that, if I met him about here. I look round for him always, as I pass to and fro at night."

"Are you afraid of anything he may do to himself in London, my dear?"

"No. He might be fierce enough even to do some violence to himself, but I don't think of that."

"Then it would almost seem, dear," said Bella quaintly, "as if there must be somebody else?"

Lizzie put her hands before her face for a moment before replying: "The words are always in my ears, and the blow he struck upon a stone wall as he said them is always before my eyes. I have tried hard to think it not worth remembering, but I cannot make so little of

it. His hand was trickling down with blood as he said to me, 'Then I hope that I may never kill him!'

Rather startled, Bella made and clasped a girdle of her arms round Lizzie's waist, and then asked quietly, in a soft voice, as they both looked at the fire :

"Kill him! Is this man so jealous, then?"

"Of a gentleman," said Lizzie. — "I hardly know how to tell you — of a gentleman far above me and my way of life, who broke father's death to me, and has shown an interest in me since."

"Does he love you?"

Lizzie shook her head.

"Does he admire you?"

Lizzie ceased to shake her head, and pressed her hand upon her living girdle.

"Is it through his influence you came here?"

"O no! And of all the world I would n't have him know that I am here, or get the least clue where to find me."

"Lizzie, dear! Why?" asked Bella, in amazement at this burst. But then quickly added, reading Lizzie's face: "No. Don't say why. That was a foolish question of mine. I see, I see."

There was silence between them. Lizzie, with a drooping head, glanced down at the glow in the fire, where her first fancies had been nursed, and her first escape made from the grim life out of which she had plucked her brother, foreseeing her reward.

"You know all now," she said, raising her eyes to Bella's. "There is nothing left out. This is my reason for living secret here, with the aid of a good old man who is my true friend. For a short part of my life at home with father, I knew of things — don't ask me what

— that I set my face against, and tried to better. I don't think I could have done more, then, without letting my hold on father go; but they sometimes lie heavy on my mind. By doing all for the best, I hope I may wear them out."

"And wear out too," said Bella soothingly, "this weakness, Lizzie, in favor of one who is not worthy of it."

"No. I don't want to wear that out," was the flushed reply, "nor do I want to believe, nor do I believe, that he is not worthy of it. What should I gain by that, and how much should I lose!"

Bella's expressive little eyebrows remonstrated with the fire for some short time before she rejoined:

"Don't think that I press you, Lizzie; but would n't you gain in peace, and hope, and even in freedom? Would n't it be better not to live a secret life in hiding, and not to be shut out from your natural and wholesome prospects? Forgive my asking you, would that be no gain?"

"Does a woman's heart that — that has that weakness in it which you have spoken of," returned Lizzie, "seek to gain anything?"

The question was so directly at variance with Bella's views in life, as set forth to her father, that she said internally, "There, you little mercenary wretch! Do you hear that? Ain't you ashamed of yourself?" and unclasped the girdle of her arms, expressly to give herself a penitential poke in the side.

"But you said, Lizzie," observed Bella, returning to her subject when she had administered this chastisement, "that you would lose, besides. Would you mind telling me what you would lose, Lizzie?"

“I should lose some of the best recollections, best encouragements, and best objects, that I carry through my daily life. I should lose my belief that if I had been his equal, and he had loved me, I should have tried with all my might to make him better and happier, as he would have made me. I should lose almost all the value that I put upon the little learning I have, which is all owing to him, and which I conquered the difficulties of, that he might not think it thrown away upon me. I should lose a kind of picture of him — or of what he might have been, if I had been a lady, and he had loved me — which is always with me, and which I somehow feel that I could not do a mean or a wrong thing before. I should leave off prizing the remembrance that he has done me nothing but good since I have known him, and that he has made a change within me, like — like the change in the grain of these hands, which were coarse, and cracked, and hard, and brown when I rowed on the river with father, and are softened and made supple by this new work as you see them now.”

They trembled, but with no weakness, as she showed them.

“Understand me, my dear;” thus she went on. “I have never dreamed of the possibility of his being anything to me on this earth but the kind of picture that I know I could not make you understand, if the understanding was not in your own breast already. I have no more dreamed of the possibility of *my* being his wife, than he ever has — and words could not be stronger than that. And yet I love him. I love him so much, and so dearly, that when I sometimes think my life may be but a weary one, I am proud of it and glad of it. I am proud and glad to suffer something for him, even though it is of no

service to him, and he will never know of it or care for it."

Bella sat enchained by the deep, unselfish passion of this girl or woman of her own age, courageously revealing itself in the confidence of her sympathetic perception of its truth, And yet she had never experienced anything like it, or thought of the existence of anything like it.

"It was late upon a wretched night," said Lizzie, "when his eyes first looked at me in my old river-side home, very different from this. His eyes may never look at me again. I would rather that they never did; I hope that they never may. But I would not have the light of them taken out of my life, for anything my life can give me. I have told you everything now, my dear. If it comes a little strange to me to have parted with it, I am not sorry for it. I had no thought of even parting with a single word of it, a moment before you came in; but you came in, and my mind changed."

Bella kissed her on the cheek, and thanked her warmly for her confidence. "I only wish," said Bella, "I was more deserving of it."

"More deserving of it?" repeated Lizzie, with an incredulous smile.

"I don't mean in respect of keeping it," said Bella, "because any one should tear me to bits before getting at a syllable of it — though there's no merit in that, for I am naturally as obstinate as a Pig. What I mean is, Lizzie, that I am a mere impertinent piece of conceit, and you shame me."

Lizzie put up the pretty brown hair that came tumbling down, owing to the energy with which Bella shook her head; and she remonstrated while thus engaged, "My dear!"

"Oh, it's all very well to call me your dear," said Bella, with a pettish whimper, "and I am glad to be called so, though I have slight enough claim to be. But I AM such a nasty little thing!"

"My dear!" urged Lizzie again.

"Such a shallow, cold, worldly, Limited little brute!" said Bella, bringing out her last adjective with culminating force.

"Do you think," inquired Lizzie with her quiet smile, the hair being now secured, "that I don't know better?"

"Do you know better though?" said Bella. "Do you really believe you know better? Oh, I should be so glad if you did know better, but I so am very much afraid that I must know best!"

Lizzie asked her, laughing outright, whether she ever saw her own face or heard her own voice?

"I suppose so," returned Bella; "I look in the glass often enough, and I chatter like a Magpie."

"I have seen your face, and heard your voice, at any rate," said Lizzie, "and they have tempted me to say to you — with a certainty of not going wrong — what I thought I should never say to any one. Does that look ill?"

"No, I hope it does n't," pouted Bella, stopping herself in something between a humored laugh and a humored sob.

"I used once to see pictures in the fire," said Lizzie, playfully, "to please my brother. Shall I tell you what I see down there where the fire is glowing?"

They had risen, and were standing on the hearth, the time being come for separating; each had drawn an arm around the other to take leave.

"Shall I tell you," asked Lizzie, "what I see down there?"

"Limited little b?" suggested Bella with her eyebrows raised.

"A heart well worth winning, and well won. A heart that, once won, goes through fire and water for the winner, and never changes, and is never daunted."

"Girl's heart?" asked Bella, with accompanying eyebrows.

Lizzie nodded. "And the figure to which it belongs" —

"Is yours," suggested Bella.

"No. Most clearly and distinctly yours."

So the interview terminated with pleasant words on both sides, and with many reminders on the part of Bella that they were friends, and pledges that she would soon come down into that part of the country again. There-with Lizzie returned to her occupation, and Bella ran over to the little inn to rejoin her company.

"You look rather serious, Miss Wilfer," was the Secretary's first remark.

"I feel rather serious," returned Miss Wilfer.

She had nothing else to tell him but that Lizzie Hexam's secret had no reference whatever to the cruel charge, or its withdrawal. Oh yes, though! said Bella; she might as well mention one other thing; Lizzie was very desirous to thank her unknown friend who had sent her the written retraction. Was she, indeed? observed the Secretary. Ah! Bella asked him, had he any notion who that unknown friend might be? He had no notion whatever.

They were on the borders of Oxfordshire, so far had poor old Betty Higden strayed. They were to return by the train presently, and, the station being near at hand, the Reverend Frank and Mrs. Frank, and Sloppy

and Bella and the Secretary, set out to walk to it. Few rustic paths are wide enough for five, and Bella and the Secretary dropped behind.

"Can you believe, Mr. Rokesmith," said Bella, "that I feel as if whole years had passed since I went into Lizzie Hexam's cottage?"

"We have crowded a good deal into the day," he returned, "and you were much affected in the churchyard. You are over-tired."

"No, I am not at all tired. I have not quite expressed what I mean. I don't mean that I feel as if a great space of time had gone by, but that I feel as if much had happened — to myself, you know."

"For good, I hope?"

"I hope so," said Bella.

"You are cold; I felt you tremble. Pray let me put this wrapper of mine about you. May I fold it over this shoulder without injuring your dress? Now, it will be too heavy and too long. Let me carry this end over my arm, as you have no arm to give me."

Yes she had though. How she got it out, in her muffled state, Heaven knows; but she got it out somehow — there it was — and slipped it through the Secretary's.

"I have had a long and interesting talk with Lizzie, Mr. Rokesmith, and she gave me her full confidence."

"She could not withhold it," said the Secretary.

"I wonder how you come," said Bella, stopping short as she glanced at him, "to say to me just what she said about it!"

"I infer that it must be because I feel just as she felt about it."

"And how was that, do you mean to say, sir?" asked Bella, moving again.

“That if you were inclined to win her confidence — anybody’s confidence — you were sure to do it.”

The railway, at this point, knowingly shutting a green eye and opening a red one, they had to run for it. As Bella could not run easily so wrapped up, the Secretary had to help her. When she took her opposite place in the carriage-corner, the brightness in her face was so charming to behold, that on her exclaiming, “What beautiful stars and what a glorious night!” the Secretary said “Yes,” but seemed to prefer to see the night and the stars in the light of her lovely little countenance, to looking out of window.

O boofer lady, fascinating boofer lady! If I were but legally executor of Johnny’s will! If I had but the right to pay your legacy and to take your receipt! — Something to this purpose surely mingled with the blast of the train as it cleared the stations, all knowingly shutting up their green eyes and opening their red ones when they prepared to let the boofer lady pass.

CHAPTER X.

SCOUTS OUT.

“AND so, Miss Wren,” said Mr. Eugene Wrayburn, “I cannot persuade you to dress me a doll?”

“No,” replied Miss Wren snappishly; “if you want one, go and buy one at the shop.”

“And my charming young goddaughter,” said Mr. Wrayburn plaintively, “down in Hertfordshire” —

(“Humbugshire, you mean, I think,” interposed Miss Wren.)

— “is to be put upon the cold footing of the general public, and is to derive no advantage from my private acquaintance with the Court Dressmaker?”

“If it’s any advantage to your charming godchild — and oh, a precious godfather she has got!” — replied Miss Wren, pricking at him in the air with her needle, “to be informed that the Court Dressmaker knows your tricks and your manners, you may tell her so by post with my compliments.”

Miss Wren was busy at her work by candle-light, and Mr. Wrayburn, half amused and half vexed, and all idle and shiftless, stood by her bench looking on. Miss Wren’s troublesome child was in the corner in deep disgrace, and exhibiting great wretchedness in the shivering stage of prostration from drink.

“Ugh, you disgraceful boy!” exclaimed Miss Wren, attracted by the sound of his chattering teeth, “I wish

they'd all drop down your throat and play at dice in your stomach! Boh, wicked child! Bee-baa, black sheep!"

On her accompanying each of these reproaches with a threatening stamp of the foot, the wretched creature protested with a whine.

"Pay five shillings for you indeed!" Miss Wren proceeded; "how many hours do you suppose it costs me to earn five shillings, you infamous boy? — Don't cry like that, or I'll throw a doll at you. Pay five shillings fine for you indeed. Fine in more ways than one, I think! I'd give the dustman five shillings, to carry you off in the dust-cart."

"No, no," pleaded the absurd creature. "Please!"

"He's enough to break his mother's heart, is this boy," said Miss Wren, half appealing to Eugene. "I wish I had never brought him up. He'd be sharper than a serpent's tooth, if he was n't as dull as ditch-water. Look at him. There's a pretty object for a parent's eyes!"

Assuredly, in his worse than swinish state (for swine at least fatten on their guzzling, and make themselves good to eat), he was a pretty object for any eyes.

"A muddling and a swikey old child," said Miss Wren, rating him with great severity, "fit for nothing but to be preserved in the liquor that destroys him, and put in a great glass bottle as a sight for other swikey children of his own pattern, — if he has no consideration for his liver, has he none for his mother?"

"Yes. Deration, oh don't!" cried the subject of these angry remarks.

"Oh don't and oh don't," pursued Miss Wren. "It's oh do and oh do. And why do you?"

"Won't do so any more. Won't indeed. Pray!"

"There!" said Miss Wren, covering her eyes with her hand. "I can't bear to look at you. Go up-stairs and get me my bonnet and shawl. Make yourself useful in some way, bad boy, and let me have your room instead of your company, for one half minute."

Obeying her, he shambled out, and Eugene Wrayburn saw the tears exude from between the little creature's fingers as she kept her hand before her eyes. He was sorry, but his sympathy did not move his carelessness to do anything but feel sorry.

"I'm going to the Italian Opera to try on," said Miss Wren, taking away her hand after a little while, and laughing satirically to hide that she had been crying; "I must see your back before I go, Mr. Wrayburn. Let me first tell you, once for all, that it's of no use your paying visits to me. You would n't get what you want, of me, no, not if you brought pincers with you to tear it out."

"Are you so obstinate on the subject of a doll's dress for my godchild?"

"Ah!" returned Miss Wren with a hitch of her chin, "I am so obstinate. And of course it's on the subject of a doll's dress — or *address* — which ever you like. Get along and give it up!"

Her degraded charge had come back, and was standing behind her with the bonnet and shawl.

"Give 'em to me and get back into your corner, you naughty old thing!" said Miss Wren, as she turned and espied him. "No, no, I won't have your help. Go into your corner, this minute!"

The miserable man, feebly rubbing the back of his faltering hands downward from the wrists, shuffled on to his post of disgrace; but not without a curious glance at

Eugene in passing him, accompanied with what seemed as if it might have been an action of his elbow, if any action of any limb or joint he had, would have answered truly to his will. Taking no more particular notice of him than instinctively falling away from the disagreeable contact, Eugene, with a lazy compliment or so to Miss Wren, begged leave to light his cigar, and departed.

“Now, you prodigal old son,” said Jenny, shaking her head and her emphatic little forefinger at her burden, “you sit there till I come back. You dare to move out of your corner for a single instant while I’m gone, and I’ll know the reason why.”

With this admonition, she blew her work-candles out, leaving him to the light of the fire, and, taking her big door key in her pocket and her crutch-stick in her hand, marched off.

Eugene lounged slowly towards the Temple, smoking his cigar, but saw no more of the dolls’ dressmaker, through the accident of their taking opposite sides of the street. He lounged along moodily, and stopped at Charing Cross to look about him, with as little interest in the crowd as any man might take, and was lounging on again, when a most unexpected object caught his eyes. No less an object than Jenny Wren’s bad boy trying to make up his mind to cross the road.

A more ridiculous and feeble spectacle than this tottering wretch making unsteady sallies into the roadway, and as often staggering back again, oppressed by terrors of vehicles that were a long way off or were nowhere, the streets could not have shown. Over and over again, when the course was perfectly clear, he set out, got half way, described a loop, turned, and went back again, when he might have crossed and recrossed half a dozen times.

Then, he would stand shivering on the edge of the pavement, looking up the street and looking down, while scores of people jostled him, and crossed, and went on. Stimulated in course of time by the sight of so many successes, he would make another sally, make another loop, would all but have his foot on the opposite pavement, would see or imagine something coming, and would stagger back again. There, he would stand making spasmodic preparations as if for a great leap, and at last would decide on a start at precisely the wrong moment, and would be roared at by drivers, and would shrink back once more, and stand in the old spot shivering, with the whole of the proceedings to go through again.

"It strikes me," remarked Eugene coolly, after watching him for some minutes, "that my friend is likely to be rather behind time if he has any appointment on hand." With which remark he strolled on, and took no further thought of him.

Lightwood was at home when he got to the Chambers, and had dined alone there. Eugene drew a chair to the fire by which he was having his wine and reading the evening paper, and brought a glass, and filled it for good fellowship's sake.

"My dear Mortimer, you are the express picture of contented industry, reposing (on credit) after the virtuous labors of the day."

"My dear Eugene, you are the express picture of discontented idleness not reposing at all. Where have you been?"

"I have been," replied Wrayburn, — "about town. I have turned up at the present juncture, with the intention of consulting my highly intelligent and respected solicitor on the position of my affairs."

"Your highly intelligent and respected solicitor is of opinion that your affairs are in a bad way, Eugene."

"Though whether," said Eugene thoughtfully, "that can be intelligently said, now, of the affairs of a client who has nothing to lose and who cannot possibly be made to pay, may be open to question."

"You have fallen into the hands of the Jews, Eugene."

"My dear boy," returned the debtor, very composedly taking up his glass, "having previously fallen into the hands of some of the Christians, I can bear it with philosophy."

"I have had an interview to-day, Eugene, with a Jew, who seems determined to press us hard. Quite a Shylock, and quite a Patriarch. A picturesque gray-headed and gray-bearded old Jew, in a shovel-hat and gaberdine."

"Not," said Eugene, pausing in setting down his glass, "surely not my worthy friend Mr. Aaron?"

"He calls himself Mr. Riah."

"By the by," said Eugene, "it comes into my mind that — no doubt with an instinctive desire to receive him into the bosom of our Church — I gave him the name of Aaron!"

"Eugene, Eugene," returned Lightwood, "you are more ridiculous than usual. Say what you mean."

"Merely, my dear fellow, that I have the honor and pleasure of a speaking acquaintance with such a Patriarch as you describe, and that I address him as Mr. Aaron, because it appears to me Hebraic, expressive, appropriate, and complimentary. Notwithstanding which strong reasons for its being his name, it may not be his name."

"I believe you are the absurdest man on the face of the earth," said Lightwood, laughing.

"Not at all, I assure you. Did he mention that he knew me?"

"He did not. He only said of you that he expected to be paid by you."

"Which looks," remarked Eugene with much gravity, "like *not* knowing me. I hope it may not be my worthy friend Mr. Aaron, for, to tell you the truth, Mortimer, I doubt he may have a prepossession against me. I strongly suspect him of having had a hand in spiriting away Lizzie."

"Everything," returned Lightwood impatiently, "seems, by a fatality, to bring us round to Lizzie. 'About town' meant about Lizzie, just now, Eugene."

"My solicitor, do you know," observed Eugene, turning round to the furniture, "is a man of infinite discernment!"

"Did it not, Eugene?"

"Yes it did, Mortimer."

"And yet, Eugene, you know you do not really care for her."

Eugene Wrayburn rose, and put his hands in his pockets, and stood with a foot on the fender, indolently rocking his body and looking at the fire. After a prolonged pause, he replied: "I don't know that. I must ask you not to say that, as if we took it for granted."

"But if you do care for her, so much the more should you leave her to herself."

Having again paused as before, Eugene said: "I don't know that, either. But tell me. Did you ever see me take so much trouble about anything, as about this disappearance of hers? I ask, for information."

"My dear Eugene, I wish I ever had!"

"Then you have not? Just so. You confirm my own impression. Does that look as if I cared for her? I ask, for information."

I asked *you* for information, Eugene," said Mortimer reproachfully.

"Dear boy, I know it, but I can't give it. I thirst for information. What do I mean? If my taking so much trouble to recover her does not mean that I care for her, what does it mean? 'If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers, where's the peck,' &c.?"

Though he said this gayly, he said it with a perplexed and inquisitive face, as if he actually did not know what to make of himself. "Look on to the end" — Lightwood was beginning to remonstrate, when he caught at the words:

"Ah! See now! That's exactly what I am incapable of doing. How very acute you are, Mortimer, in finding my weak place! When we were at school together, I got up my lessons at the last moment, day by day and bit by bit; now we are out in life together, I get up my lessons in the same way. In the present task I have not got beyond this: — I am bent on finding Lizzie, and I mean to find her, and I will take any means of finding her that offer themselves. Fair means or foul means, are all alike to me. I ask you — for information — what does that mean? When I have found her I may ask you — also for information — what do I mean now? But it would be premature in this stage, and it's not the character of my mind."

Lightwood was shaking his head over the air with which his friend held forth thus — an air so whimsically open and argumentative as almost to deprive what he

said of the appearance of evasion — when a shuffling was heard at the outer door, and then an undecided knock, as though some hand were groping for the knocker. “The frolicsome youth of the neighborhood,” said Eugene, “whom I should be delighted to pitch from this elevation into the churchyard below, without any intermediate ceremonies, have probably turned the lamp out. I am on duty to-night, and will see to the door.”

His friend had barely had time to recall the unprecedented gleam of determination with which he had spoken of finding this girl, and which had faded out of him with the breath of the spoken words, when Eugene came back, ushering in a most disgraceful shadow of a man, shaking from head to foot, and clothed in shabby grease and smear.

“This interesting gentleman,” said Eugene, “is the son — the occasionally rather trying son, for he has his failings — of a lady of my acquaintance. My dear Mortimer — Mr. Dolls.” Eugene had no idea what his name was, knowing the little dressmaker’s to be assumed, but presented him with easy confidence under the first appellation that his associations suggested.

“I gather, my dear Mortimer,” pursued Eugene, as Lightwood stared at the obscene visitor, “from the manner of Mr. Dolls — which is occasionally complicated — that he desires to make some communication to me. I have mentioned to Mr. Dolls that you and I are on terms of confidence, and have requested Mr. Dolls to develop his views here.”

The wretched object being much embarrassed by holding what remained of his hat, Eugene airily tossed it to the door, and put him down in a chair.

“It will be necessary, I think,” he observed, “to wind

up 'Mr. Dolls, before anything to any mortal purpose can be got out of him. Brandy, Mr. Dolls, or ?" —

"Threepenn'orth Rum," said Mr. Dolls.

A judiciously small quantity of the spirit was given him in a wine-glass, and he began to convey it to his mouth, with all kinds of falterings and gyrations on the road.

"The nerves of Mr. Dolls," remarked Eugene to Lightwood, "are considerably unstrung. And I deem it on the whole expedient to fumigate Mr. Dolls."

He took the shovel from the grate, sprinkled a few live ashes on it, and from a box on the chimney-piece took a few pastiles, which he set upon them; then, with great composure began placidly waving the shovel in front of Mr. Dolls, to cut him off from his company.

"Lord bless my soul, Eugene!" cried Lightwood, laughing again, "what a mad fellow you are! Why does this creature come to see you?"

"We shall hear," said Wrayburn, very observant of his face withal. "Now then. Speak out. Don't be afraid. State your business, Dolls."

"Mist- Wrayburn!" said the visitor, thickly and huskily. — "'Tis Mist Wrayburn, ain't?" With a stupid stare.

"Of course it is. Look at me. What do you want?"

Mr. Dolls collapsed in his chair, and faintly said, "Threepenn'orth Rum."

"Will you do me the favor, my dear Mortimer, to wind up Mr. Dolls again?" said Eugene. "I am occupied with the fumigation."

A similar quantity was poured into his glass, and he got it to his lips by similar circuitous ways. Having

drunk it, Mr. Dolls, with an evident fear of running down again unless he made haste, proceeded to business.

"Mist Wrayburn. Tried to nudge you, but you would n't. You want that d'rection. You want t' know where she lives. *Do you, Mist Wrayburn?*"

With a glance at his friend, Eugene replied to the question sternly, "I do."

"I am er man," said Mr. Dolls, trying to smite himself on the breast, but bringing his hand to bear upon the vicinity of his eye, "er do it. I am er man er do it."

"What are you the man to do?" demanded Eugene, still sternly.

"Er give up that d'rection."

"Have you got it?"

With a most laborious attempt at pride and dignity, Mr. Dolls rolled his head for some time, awakening the highest expectations, and then answered, as if it were the happiest point that could possibly be expected of him: "No."

"What do you mean then?"

Mr. Dolls, collapsing in the drowsiest manner after his late intellectual triumph, replied: "Threepenn'orth Rum."

"Wind him up again, my dear Mortimer," said Wrayburn; "wind him up again."

"Eugene, Eugene," urged Lightwood in a low voice, as he complied, "can you stoop to the use of such an instrument as this?"

"I said," was the reply, made with that former gleam of determination, "that I would find her out by any means, fair or foul. These are foul, and I'll take them — if I am not first tempted to break the head of Mr. Dolls with the fumigator. Can you get the direction?"

Do you mean that? Speak! If that's what you have come for, say how much you want."

"Ten shillings — Threepenn'orths Rum," said Mr. Dolls.

"You shall have it."

"Fifteen shillings — Threepenn'orths Rum," said Mr. Dolls, making an attempt to stiffen himself.

"You shall have it. Stop at that. How will you get the direction you talk of?"

"I am er man," said Mr. Dolls, with majesty, "er get it, sir."

"How will you get it, I ask you?"

"I am ill-used 'vidual," said Mr. Dolls. "Blown up morning t'night. Called names. She makes Mint money, sir, and never stands Threepenn'orth Rum."

"Get on," rejoined Eugene, tapping his palsied head with the fire-shovel, as it sank on his breast. "What comes next?"

Making a dignified attempt to gather himself together, but, as it were, dropping half a dozen pieces of himself while he tried in vain to pick up one, Mr. Dolls, swaying his head from side to side, regarded his questioner with what he supposed to be a haughty smile and a scornful glance.

"She looks upon me as mere child, sir. I am NOT mere child, sir. Man. Man talent. Lerrers past betwixt 'em. Postman lerrers. Easy for man talent er get d'rection, as get his own d'rection."

"Get it then," said Eugene; adding very heartily under his breath, — "You Brute! Get it, and bring it here to me, and earn the money for sixty threepenn'orths of rum, and drink them all, one a-top of another, and drink yourself dead with all possible expedition." The

latter clauses of these special instructions he addressed to the fire, as he gave it back the ashes he had taken from it, and replaced the shovel.

Mr. Dolls now struck out the highly unexpected discovery that he had been insulted by Lightwood, and stated his desire to "have it out with him" on the spot, and defied him to come on, upon the liberal terms of a sovereign to a halfpenny. Mr. Dolls then fell a-crying, and then exhibited a tendency to fall asleep. This last manifestation was by far the most alarming, by reason of its threatening his prolonged stay on the premises, necessitated vigorous measures. Eugene picked up his worn-out hat with the tongs, clapped it on his head, and, taking him by the collar — all this at arm's length — conducted him down stairs and out of the precincts into Fleet Street. There, he turned his face westward, and left him.

When he got back, Lightwood was standing over the fire, brooding in a sufficiently low-spirited manner.

"I'll wash my hands of Mr. Dolls — physically" — said Eugene, "and be with you again directly, Mortimer."

"I would much prefer," retorted Mortimer, "your washing your hands of Mr. Dolls, morally, Eugene."

"So would I," said Eugene; "but you see, dear boy, I can't do without him."

In a minute or two he resumed his chair, as perfectly unconcerned as usual, and rallied his friend on having so narrowly escaped the prowess of their muscular visitor.

"I can't be amused on this theme," said Mortimer, restlessly. "You can make almost any theme amusing to me, Eugene, but not this."

"Well!" cried Eugene, "I am a little ashamed of it myself, and therefore let us change the subject."

"It is so deplorably underhanded," said Mortimer. "It is so unworthy of you, this setting on of such a shameful scout."

"We have changed the subject!" exclaimed Eugene, airily. "We have found a new one in that word, scout. Don't be like Patience on a mantelpiece frowning at Dolls, but sit down, and I'll tell you something that you really will find amusing. Take a cigar. Look at this of mine. I light it — draw one puff — breathe the smoke out — there it goes — it's Dolls! — it's gone — and being gone you are a man again."

"Your subject," said Mortimer, after lighting a cigar, and comforting himself with a whiff or two, "was scouts, Eugene."

"Exactly. Is n't it droll that I never go out after dark, but I find myself attended, always by one scout, and often by two?"

Lightwood took his cigar from his lips in surprise, and looked at his friend, as if with a latent suspicion that there must be a jest or hidden meaning in his words.

"On my honor, no," said Wrayburn, answering the look and smiling carelessly; "I don't wonder at your supposing so, but on my honor, no. I say what I mean. I never go out after dark, but I find myself in the ludicrous situation of being followed and observed at a distance, always by one scout, and often by two."

"Are you sure, Eugene?"

"Sure? My dear boy, they are always the same."

"But there's no process out against you. The Jews only threaten. They have done nothing. Besides, they

know where to find you, and I represent you. Why take the trouble?"

"Observe the legal mind!" remarked Eugene, turning round to the furniture again, with an air of indolent rapture. "Observe the dyer's hand, assimilating itself to what it works in, — or would work in, if anybody would give it anything to do. Respected solicitor, it's not that. The schoolmaster's abroad."

"The schoolmaster?"

"Ay! Sometimes the schoolmaster and the pupil are both abroad. Why, how soon you rust in my absence! You don't understand yet? Those fellows who were here one night. They are the scouts I speak of, as doing me the honor to attend me after dark."

"How long has this been going on?" asked Lightwood, opposing a serious face to the laugh of his friend.

"I apprehend it has been going on ever since a certain person went off. Probably, it had been going on some little time before I noticed it; which would bring it to about that time."

"Do you think they suppose you to have inveigled her away?"

"My dear Mortimer, you know the absorbing nature of my professional occupations; I really have not had leisure to think about it."

"Have you asked them what they want? Have you objected?"

"Why should I ask them what they want, dear fellow, when I am indifferent to what they want? Why should I express objection when I don't object?"

"You are in your most reckless mood. But you called the situation, just now, a ludicrous one; and most men object to that, even those who are utterly indifferent to anything else."

“ You charm me, Mortimer, with your reading of my weaknesses. (By the by, that very word, Reading, in its critical use, always charms me. An actress's Reading of a chambermaid, a dancer's Reading of a hornpipe, a singer's Reading of a song, a marine-painter's Reading of the sea, the kettle-drum's Reading of an instrumental passage, are phrases ever youthful and delightful.) I was mentioning your perception of my weaknesses. I own to the weakness of objecting to occupy a ludicrous position, and therefore I transfer the position to the scouts.”

“ I wish, Eugene, you would speak a little more soberly and plainly, if it were only out of consideration for my feeling less at ease than you do.”

“ Then soberly and plainly, Mortimer, I goad the schoolmaster to madness. I make the schoolmaster so ridiculous, and so aware of being made ridiculous, that I see him chafe and fret at every pore when we cross one another. The amiable occupation has been the solace of my life, since I was balked in the manner unnecessary to recall. I have derived inexpressible comfort from it. I do it thus: I stroll out after dark, stroll a little way, look in at a window and furtively look out for the schoolmaster. Sooner or later, I perceive the schoolmaster on the watch; sometimes accompanied by his hopeful pupil; oftener, pupil-less. Having made sure of his watching me, I tempt him on, all over London. One night I go east, another night north, in a few nights I go all round the compass. Sometimes, I walk; sometimes, I proceed in cabs, draining the pocket of the schoolmaster who then follows in cabs. I study and get up abstruse No Thoroughfares in the course of the day. With Venetian mystery I seek those No Thoroughfares at night,

glide into them by means of dark courts, tempt the schoolmaster to follow, turn suddenly, and catch him before he can retreat. Then we face one another, and I pass him as unaware of his existence, and he undergoes grinding torments. Similarly, I walk at a great pace down a short street, rapidly turn the corner, and, getting out of his view, as rapidly turn back. I catch him coming on post, again pass him as unaware of his existence, and again he undergoes grinding torments. Night after night his disappointment is acute, but hope springs eternal in the scholastic breast, and he follows me again tomorrow. Thus I enjoy the pleasures of the chase, and derive great benefit from the healthful exercise. When I do not enjoy the pleasures of the chase, for anything I know he watches at the Temple Gate all night."

"This is an extraordinary story," observed Lightwood, who had heard it out with serious attention. "I don't like it."

"You are a little hipped, dear fellow," said Eugene; "you have been too sedentary. Come and enjoy the pleasures of the chase."

"Do you mean that you believe he is watching now?"

"I have not the slightest doubt he is."

"Have you seen him to-night?"

"I forgot to look for him when I was last out," returned Eugene with the calmest indifference; "but I dare say he was there. Come! Be a British sportsman and enjoy the pleasure of the chase. It will do you good."

Lightwood hesitated; but, yielding to his curiosity, rose.

"Bravo!" cried Eugene, rising too. "Or, if Yoicks would be in better keeping, consider that I said Yoicks."

Look to your feet, Mortimer, for we shall try your boots. When you are ready, I am — need I say with a Hey Ho Chivey, and likewise with a Hark Forward, Hark Forward, Tantivy?”

“Will nothing make you serious?” said Mortimer, laughing through his gravity.

“I am always serious, but just now I am a little excited by the glorious fact that a southerly wind and a cloudy sky proclaim a hunting evening. Ready? So. We turn out the lamp and shut the door, and take the field.”

As the two friends passed out of the Temple into the public street, Eugene demanded with a show of courteous patronage in which direction Mortimer would like the run to be? “There is a rather difficult country about Bethnal Green,” said Eugene, “and we have not taken in that direction lately. What is your opinion of Bethnal Green?” Mortimer assented to Bethnal Green, and they turned eastward. “Now, when we come to St. Paul’s churchyard,” pursued Eugene, “we’ll loiter artfully, and I’ll show you the schoolmaster.” But, they both saw him, before they got there; alone, and stealing after them in the shadow of the houses, on the opposite side of the way.

“Get your wind,” said Eugene, “for I am off directly. Does it occur to you that the boys of Merry England will begin to deteriorate in an educational light, if this lasts long? The schoolmaster can’t attend to me and the boys too. Got your wind? I am off!”

At what a rate he went, to breathe the schoolmaster; and how he then lounged and loitered, to put his patience to another kind of wear; what preposterous ways he took, with no other object on earth than to disappoint and pun-

ish him ; and how he wore him out by every piece of ingenuity that his eccentric humor could devise ; all this Lightwood noted, with a feeling of astonishment that so careless a man could be so wary, and that so idle a man could take so much trouble. At last, far on in the third hour of the pleasures of the chase, when he had brought the poor dogging wretch round again into the City, he twisted Mortimer up a few dark entries, twisted him into a little square court, twisted him sharp round again, and they almost ran against Bradley Headstone.

“ And you see, as I was saying, Mortimer,” remarked Eugene aloud with the utmost coolness, as though there were no one within hearing but themselves : “ and you see, as I was saying — undergoing grinding torments.”

It was not too strong a phrase for the occasion. Looking like the hunted and not the hunter, baffled, worn, with the exhaustion of deferred hope and consuming hate and anger in his face, white-lipped, wild-eyed, draggle-haired, seamed with jealousy and anger, and torturing himself with the conviction that he showed it all and they exulted in it, he went by them in the dark, like a haggard head suspended in the air : so completely did the force of his expression cancel his figure.

Mortimer Lightwood was not an extraordinarily impressive man, but this face impressed him. He spoke of it more than once on the remainder of the way home, and more than once when they got home.

They had been abed in their respective rooms two or three hours, when Eugene was partly awakened by hearing a footstep going about, and was fully awakened by seeing Lightwood standing at his bedside.

“ Nothing wrong, Mortimer ? ”

“ No.”

“What fancy takes you, then, for walking about in the night?”

“I am horribly wakeful.”

“How comes that about, I wonder!”

“Eugene, I cannot lose sight of that fellow’s face.”

“Odd!” said Eugene with a light laugh; “*I can.*”
And turned over, and fell asleep again.

CHAPTER XL

IN THE DARK.

THERE was no sleep for Bradley Headstone on that night when Eugene Wrayburn turned so easily in his bed; there was no sleep for little Miss Peecher. Bradley consumed the lonely hours, and consumed himself, in haunting the spot where his careless rival lay a-dreaming; little Miss Peecher wore them away in listening for the return home of the master of her heart, and in sorrowfully presaging that much was amiss with him. Yet more was amiss with him than Miss Peecher's simply arranged little work-box of thoughts, fitted with no gloomy and dark recesses, could hold. For, the state of the man was murderous.

The state of the man was murderous, and he knew it. More; he irritated it, with a kind of perverse pleasure akin to that which a sick man sometimes has in irritating a wound upon his body. Tied up all day with his disciplined show upon him, subdued to the performance of his routine of educational tricks, encircled by a gabbling crowd, he broke loose at night like an ill-tamed wild animal. Under his daily restraint, it was his compensation, not his trouble, to give a glance towards his state at night, and to the freedom of its being indulged. If great criminals told the truth, — which, being great criminals, they do not, — they would very rarely tell of their struggles against the crime. Their struggles are towards it. They

buffet with opposing waves, to gain the bloody shore, not to recede from it. This man perfectly comprehended that he hated his rival with his strongest and worst forces, and that if he tracked him to Lizzie Hexam, his so doing would never serve himself with her, or serve her. All his pains were taken, to the end that he might incense himself with the sight of the detested figure in her company and favor, in her place of concealment. And he knew as well what act of his would follow if he did, as he knew that his mother had borne him. Granted, that he may not have held it necessary to make express mention to himself of the one familiar truth any more than of the other.

He knew equally well that he fed his wrath and hatred, and that he accumulated provocation and self-justification, by being made the nightly sport of the reckless and insolent Eugene. Knowing all this, and still always going on with infinite endurance, pains, and perseverance, could his dark soul doubt whither he went?

Baffled, exasperated, and weary, he lingered opposite the Temple gate when it closed on Wrayburn and Lightwood, debating with himself should he go home for that time or should he watch longer. Possessed in his jealousy by the fixed idea that Wrayburn was in the secret, if it were not altogether of his contriving, Bradley was as confident of getting the better of him at last by sullenly sticking to him, as he would have been — and often had been — of mastering any piece of study in the way of his vocation, by the like slow persistent process. A man of rapid passions and sluggish intelligence, it had served him often and should serve him again.

The suspicion crossed him as he rested in a doorway with his eyes upon the Temple gate, that perhaps she

was even concealed in that set of Chambers. It would furnish another reason for Wrayburn's purposeless walks, and it might be. He thought of it and thought of it, until he resolved to steal up the stairs, if the gate-keeper would let him through, and listen. So, the haggard head suspended in the air flitted across the road, like the spectre of one of the many heads erst hoisted upon neighboring Temple Bar, and stopped before the watchman.

The watchman looked at it, and asked: "Who for?"

"Mr. Wrayburn."

"It's very late."

"He came back with Mr. Lightwood, I know, near upon two hours ago. But if he has gone to bed, I'll put a paper in his letter-box. I am expected."

The watchman said no more, but opened the gate, though rather doubtfully. Seeing, however, that the visitor went straight and fast in the right direction, he seemed satisfied.

The haggard head floated up the dark staircase, and softly descended nearer to the floor outside the outer door of the chambers. The doors of the rooms within, appeared to be standing open. There were rays of candle-light from one of them, and there was the sound of a footstep going about. There were two voices. The words they uttered were not distinguishable, but they were both the voices of men. In a few moments the voices were silent, and there was no sound of footstep, and the inner light went out. If Lightwood could have seen the face which kept him awake, staring and listening in the darkness outside the door as he spoke of it, he might have been less disposed to sleep through the remainder of the night.

"Not there," said Bradley; "but she might have

been." The head arose to its former height from the ground, floated down the staircase again, and passed on to the gate. A man was standing there, in parley with the watchman.

"Oh!" said the watchman. "Here he is!"

Perceiving himself to be the antecedent, Bradley looked from the watchman to the man.

"This man is leaving a letter for Mr. Lightwood," the watchman explained, showing it in his hand; "and I was mentioning that a person had just gone up to Mr. Lightwood's chambers. It might be the same business perhaps?"

"No," said Bradley, glancing at the man, who was a stranger to him.

"No," the man assented in a surly way; "my letter — it's wrote by my daughter, but it's mine — is about my business, and my business ain't nobody else's business."

As Bradley passed out at the gate with an undecided foot, he heard it shut behind him, and heard the footstep of the man coming after him.

"'Scuse me," said the man, who appeared to have been drinking, and rather stumbled at him than touched him, to attract his attention; "but might you be acquainted with the T'other Governor?"

"With whom?" asked Bradley.

"With," returned the man, pointing backward over his right shoulder with his right thumb, "the T'other Governor?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Why look here," hooking his proposition on his left-hand fingers with the forefinger of his right. "There's two Governors, ain't there? One and one, two — Law-

yer Lightwood, my first finger, he's one, ain't he? Well; might you be acquainted with my middle finger, the T'other?"

"I know quite as much of him," said Bradley, with a frown and a distant look before him, "as I want to know."

"Hooroar!" cried the man. "Hooroar T'other t'other Governor. Hooroar T'otherest Governor! I am of your way of thinkin'."

"Don't make such a noise at this dead hour of the night. What are you talking about?"

"Look here, T'otherest Governor," replied the man, becoming hoarsely confidential. "The T'other Governor he's always joked his jokes agin me, owing, as I believe, to my being a honest man as gets my living by the sweat of my brow. Which he ain't, and he don't."

"What is that to me?"

"T'otherest Governor," returned the man in a tone of injured innocence, "if you don't care to hear no more, don't hear no more. You begun it. You said, and likewise showed pretty plain, as you warn't by no means friendly to him. But I don't seek to force my company nor yet my opinions on no man. I am a honest man, that's what I am. Put me in the dock anywhere — I don't care where — and I says, 'My Lord, I am a honest man.' Put me in the witness-box anywhere — I don't care where — and I says the same to his lordship, and I kisses the book. I don't kiss my coat-cuff; I kisses the book."

It was not so much in deference to these strong testimonials to character, as in his restless casting about for any way or help towards the discovery on which he was concentrated, that Bradley Headstone replied: "You need n't take offence. I did n't mean to stop you. You were too loud in the open street; that was all."

"T'otherest Governor," replied Mr. Riderhood, mollified and mysterious, "I know wot it is to be loud, and I know wot it is to be soft. Nat'rally I do. It would be a wonder if I did not, being by the Chris'en name of Roger, which took it arter my own father, which took it from his own father, though which of our fam'ly fust took it nat'ral I will not in any ways mislead you by undertakin' to say. And wishing that your elth may be better than your looks, which your inside must be bad indeed if it's on the footing of your out."

Startled by the implication that his face revealed too much of his mind, Bradley made an effort to clear his brow. It might be worth knowing what this strange man's business was with Lightwood, or Wrayburn, or both, at such an unseasonable hour. He set himself to find out, for the man might prove to be a messenger between those two.

"You call at the Temple late," he remarked, with a lumbering show of ease.

"Wish I may die," cried Mr. Riderhood, with a hoarse laugh, "if I warn't a goin' to say the self-same words to you, T'otherest Governor!"

"It chanced so with me," said Bradley, looking disconcertedly about him.

"And it chanced so with me," said Riderhood. "But I don't mind telling you how. Why should I mind telling you? I'm a Deputy Lock-keeper up the river, and I was off duty yes'day, and I shall be on to-morrow."

"Yes?"

"Yes, and I come to London to look arter my private affairs. My private affairs is to get app'inted to the Lock as reg'lar keeper at fust hand, and to have the law of a busted B'low-Bridge steamer which drowned of me. I ain't a goin' to be drowned and not paid for it!"

Bradley looked at him, as though he were claiming to be a Ghost.

"The steamer," said Mr. Riderhood, obstinately, "run me down and drowned of me. Interference on the part of other parties brought me round; but I never asked 'em to bring me round, nor yet the steamer never asked 'em to it. I mean to be paid for the life as the steamer took."

"Was that your business at Mr. Lightwood's chambers in the middle of the night?" asked Bradley, eyeing him with distrust.

"That and to get a writing to be fust-hand Lock Keeper. A recommendation in writing being looked for, who else ought to give it to me? As I says in the letter in my daughter's hand, with my mark put to it to make it good in law, Who but you, Lawyer Lightwood, ought to hand over this here stificate, and who but you ought to go in for damages on my account agin the Steamer? For (as I says under my mark) I have had trouble enough along of you and your friend. If you, Lawyer Lightwood, had backed me good and true, and if the T'other Governor had took me down correct (I says under my mark), I should have been worth money at the present time, instead of having a barge-load of bad names chucked at me, and being forced to eat my words, which is a unsatisfying sort of food wotever a man's appetite! And when you mention the middle of the night, T'otherest Governor," growled Mr. Riderhood, winding up his monotonous summary of his wrongs, "throw your eye on this here bundle under my arm, and bear in mind that I'm a walking back to my Lock, and that the Temple laid upon my line of road."

Bradley Headstone's face had changed during this lat-

ter recital, and he had observed the speaker with a more sustained attention.

"Do you know," said he, after a pause, during which they walked on side by side, "that I believe I could tell you your name, if I tried?"

"Prove your opinion," was the answer, accompanied with a stop and a stare. "Try."

"Your name is Riderhood."

"I'm blest if it ain't," returned that gentleman. "But I don't know your'n."

"That's quite another thing," said Bradley. "I never supposed you did."

As Bradley walked on meditating, the Rogue walked on at his side muttering. The purport of the muttering was: "that Rogue Riderhood, by George! seemed to be made public property on, now, and that every man seemed to think himself free to handle his name as if it was a Street Pump." The purport of the meditating was: "Here is an instrument. Can I use it?"

They had walked along the Strand, and into Pall Mall, and had turned up-hill towards Hyde Park Corner; Bradley Headstone waiting on the pace and lead of Riderhood, and leaving him to indicate the course. So slow were the schoolmaster's thoughts, and so indistinct his purposes when they were but tributary to the one absorbing purpose — or rather when, like dark trees under a stormy sky, they only lined the long vista at the end of which he saw those two figures of Wrayburn and Lizzie on which his eyes were fixed — that at least a good half-mile was traversed before he spoke again. Even then, it was only to ask:

"Where is your Lock?"

"Twenty mile and odd — call it five-and-twenty mile and odd, if you like — up stream," was the sullen reply.

"How is it called?"

"Plashwater Weir Mill Lock."

"Suppose I was to offer you five shillings; what then?"

"Why, then, I'd take it," said Mr. Riderhood.

The schoolmaster put his hand in his pocket, and produced two half-crowns, and placed them in Mr. Riderhood's palm; who stopped at a convenient doorstep to ring them both, before acknowledging their receipt.

"There's one thing about you, T'otherest Governor," said Riderhood, faring on again, "as looks well and goes fur. You're a ready-money man. "Now" — when he had carefully pocketed the coins on that side of himself which was furthest from his new friend — "what's this for?"

"For you."

"Why, o' course I know *that*," said Riderhood, as arguing something that was self-evident. "O' course I know very well as no man in his right senses would suppose as anythink would make me give it up agin when I'd once got it. But what do you want for it?"

"I don't know that I want anything for it. Or if I do want anything for it, I don't know what it is." Bradley gave this answer in a stolid, vacant, and self-communing manner, which Mr. Riderhood found very extraordinary.

"You have no good will towards this Wrayburn," said Bradley, coming to the name in a reluctant and forced way, as if he were dragged to it.

"No."

"Neither have I."

Riderhood nodded, and asked: "Is it for that?"

"It's as much for that as anything else. It's some-

thing to be agreed with, on a subject that occupies so much of one's thoughts."

"It don't agree with *you*," returned Mr. Riderhood, bluntly. "No! It don't, T'otherest Governor, and it's no use a lookin' as if you wanted to make out that it did. I tell you it rankles in you. It rankles in you, rusts in you, and pisons you."

"Say that it does so," returned Bradley with quivering lips; "is there no cause for it?"

"Cause enough, I'll bet a pound!" cried Mr. Riderhood.

"Have n't you yourself declared that the fellow has heaped provocations, insults, and affronts on you, or something to that effect? He has done the same by me. He is made of venomous insults and affronts, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot. Are you so hopeful or so stupid, as not to know that he and the other will treat your application with contempt, and light their cigars with it?"

"I should n't wonder if they did, by George!" said Riderhood, turning angry.

"If they did! They will. Let me ask you a question. I know something more than your name about you; I knew something about Gaffer Hexam. When did you last set eyes upon his daughter?"

"When did I last set eyes upon his daughter, T'otherest Governor?" repeated Mr. Riderhood, growing intentionally slower of comprehension as the other quickened in his speech.

"Yes. Not to speak to her. To see her — anywhere?"

The Rogue had got the clue he wanted, though he held it with a clumsy hand. Looking perplexedly at

the passionate face, as if he were trying to work out a sum in his mind, he slowly answered: "I ain't set eyes upon her — never once — not since the day of Gaffer's death."

"You know her well, by sight?"

"I should think I did! No one better."

"And you know him as well?"

"Who's him?" asked Riderhood, taking off his hat and rubbing his forehead, as he directed a dull look at his questioner.

"Curse the name! Is it so agreeable to you that you want to hear it again?"

"Oh! *Him!*" said Riderhood, who had craftily worked the schoolmaster into this corner, that he might again take note of his face under its evil possession. "I'd know *him* among a thousand."

"Did you" — Bradley tried to ask it quietly; but, do what he might with his voice, he could not subdue his face; — "did you ever see them together?"

(The Rogue had got the clue in both hands now.)

"I see 'em together, T'otherest Governor, on the very day when Gaffer was towed ashore."

Bradley could have hidden a reserved piece of information from the sharp eyes of a whole inquisitive class, but he could not veil from the eyes of the ignorant Riderhood the withheld question next in his breast. "You shall put it plain if you want it answered," thought the Rogue, doggedly; "I ain't a-going a wolunteering."

"Well! was he insolent to her too?" asked Bradley after a struggle. "Or did he make a show of being kind to her?"

"He made a show of being most uncommon kind to her," said Riderhood. "By George! now I" —

His flying off at a tangent was indisputably natural. Bradley looked at him for the reason.

"Now I think of it," said Mr. Riderhood, evasively, for he was substituting those words for "Now I see you so jealous," which was the phrase really in his mind; "P'r'aps he went and took me down wrong, a purpose, on account o' being sweet upon her!"

The baseness of confirming him in this suspicion or pretence of one, (for he could not have really entertained it,) was a line's breadth beyond the mark the schoolmaster had reached. The baseness of communing and intriguing with the fellow who would have set that stain upon her, and upon her brother too, was attained. The line's breadth further, lay beyond. He made no reply, but walked on with a lowering face.

What he might gain by this acquaintance, he could not work out in his slow and cumbrous thoughts. The man had an injury against the object of his hatred, and that was something; though it was less than he supposed, for there dwelt in the man no such deadly rage and resentment as burned in his own breast. The man knew her, and might, by a fortunate chance see her, or hear of her; that was something, as enlisting one pair of eyes and ears the more. The man was a bad man, and willing enough to be in his pay. That was something, for his own state and purpose were as bad as bad could be, and he seemed to derive a vague support from the possession of a congenial instrument, though it might never be used.

Suddenly he stood still, and asked Riderhood point-blank if he knew where she was? Clearly, he did not know. He asked Riderhood if he would be willing, in case any intelligence of her, or of Wrayburn as seeking

her or associating with her, should fall in his way, to communicate it if it were paid for? He would be very willing indeed. He was "agin 'em both," he said with an oath, and for why? 'Cause they had both stood betwixt him and his getting his living by the sweat of his brow.

"It will not be long then," said Bradley Headstone, after some more discourse to this effect, "before we see one another again. Here is the country road, and here is the day. Both have come upon me by surprise."

"But, T'otherest Governor," urged Mr. Riderhood, "I don't know where to find you."

"It is of no consequence. I know where to find you, and I'll come to your Lock."

"But, T'otherest Governor," urged Mr. Riderhood again, "no luck never come yet of a dry acquaintance. Let's wet it, in a mouthful of rum and milk, T'otherest Governor."

Bradley assenting, went with him into an early public house, haunted by unsavory smells of musty hay and stale straw, where returning carts, farmers' men, gaunt dogs, fowls of a beery breed, and certain human nightbirds fluttering home to roost, were solacing themselves after their several manners; and where not one of the nightbirds hovering about the sloppy bar failed to discern at a glance in the passion-wasted nightbird with respectable feathers, the worst nightbird of all.

An inspiration of affection for a half-drunken carter going his way led to Mr. Riderhood's being elevated on a high heap of baskets on a wagon, and pursuing his journey recumbent on his back with his head on his bundle. Bradley then turned to retrace his steps, and by-and-by struck off through little-traversed ways, and

by-and-by reached school and home. Up came the sun to find him washed and brushed, methodically dressed in decent black coat and waistcoat, decent formal black tie, and pepper-and-salt pantaloons, with his decent silver watch in its pocket, and its decent hair-guard round his neck, — a scholastic huntsman clad for the field, with his fresh pack yelping and barking around him.

Yet more really bewitched than the miserable creatures of the much-lamented times, who accused themselves of impossibilities under a contagion of horror and strongly suggestive influences of Torture, he had been ridden hard by Evil Spirits in the night that was newly gone. He had been spurred and whipped and heavily sweated. If a record of the sport had usurped the places of the peaceful texts from Scripture on the wall, the most advanced of the scholars might have taken fright and run away from the master.

CHAPTER XII.

MEANING MISCHIEF.

UP came the sun, streaming all over London, and in its glorious impartiality even condescending to make prismatic sparkles in the whiskers of Mr. Alfred Lammle as he sat at breakfast. In need of some brightening from without, was Mr. Alfred Lammle, for he had the air of being dull enough within, and looked grievously discontented.

Mrs. Alfred Lammle faced her lord. The happy pair of swindlers, with the comfortable tie between them that each had swindled the other, sat moodily observant of the tablecloth. Things looked so gloomy in the breakfast-room, albeit on the sunny side of Sackville Street, that any of the family tradespeople glancing through the blinds might have taken the hint to send in his account and press for it. But this, indeed, most of the family tradespeople had already done, without the hint.

"It seems to me," said Mrs. Lammle, "that you have had no money at all, ever since we have been married."

"What seems to you," said Mr. Lammle, "to have been the case, may possibly have been the case. It does n't matter."

Was it the speciality of Mr. and Mrs. Lammle, or does it ever obtain with other loving couples? In these matrimonial dialogues they never addressed each other, but always some invisible presence that appeared to take

a station about midway between them. Perhaps the skeleton in the cupboard comes out to be talked to, on such domestic occasions?

"I have never seen any money in the house," said Mrs. Lammle to the skeleton, "except my own annuity. That I swear."

"You need n't take the trouble of swearing," said Mr. Lammle to the skeleton; "once more, it does n't matter. You never turned your annuity to so good an account."

"Good an account! In what way?" asked Mrs. Lammle.

"In the way of getting credit, and living well," said Mr. Lammle.

Perhaps the skeleton laughed scornfully on being intrusted with this question and this answer; certainly Mrs. Lammle did, and Mr. Lammle did.

"And what is to happen next?" asked Mrs. Lammle of the skeleton.

"Smash is to happen next," said Mr. Lammle to the same authority.

After this, Mrs. Lammle looked disdainfully at the skeleton — but without carrying the look on to Mr. Lammle — and drooped her eyes. After that, Mr. Lammle did exactly the same thing, and drooped *his* eyes. A servant then entering with toast, the skeleton retired into the closet, and shut itself up.

"Sophronia," said Mr. Lammle, when the servant had withdrawn. And then, very much louder: "Sophronia!"

"Well?"

"Attend to me, if you please." He eyed her sternly until she did attend, and then went on. "I want to

take counsel with you. Come, come; no more trifling. You know our league and covenant. We are to work together for our joint interest, and you are as knowing hand as I am. We should n't be together, if you were not. What's to be done? We are hemmed into a corner. What shall we do?"

"Have you no scheme on foot that will bring in anything?"

Mr. Lammle plunged into his whiskers for reflection, and came out hopeless: "No; as adventurers; we are obliged to play rash games for chances of high winnings, and there has been a run of luck against us."

She was resuming, "Have you nothing" — when he stopped her.

"We, Sophronia. We, we, we."

"Have we nothing to sell?"

"Deuce a bit. I have given a Jew a bill of sale on this furniture, and he could take it to-morrow, to-day, now. He would have taken it before now, I believe, but for Fledgeby."

"What has Fledgeby to do with him?"

"Knew him. Cautioned me against him before I got into his claws. Could n't persuade him then, in behalf of somebody else."

"Do you mean that Fledgeby has at all softened him towards you?"

"Us, Sophronia. Us, us, us."

"Towards us?"

"I mean that the Jew has not yet done what he might have done, and that Fledgeby takes the credit of having got him to hold his hand."

"Do you believe Fledgeby?"

"Sophronia, I never believe anybody. I never have, my dear, since I believed you. But it looks like it."

Having given her this back-handed reminder of her mutinous observations to the skeleton, Mr. Lammle rose from table — perhaps, the better to conceal a smile, and a white dint or two about his nose — and took a turn on the carpet and came to the hearth-rug.

“If we could have packed the brute off with Georgiana; — but however, that’s spilled milk.”

As Lammle, standing gathering up the skirts of his dressing-gown with his back to the fire, said this, looking down at his wife, she turned pale and looked down at the ground. With a sense of disloyalty upon her, and perhaps with a sense of personal danger — for she was afraid of him — even afraid of his hand and afraid of his foot, though he had never done her violence — she hastened to put herself right in his eyes.

“If we could borrow money, Alfred” —

“Beg money, borrow money, or steal money. It would be all one to us, Sophronia,” her husband struck in.

— “Then, we could weather this?”

“No doubt. To offer another original and undeniable remark, Sophronia, two and two make four.”

“But, seeing that she was turning something in her mind, he gathered up the skirts of his dressing-gown again, and, tucking them under one arm, and collecting his ample whiskers in his other hand, kept his eye upon her, silently.

“It is natural, Alfred,” she said, looking up with some timidity into his face, “to think in such an emergency of the richest people we know, and the simplest.”

“Just so, Sophronia.”

“The Boffins.”

“Just so, Sophronia.”

“Is there nothing to be done with them?”

“What is there to be done with them, Sophronia?”

She cast about in her thoughts again, and he kept his eye upon her as before.

“Of course I have repeatedly thought of the Boffins, Sophronia,” he resumed, after a fruitless silence; “but I have seen my way to nothing. They are well guarded. That infernal Secretary stands between them and — people of merit.”

“If he could be got rid of?” said she, brightening a little, after more casting about.

“Take time, Sophronia,” observed her watchful husband, in a patronizing manner.

“If working him out of the way could be presented in the light of a service to Mr. Boffin?”

“Take time, Sophronia.”

“We have remarked lately, Alfred, that the old man is turning very suspicious and distrustful.”

“Miserly too, my dear; which is far the most unpromising for us. Nevertheless, take time, Sophronia, take time.”

She took time and then said:

“Suppose we should address ourselves to that tendency in him of which we have made ourselves quite sure. Suppose my conscience” —

“And we know what a conscience it is, my soul. Yes?”

“Suppose my conscience should not allow me to keep to myself any longer what that upstart girl told me of the Secretary’s having made a declaration to her. Suppose my conscience should oblige me to repeat it to Mr. Boffin.”

“I rather like that,” said Lammle.

“Suppose I so repeated it to Mr. Boffin, as to insinuate that my sensitive delicacy and honor” —

“Very good words, Sophronia.”

—“As to insinuate that *our* sensitive delicacy and honor,” she resumed, with a bitter stress upon the phrase, “would not allow us to be silent parties to so mercenary and designing a speculation on the Secretary’s part, and so gross a breach of faith towards his confiding employer. Suppose I had imparted my virtuous uneasiness to my excellent husband, and he had said, in his integrity, ‘Sophronia, you must immediately disclose this to Mr. Boffin.’”

“Once more, Sophronia,” observed Lammle, changing the leg on which he stood, “I rather like that.”

“You remark that he is well guarded,” she pursued. “I think so too. But if this should lead to his discharging his Secretary, there would be a weak place made.”

“Go on expounding, Sophronia. I begin to like this very much.”

“Having, in our unimpeachable rectitude, done him the service of opening his eyes to the treachery of the person he trusted, we shall have established a claim upon him and a confidence with him. Whether it can be made much of, or little of, we must wait — because we can’t help it — to see. Probably we shall make the most of it that is to be made.”

“Probably,” said Lammle.

“Do you think it possible,” she asked, in the same cold plotting way, “that you might replace the Secretary?”

“Not impossible, Sophronia. It might be brought about. At any rate it might be skilfully led up to.”

She nodded her understanding of the hint, as she looked at the fire. “Mr. Lammle,” she said, musingly — not without a slight ironical touch — “Mr. Lammle would

be so delighted to do anything in his power. Mr. Lammle, himself a man of business as well as a capitalist. Mr. Lammle, accustomed to be intrusted with the most delicate affairs. Mr. Lammle, who has managed my own little fortune so admirably, but who, to be sure, began to make his reputation with the advantage of being a man of property, above temptation, and beyond suspicion."

Mr. Lammle smiled, and even patted her on the head. In his sinister relish of the scheme, as he stood above her, making it the subject of his cogitations, he seemed to have twice as much nose on his face as he had ever had in his life.

He stood pondering, and she sat looking at the dusty fire without moving, for some time. But, the moment he began to speak again she looked up with a wince and attended to him, as if that double-dealing of hers had been in her mind, and the fear were revived in her of his hand or his foot.

"It appears to me, Sophronia, that you have omitted one branch of the subject. Perhaps not, for women understand women. We might oust the girl herself?"

Mrs. Lammle shook her head. "She has an immensely strong hold upon them both, Alfred. Not to be compared with that of a paid secretary."

"But the dear child," said Lammle, with a crooked smile, "ought to have been open with her benefactor and benefactress. The darling love ought to have reposed unbounded confidence in her benefactor and benefactress."

Sophronia shook her head again.

"Well! Women understand women," said her husband, rather disappointed. "I don't press it. It might be the making of our fortune to make a clean sweep of

them both. With me to manage the property, and my wife to manage the people — Whew !”

Again shaking her head, she returned : “ They will never quarrel with the girl. They will never punish the girl. We must accept the girl, rely upon it.”

“ Well !” cried Lammle, shrugging his shoulders, “ so be it : only always remember that we don’t want her.”

“ Now, the sole remaining question is,” said Mrs. Lammle, “ when shall I begin ?”

“ You cannot begin too soon, Sophronia. As I have told you, the condition of our affairs is desperate, and may be blown upon at any moment.”

“ I must secure Mr. Boffin alone, Alfred. If his wife was present, she would throw oil upon the waters. I know I should fail to move him to an angry outburst, if his wife was there. And as to the girl herself — as I am going to betray her confidence, she is equally out of the question.”

“ It would n’t do to write for an appointment ?” said Lammle.

“ No, certainly not. They would wonder among themselves why I wrote, and I want to have him wholly unprepared.”

“ Call, and ask to see him alone ?” suggested Lammle.

“ I would rather not do that either. Leave it to me. Spare me the little carriage for to-day, and for to-morrow (if I don’t succeed to-day), and I ’ll lie in wait for him.”

It was barely settled when a manly form was seen to pass the windows and heard to knock and ring. “ Here ’s Fledgeby,” said Lammle. “ He admires you, and has a high opinion of you. I ’ll be out. Coax him to use his influence with the Jew. His name is Riah, of the House of Pubsey and Co.” Adding these words under his

breath, lest he should be audible in the erect ears of Mr. Fledgeby, through two keyholes and the hall, Lammle, making signals of discretion to his servant, went softly up stairs.

"Mr. Fledgeby," said Mrs. Lammle, giving him a very gracious reception, "so glad to see you! My poor dear Alfred, who is greatly worried just now about his affairs, went out rather early. Dear Mr. Fledgeby, do sit down."

Dear Mr. Fledgeby did sit down, and satisfied himself (or, judging from the expression of his countenance, *dissatisfied* himself) that nothing new had occurred in the way of whisker-sprout since he came round the corner from the Albany.

"Dear Mr. Fledgeby, it was needless to mention to you that my poor dear Alfred is much worried about his affairs at present, for he has told me what a comfort you are to him in his temporary difficulties, and what a great service you have rendered him."

"Oh!" said Mr. Fledgeby.

"Yes," said Mrs. Lammle.

"I did n't know," remarked Mr. Fledgeby, trying a new part of his chair, "but that Lammle might be reserved about his affairs."

"Not to me," said Mrs. Lammle, with deep feeling.

"Oh, indeed?" said Fledgeby.

"Not to me, dear Mr. Fledgeby. I am his wife."

"Yes. I—I always understood so," said Mr. Fledgeby.

"And as the wife of Alfred, may I, dear Mr. Fledgeby, wholly without his authority or knowledge, as I am sure your discernment will perceive, entreat you to continue that great service, and once more use your well-earned influence with Mr. Riah for a little more indul-

gence? The name I have heard Alfred mention, tossing in his dreams, is Riah; is it not?"

"The name of the Creditor is Riah," said Mr. Fledgeby, with a rather uncompromising accent on his noun-substantive. "Saint Mary Axe. Pubsey and Co."

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Mrs. Lamble, clasping her hands with a certain gushing wildness. "Pubsey and Co.!"

"The pleading of the feminine" — Mr. Fledgeby began, and there stuck so long for a word to get on with, that Mrs. Lamble offered him sweetly, "Heart?"

"No," said Mr. Fledgeby, "Gender — is ever what a man is bound to listen to, and I wish it rested with myself. But this Riah is a nasty one, Mrs. Lamble; he really is."

"Not if *you* speak to him, dear Mr. Fledgeby."

"Upon my soul and body he is!" said Fledgeby.

"Try. Try once more, dearest Mr. Fledgeby. What is there you cannot do, if you will!"

"Thank you," said Fledgeby, "you're very complimentary to say so. I don't mind trying him again, at your request. But of course I can't answer for the consequences. Riah is a tough subject, and when he says he'll do a thing, he'll do it."

"Exactly so," cried Mrs. Lamble, "and when he says to you he'll wait, he'll wait."

("She is a devilish clever woman," thought Fledgeby. "I did n't see that opening, but she spies it out and cuts into it as soon as it's made.")

"In point of fact, dear Mr. Fledgeby," Mrs. Lamble went on in a very interesting manner, "not to affect concealment of Alfred's hopes, to you who are so much his friend, there is a distant break in his horizon."

This figure of speech seemed rather mysterious to Fascination Fledgeby, who said, "There's a what in his — eh?"

"Alfred, dear Mr. Fledgeby, discussed with me this very morning before he went out, some prospects he has, which might entirely change the aspect of his present troubles."

"Really?" said Fledgeby.

"O yes!" Here Mrs. Lamble brought her handkerchief into play. "And you know, dear Mr. Fledgeby — you who study the human heart, and study the world — what an affliction it would be to lose position and to lose credit, when ability to tide over a very short time might save all appearances."

"Oh!" said Fledgeby. "Then you think, Mrs. Lamble, that if Lamble got time, he would n't burst up? — To use an expression," Mr. Fledgeby apologetically explained, "which is adopted in the Money Market."

"Indeed yes. Truly, truly, yes!"

"That makes all the difference," said Fledgeby. "I'll make a point of seeing Riah at once."

"Blessings on you, dearest Mr. Fledgeby!"

"Not at all," said Fledgeby. She gave him her hand. "The hand," said Mr. Fledgeby, "of a lovely and superior-minded female is ever the repayment of a" —

"Noble action!" said Mrs. Lamble, extremely anxious to get rid of him.

"It was n't what I was going to say, returned Fledgeby, who never would, under any circumstances, accept a suggested expression, "but you're very complimentary. May I imprint a — a one — upon it? Good morning!"

"I may depend upon your promptitude, dearest Mr. Fledgeby?"

Said Fledgeby, looking back at the door and respectfully kissing his hand, "You may depend upon it."

In fact, Mr. Fledgeby sped on his errand of mercy through the streets, at so brisk a rate that his feet might have been winged by all the good spirits that wait on Generosity. They might have taken up their station in his breast, too, for he was blithe and merry. There was quite a fresh trill in his voice, when, arriving at the counting-house in St. Mary Axe, and finding it for the moment empty, he trolled forth at the foot of the staircase: "Now, Judah, what are you up to there?"

The old man appeared, with his accustomed deference.

"Holloa!" said Fledgeby, falling back, with a wink. "You mean mischief, Jerusalem!"

The old man raised his eyes inquiringly.

"Yes you do," said Fledgeby. "Oh, you sinner! Oh, you dodger! What! You're going to act upon that bill of sale at Lammle's, are you? Nothing will turn you, won't it? You won't be put off for another single minute, won't you?"

Ordered to immediate action by the master's tone and look, the old man took up his hat from the little counter where it lay.

"You have been told that he might pull through it, if you didn't go in to win, Wide-Awake; have you?" said Fledgeby. "And it's not your game that he should pull through it; ain't it? You having got security, and there being enough to pay you? Oh, you Jew!"

The old man stood irresolute and uncertain for a moment, as if there might be further instructions for him in reserve.

“Do I go, sir?” he at length asked in a low voice.

“Asks me if he is going!” exclaimed Fledgeby.
“Asks me, as if he did n’t know his own purpose! Asks me, as if he had n’t got his hat on ready! Asks me, as if his sharp old eye — why, it cuts like a knife — was n’t looking at his walking-stick by the door!”

“Do I go, sir?”

“Do you go?” sneered Fledgeby. “Yes, you do go. Toddle, Judah!”

CHAPTER XIII.

GIVE A DOG A BAD NAME, AND HANG HIM.

FASCINATION FLEDGEBY, left alone in the counting-house, strolled about with his hat on one side, whistling, and investigating the drawers, and prying here and there for any small evidences of his being cheated, but could find none. "Not his merit that he don't cheat me," was Mr. Fledgeby's commentary delivered with a wink, "but my precaution." He then with a lazy grandeur asserted his rights as lord of Pubsey and Co. by poking his cane at the stools and boxes, and spitting in the fireplace, and so loitered royally to the window and looked out into the narrow street, with his small eyes just peering over the top of Pubsey and Co's blind. As a blind in more senses than one, it reminded him that he was alone in the counting-house with the front door open. He was moving away to shut it, lest he should be injudiciously identified with the establishment, when he was stopped by some one coming to the door.

This some one was the dolls' dressmaker, with a little basket on her arm, and her crutch-stick in her hand. Her keen eyes had espied Mr. Fledgeby before Mr. Fledgeby had espied her, and he was paralyzed in his purpose of shutting her out, not so much by her approaching the door, as by her favoring him with a shower of nods, the instant he saw her. This advantage she improved by hobbling up the steps with such despatch that before Mr.

Fledgeby could take measures for her finding nobody at home, she was face to face with him in the counting-house.

"Hope I see you well, sir," said Miss Wren. "Mr. Riah in?"

Fledgeby had dropped into a chair, in the attitude of one waiting wearily. "I suppose he will be back soon," he replied; "he has cut out and left me expecting him back, in an odd way. Have n't I seen you before?"

"Once before — if you had your eyesight," replied Miss Wren; the conditional clause in an undertone.

"When you were carrying on some games up at the top of the house. I remember. How's your friend?"

"I have more friends than one, sir, I hope," replied Miss Wren. "Which friend?"

"Never mind," said Mr. Fledgeby, shutting up one eye, "any of your friends, all your friends. Are they pretty tolerable?"

Somewhat confounded, Miss Wren parried the pleasantry, and sat down in a corner behind the door, with her basket in her lap. By-and-by, she said, breaking a long and patient silence:

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I am used to find Mr. Riah at this time, and so I generally come at this time. I only want to buy my poor little two shillings' worth of waste. Perhaps you'll kindly let me have it, and I'll trot off to my work."

"I let you have it?" said Fledgeby, turning his head towards her; for he had been sitting blinking at the light, and feeling his cheek. "Why, you don't really suppose that I have anything to do with the place, or the business; do you?"

"Suppose?" exclaimed Miss Wren. "He said, that day, you were the master!"

"The old cock in black said? Riah said? Why, he'd say anything."

"Well; but you said so too," returned Miss Wren. "Or at least you took on like the master, and did n't contradict him."

"One of his dodges," said Mr. Fledgeby, with a cool and contemptuous shrug. "He's made of dodges. He said to me, 'Come up to the top of the house, sir, and I'll show you a handsome girl. But I shall call you the master.' So I went up to the top of the house and he showed me the handsome girl (very well worth looking at she was), and I was called the master. I don't know why. I dare say he don't. He loves a dodge for its own sake; being," added Mr. Fledgeby, after casting about for an expressive phrase, "the dodgerest of all the dodgers."

"Oh my head!" cried the dolls' dressmaker, holding it with both her hands, as if it were cracking. "You can't mean what you say."

"I can, my little woman," retorted Fledgeby, "and I do, I assure you."

This repudiation was not only an act of deliberate policy on Fledgeby's part, in case of his being surprised by any other caller, but was also a retort upon Miss Wren for her over-sharpness, and a pleasant instance of his humor as regarded the old Jew. "He has got a bad name as an old Jew, and he is paid for the use of it, and I'll have my money's worth out of him." This was Fledgeby's habitual reflection in the way of business, and it was sharpened just now by the old man's presuming to have a secret from him: though of the secret itself, as annoying somebody else whom he disliked, he by no means disapproved.

Miss Wren with a fallen countenance sat behind the door looking thoughtfully at the ground, and the long and patient silence had again set in for some time, when the expression of Mr. Fledgeby's face betokened that through the upper portion of the door, which was of glass, he saw some one faltering on the brink of the counting-house. Presently there was a rustle and a tap, and then some more rustling and another tap. Fledgeby taking no notice, the door was at length softly opened, and the dried face of a mild little elderly gentleman looked in.

"Mr. Riah?" said this visitor, very politely.

"I am waiting for him, sir," returned Mr. Fledgeby. "He went out and left me here. I expect him back every minute. Perhaps you had better take a chair."

The gentleman took a chair, and put his hand to his forehead, as if he were in a melancholy frame of mind. Mr. Fledgeby eyed him aside, and seemed to relish his attitude.

"A fine day, sir," remarked Fledgeby.

The little dried gentleman was so occupied with his own depressed reflections that he did not notice the remark until the sound of Mr. Fledgeby's voice had died out of the counting-house. Then he started, and said: "I beg your pardon, sir. I fear you spoke to me?"

"I said," remarked Fledgeby, a little louder than before, "it was a fine day."

"I beg your pardon. I beg your pardon. Yes."

Again the little dried gentleman put his hand to his forehead, and again Mr. Fledgeby seemed to enjoy his doing it. When the gentleman changed his attitude with a sigh, Fledgeby spake with a grin.

"Mr. Twemlow, I think?"

The dried gentleman seemed much surprised.

"Had the pleasure of dining with you at Lammle's," said Fledgeby. "Even have the honor of being a connexion of yours. An unexpected sort of place this to meet in; but one never knows, when one gets into the City, what people one may knock up against. I hope you have your health, and are enjoying yourself."

There might have been a touch of impertinence in the last words; on the other hand, it might have been but the native grace of Mr. Fledgeby's manner. Mr. Fledgeby sat on a stool with a foot on the rail of another stool, and his hat on. Mr. Twemlow had uncovered on looking in at the door, and remained so.

Now the conscientious Twemlow, knowing what he had done to thwart the gracious Fledgeby, was particularly disconcerted by this encounter. He was as ill at ease as a gentleman well could be. He felt himself bound to conduct himself stiffly towards Fledgeby, and he made him a distant bow. Fledgeby made his small eyes smaller in taking special note of his manner. The dolls' dressmaker sat in her corner behind the door, with her eyes on the ground and her hands folded on her basket, holding her crutch-stick between them, and appearing to take no heed of anything.

"He's a long time," muttered Mr. Fledgeby, looking at his watch. "What time may you make it, Mr. Twemlow?"

Mr. Twemlow made it ten minutes past twelve, sir.

"As near as a toucher," assented Fledgeby. "I hope, Mr. Twemlow, your business here may be of a more agreeable character than mine."

"Thank you, sir," said Mr. Twemlow.

Fledgeby again made his small eyes smaller, as he glanced with great complacency at Twemlow, who was timorously tapping the table with a folded letter.

"What I know of Mr. Riah," said Fledgeby, with a very disparaging utterance of his name, "leads me to believe that this is about the shop for disagreeable business. I have always found him the bitingest and tightest screw in London."

Mr. Twemlow acknowledged the remark with a little distant bow. It evidently made him nervous.

"So much so," pursued Fledgeby, "that if it was n't to be true to a friend, nobody should catch me waiting here a single minute. But if you have friends in adversity, stand by them. That's what I say and act up to."

The equitable Twemlow felt that this sentiment, irrespective of the utterer, demanded his cordial assent. "You are very right, sir," he rejoined with spirit. "You indicate the generous and manly course."

"Glad to have your approbation," returned Fledgeby. "It's a coincidence, Mr. Twemlow;" here he descended from his perch, and sauntered towards him; "that the friends I am standing by to-day are the friends at whose house I met you! The Lammles. She's a very taking and agreeable woman?"

Conscience smote the gentle Twemlow pale. "Yes," he said. "She is."

"And when she appealed to me this morning, to come and try what I could do to pacify their creditor, this Mr. Riah — that I certainly have gained some little influence with in transacting business for another friend, but nothing like so much as she supposes — and when a woman like that spoke to me as her dearest Mr. Fledgeby, and shed tears — why what could I do, you know?"

Twemlow gasped "Nothing but come."

"Nothing but come. And so I came. But why," said Fledgeby, putting his hands in his pockets and coun-

terfeiting deep meditation, "why Riah should have started up, when I told him that the Lammles entreated him to hold over a Bill of Sale he has on all their effects; and why he should have cut out, saying he would be back directly; and why he should have left me here alone so long; I cannot understand."

The chivalrous Twemlow, Knight of the Simple Heart, was not in a condition to offer any suggestion. He was too penitent, too remorseful. For the first time in his life he had done an underhanded action, and he had done wrong. He had secretly interposed against this confiding young man, for no better real reason than because the young man's ways were not his ways.

But, the confiding young man proceeded to heap coals of fire on his sensitive head.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Twemlow; you see I am acquainted with the nature of the affairs that are transacted here. Is there anything I can do for you here? You have always been brought up as a gentleman, and never as a man of business," — another touch of possible impertinence in this place, — "and perhaps you are but a poor man of business. What else is to be expected!"

"I am even a poorer man of business than I am a man, sir," returned Twemlow, "and I could hardly express my deficiency in a stronger way. I really do not so much as clearly understand my position in the matter on which I am brought here. But there are reasons which make me very delicate of accepting your assistance. I am greatly, greatly, disinclined to profit by it. I don't deserve it."

Good childish creature! Condemned to a passage through the world by such narrow little dimly-lighted ways, and picking up so few specks or spots on the road!

"Perhaps," said Fledgeby, "you may be a little proud of entering on the topic, — having been brought up as a gentleman."

"It's not that, sir," returned Twemlow, "it's not that. I hope I distinguish between true pride and false pride."

"I have no pride at all, myself," said Fledgeby, "and perhaps I don't cut things so fine as to know one from t'other. But I know this is a place where even a man of business needs his wits about him; and if mine can be of any use to you here, you're welcome to them."

"You are very good," said Twemlow, faltering. "But I am most unwilling" —

"I don't, you know," proceeded Fledgeby with an ill-favored glance, "entertain the vanity of supposing that my wits could be of any use to you in society, but they might be here. You cultivate society and society cultivates you, but Mr. Riah's not society. In society, Mr. Riah is kept dark; eh, Mr. Twemlow?"

Twemlow, much disturbed, and with his hand fluttering about his forehead, replied: "Quite true."

The confiding young man besought him to state his case. The innocent Twemlow, expecting Fledgeby to be astounded by what he should unfold, and not for an instant conceiving the possibility of its happening every day, but treating of it as a terrible phenomenon occurring in the course of ages, related how that he had had a deceased friend, a married civil officer with a family, who had wanted money for change of place on change of post, and how he, Twemlow, had "given him his name," with the usual, but in the eyes of Twemlow almost incredible result, that he had been left to repay what he had never had. How, in the course of years, he had reduced the

principal by trifling sums, "having," said Twemlow, "always to observe great economy, being in the enjoyment of a fixed income limited in extent, and that depending on the munificence of a certain nobleman," and had always pinched the full interest out of himself with punctual pinches. How he had come, in course of time, to look upon this one only debt of his life as a regular quarterly drawback, and no worse, when "his name" had some way fallen into the possession of Mr. Riah, who had sent him notice to redeem it by paying up in full, in one plump sum, or take tremendous consequences. This, with hazy remembrances of how he had been carried to some office to "confess judgment" (as he recollected the phrase), and how he had been carried to another office where his life was assured for somebody not wholly unconnected with the sherry trade, whom he remembered by the remarkable circumstance that he had a Straduaris violin to dispose of, and also a Madonna, formed the sum and substance of Mr. Twemlow's narrative. Through which stalked the shadow of the awful Snigs-worth, eyed afar off by money-lenders as Security in the Mist, and menacing Twemlow with his baronial truncheon.

To all, Mr. Fledgeby listened with the modest gravity becoming a confiding young man who knew it all beforehand, and, when it was finished, seriously shook his head. "I don't like, Mr. Twemlow," said Fledgeby, "I don't like Riah's calling in the principal. If he's determined to call it in, it must come."

"But supposing, sir," said Twemlow, downcast, "that it can't come?"

"Then," retorted Fledgeby, "you must go, you know."

"Where?" asked Twemlow, faintly.

"To prison," returned Fledgeby. Whereat Mr. Twemlow leaned his innocent head upon his hand, and moaned a little moan of distress and disgrace.

"However," said Fledgeby, appearing to pluck up his spirits, "we'll hope it's not so bad as that comes to. If you'll allow me, I'll mention to Mr. Riah when he comes in, who you are, and I'll tell him you're my friend, and I'll say my say for you, instead of your saying it for yourself; I may be able to do it in a more business-like way. You won't consider it a liberty?"

"I thank you again and again, sir," said Twemlow. "I am strong, strongly, disinclined to avail myself of your generosity, though my helplessness yields. For I cannot but feel that I — to put it in the mildest form of speech — that I have done nothing to deserve it."

"Where *can* he be?" muttered Fledgeby, referring to his watch again. "What *can* he have gone out for? Did you ever see him, Mr. Twemlow?"

"Never."

"He is a thorough Jew to look at, but he is a more thorough Jew to deal with. He's worst when he's quiet. If he's quiet, I shall take it as a very bad sign. Keep your eye upon him when he comes in, and, if he's quiet, don't be hopeful. Here he is! — He looks quiet."

With these words, which had the effect of causing the harmless Twemlow painful agitation, Mr. Fledgeby withdrew to his former post, and the old man entered the counting-house.

"Why, Mr. Riah," said Fledgeby, "I thought you were lost!"

The old man, glancing at the stranger, stood stock-still. He perceived that his master was leading up to the

orders he was to take, and he waited to understand them.

"I really thought," repeated Fledgeby slowly, "that you were lost, Mr. Riah. Why, now I look at you — but no, you can't have done it; no, you can't have done it!"

Hat in hand, the old man lifted his head, and looked distressfully at Fledgeby as seeking to know what new moral burden he was to bear.

"You can't have rushed out to get the start of everybody else, and put in that bill of sale at Lammle's?" said Fledgeby. "Say you have n't, Mr. Riah."

"Sir, I have," replied the old man in a low voice.

"Oh my eye!" cried Fledgeby. "Tut, tut, tut! Dear, dear, dear! Well! I knew you were a hard customer, Mr. Riah, but I never thought you were as hard as that."

"Sir," said the old man, with great uneasiness, "I do as I am directed. I am not the principal here. I am but the agent of a superior, and I have no choice, no power."

"Don't say so," retorted Fledgeby, secretly exultant as the old man stretched out his hands, with a shrinking action of defending himself against the sharp construction of the two observers. "Don't play the tune of the trade, Mr. Riah. You've a right to get in your debts, if you're determined to do it, but don't pretend what every one in your line regularly pretends. At least, don't do it to me. Why should you, Mr. Riah? You know I know all about you."

The old man clasped the skirt of his long coat with his disengaged hand, and directed a wistful look at Fledgeby.

"And don't," said Fledgeby, "don't, I entreat you as a favor, Mr. Riah, be so devilish meek, for I know what 'll follow if you are. Look here, Mr. Riah. This gentleman is Mr. Twemlow."

The Jew turned to him and bowed. That poor lamb bowed in return; polite and terrified.

"I have made such a failure," proceeded Fledgeby, "in trying to do anything with you for my friend Lamble, that I've hardly a hope of doing anything with you for my friend (and connection indeed) Mr. Twemlow. But I do think that if you would do a favor for anybody, you would for me, and I won't fail for want of trying, and I've passed my promise to Mr. Twemlow besides. Now, Mr. Riah, here is Mr. Twemlow. Always good for his interest, always coming up to time, always paying his little way. Now, why should you press Mr. Twemlow? You can't have any spite against Mr. Twemlow! Why not be easy with Mr. Twemlow?"

The old man looked into Fledgeby's little eyes for any sign of leave to be easy with Mr. Twemlow; but there was no sign in them.

"Mr. Twemlow is no connection of yours, Mr. Riah," said Fledgeby; you can't want to be even with him for having through life gone in for a gentleman and hung on to his Family. If Mr. Twemlow has a contempt for business, what can it matter to you?"

"But pardon me," interposed the gentle victim, "I have not. I should consider it presumption."

"There, Mr. Riah!" said Fledgeby, "is n't that handsomely said? Come! Make terms with me for Mr. Twemlow."

The old man looked again for any sign of permission

to spare the poor little gentleman. No. Mr. Fledgeby meant him to be racked.

"I am very sorry, Mr. Twemlow," said Riah. "I have my instructions. I am invested with no authority for diverging from them. The money must be paid."

"In full and slap down, do you mean, Mr. Riah?" asked Fledgeby, to make things quite explicit.

"In full, sir, and at once," was Riah's answer.

Mr. Fledgeby shook his head deplorably at Twemlow, and mutely expressed in reference to the venerable figure standing before him with eyes upon the ground: "What a Monster of an Israelite this is!"

"Mr. Riah," said Fledgeby.

The old man lifted up his eyes once more to the little eyes in Mr. Fledgeby's head, with some reviving hope that the sign might be coming yet.

"Mr. Riah, it's of no use my holding back the fact. There's a certain great party in the background in Mr. Twemlow's case, and you know it."

"I know it," the old man admitted.

"Now, I'll put it as a plain point of business, Mr. Riah. Are you fully determined (as a plain point of business) either to have that said great party's security, or that said great party's money?"

"Fully determined," answered Riah, as he read his master's face and learnt the book.

"Not at all caring for, and indeed as it seems to me rather enjoying," said Fledgeby, with peculiar unction, "the precious kick-up and row that will come off between Mr. Twemlow and the said great party?"

This required no answer, and received none. Poor Mr. Twemlow, who had betrayed the keenest mental terrors since his noble kinsman loomed in the perspec-

tive, rose with a sigh to take his departure. "I thank you very much, sir," he said, offering Fledgeby his feverish hand. "You have done me an unmerited service. Thank you, thank you!"

"Don't mention it," answered Fledgeby. "It's a failure so far, but I'll stay behind, and take another touch at Mr. Riah."

"Do not deceive yourself, Mr. Twemlow," said the Jew, then addressing him directly for the first time. "There is no hope for you. You must expect no leniency here. You must pay in full, and you cannot pay too promptly, or you will be put to heavy charges. Trust nothing to me, sir. Money, money, money." When he had said these words in an emphatic manner, he acknowledged Mr. Twemlow's still polite motion of his head, and that amiable little worthy took his departure in the lowest spirits.

Fascination Fledgeby was in such a merry vein when the counting-house was cleared of him, that he had nothing for it but to go to the window, and lean his arms on the frame of the blind, and have his silent laugh out, with his back to his subordinate. When he turned round again with a composed countenance, his subordinate still stood in the same place, and the dolls' dress-maker sat behind the door with a look of horror.

"Halloa!" cried Mr. Fledgeby, "you're forgetting this young lady, Mr. Riah, and she has been waiting long enough too. Sell her her waste, please, and give her good measure, if you can make up your mind to do the liberal thing for once."

He looked on for a time, as the Jew filled her little basket with such scraps as she was used to buy; but, his merry vein coming on again, he was obliged to turn

round to the window once more, and lean his arms on the blind.

“There, my Cinderella dear,” said the old man in a whisper, and with a worn-out look, “the basket’s full now. Bless you! And get you gone!”

“Don’t call me your Cinderella dear,” returned Miss Wren. “O you cruel godmother!”

She shook that emphatic little forefinger of hers in his face at parting, as earnestly and reproachfully as she had ever shaken it at her grim old child at home.

“You are not the godmother at all!” said she. “You are the Wolf in the Forest, the wicked Wolf! And if ever my dear Lizzie is sold and betrayed, I shall know who sold and betrayed her!”

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. WEGG PREPARES A GRINDSTONE FOR MR. BOFFIN'S NOSE.

HAVING assisted at a few more expositions of the lives of Misers, Mr. Venus became almost indispensable to the evenings at the Bower. The circumstance of having another listener to the wonders unfolded by Wegg, or, as it were, another calculator to cast up the guineas found in teapots, chimneys, racks, and mangers, and other such banks of deposit, seemed greatly to heighten Mr. Boffin's enjoyment; while Silas Wegg, for his part, though of a jealous temperament which might under ordinary circumstances have resented the anatomist's getting into favor, was so very anxious to keep his eye on that gentleman — lest, being, too much left to himself, he should be tempted to play any tricks with the precious document in his keeping — that he never lost an opportunity of commending him to Mr. Boffin's notice as a third party whose company was much to be desired. Another friendly demonstration towards him Mr. Wegg now regularly gratified. After each sitting was over, and the patron had departed, Mr. Wegg invariably saw Mr. Venus home. To be sure, he as invariably requested to be refreshed with a sight of the paper in which he was a joint proprietor; but he never failed to remark that it was the great pleasure he derived from Mr. Venus's improving society which had insensibly

lured him round to Clerkenwell again, and that, finding himself once more attracted to the spot by the social powers of Mr. V., he would beg leave to go through that little incidental procedure, as a matter of form. "For well I know, sir," Mr. Wegg would add, "that a man of your delicate mind would wish to be checked off whenever the opportunity arises, and it is not for me to baulk your feelings."

A certain rustiness in Mr. Venus, which never became so lubricated by the oil of Mr. Wegg but that he turned under the screw in a creaking and stiff manner, was very noticeable at about this period. While assisting at the literary evenings, he even went so far, on two or three occasions, as to correct Mr. Wegg when he grossly mispronounced a word, or made nonsense of a passage; insomuch that Mr. Wegg took to surveying his course in the day, and to making arrangements for getting round rocks at night instead of running straight upon them. Of the slightest anatomical reference he became particularly shy, and, if he saw a bone ahead, would go any distance out of his way rather than mention it by name.

The adverse destinies ordained that one evening Mr. Wegg's laboring bark became beset by polysyllables, and embarrassed among a perfect archipelago of hard words. It being necessary to take soundings every minute, and to feel the way with the greatest caution, Mr. Wegg's attention was fully employed. Advantage was taken of this dilemma by Mr. Venus, to pass a scrap of paper into Mr. Boffin's hand, and lay his finger on his own lip.

When Mr. Boffin got home at night he found that the paper contained Mr. Venus's card and these words:

"Should be glad to be honored with a call respecting business of your own, about dusk on an early evening."

The very next evening saw Mr. Boffin peeping in at the preserved frogs in Mr. Venus's shop-window, and saw Mr. Venus espying Mr. Boffin with the readiness of one on the alert, and beckoning that gentleman into his interior. Responding, Mr. Boffin was invited to seat himself on the box of human miscellanies before the fire, and did so, looking round the place with admiring eyes. The fire being low and fitful, and the dusk gloomy, the whole stock seemed to be winking and blinking with both eyes, as Mr. Venus did. The French gentleman, though he had no eyes, was not at all behindhand, but appeared, as the flame rose and fell, to open and shut his no eyes, with the regularity of the glass-eyed dogs and ducks and birds. The big-headed babies were equally obliging in lending their grotesque aid to the general effect.

"You see, Mr. Venus, I've lost no time," said Mr. Boffin. "Here I am."

"Here you are, sir," assented Mr. Venus.

"I don't like secrecy," pursued Mr. Boffin — "at least, not in a general way I don't — but I dare say you'll show me good reason for being secret so far."

"I think I shall, sir," returned Venus.

"Good," said Mr. Boffin. "You don't expect Wegg, I take it for granted?"

"No, sir. I expect no one but the present company."

Mr. Boffin glanced about him, as accepting under that inclusive denomination the French gentleman and the circle in which he did n't move, and repeated, "The present company."

"Sir," said Mr. Venus, "before entering upon busi-

ness, I shall have to ask you for your word and honor that we are in confidence."

"Let's wait a bit and understand what the expression means," answered Mr. Boffin. "In confidence for how long? In confidence forever and a day?"

"I take your hint, sir," said Venus; "you think you might consider the business, when you came to know it, to be of a nature incompatible with confidence on your part?"

"I might," said Mr. Boffin with a cautious look.

"True, sir. Well, sir," observed Venus, after clutching at his dusty hair, to brighten his ideas, "let us put it another way. I open the business with you, relying upon your honor not to do anything in it, and not to mention me in it, without my knowledge."

"That sounds fair," said Mr. Boffin. "I agree to that."

"I have your word and honor, sir?"

"My good fellow," retorted Mr. Boffin, "you have my word; and how you can have that, without my honor too, I don't know. I've sorted a lot of dust in my time, but I never knew the two things go into separate heaps."

This remark seemed rather to abash Mr. Venus. He hesitated, and said, "Very true, sir;" and again, "Very true, sir," before resuming the thread of his discourse.

"Mr. Boffin, if I confess to you that I fell into a proposal of which you were the subject, and of which you ought n't to have been the subject, you will allow me to mention, and will please take into favorable consideration, that I was in a crushed state of mind at the time."

The Golden Dustman, with his hands folded on the top of his stout stick, with his chin resting upon them,

and with something leering and whimsical in his eyes, gave a nod, and said, "Quite so, Venus."

"That proposal, sir, was a conspiring breach of your confidence, to such an extent, that I ought at once to have made it known to you. But I did n't, Mr. Boffin, and I fell into it."

Without moving eye or finger, Mr. Boffin gave another nod, and placidly repeated, "Quite so, Venus."

"Not that I was ever hearty in it, sir," the penitent anatomist went on, "or that I ever viewed myself with anything but reproach for having turned out of the paths of science into the paths of"—he was going to say "villany," but, unwilling to press too hard upon himself, substituted with great emphasis,—"Weggery."

Placid and whimsical of look as ever, Mr. Boffin answered: "Quite so, Venus."

"And now, sir," said Venus, "having prepared your mind in the rough, I will articulate the details." With which brief professional exordium, he entered on the history of the friendly move, and truly recounted it. One might have thought that it would have extracted some show of surprise or anger, or other emotion, from Mr. Boffin, but it extracted nothing beyond his former comment: "Quite so, Venus."

"I have astonished you, sir, I believe?" said Mr. Venus, pausing dubiously.

Mr. Boffin simply answered as aforesaid: "Quite so, Venus."

By this time the astonishment was all on the other side. It did not, however, so continue. For, when Venus passed to Wegg's discovery, and from that to their having both seen Mr. Boffin dig up the Dutch bottle, that gentleman changed color, changed his attitude

became extremely restless, and ended (when Venus ended) by being in a state of manifest anxiety, trepidation, and confusion.

“Now, sir,” said Venus, finishing off; “you best know what was in that Dutch bottle, and why you dug it up, and took it away. I don’t pretend to know anything more about it than I saw. All I know is this: I am proud of my calling after all (though it has been attended by one dreadful drawback which has told upon my heart, and almost equally upon my skeleton), and I mean to live by my calling. Putting the same meaning into other words, I do not mean to turn a single dishonest penny by this affair. As the best amends I can make you for having ever gone into it, I make known to you, as a warning, what Wegg has found out. My opinion is, that Wegg is not to be silenced at a modest price, and I build that opinion on his beginning to dispose of your property the moment he knew his power. Whether it’s worth your while to silence him at any price, you will decide for yourself, and take your measures accordingly. As far as I am concerned, I have no price. If I am ever called upon for the truth, I tell it, but I want to do no more than I have now done and ended.”

“Thank’ee, Venus!” said Mr. Boffin, with a hearty grip of his hand; “thank’ee, Venus, thank’ee, Venus!” And then walked up and down the little shop in great agitation. “But look here, Venus,” he by-and-by resumed, nervously sitting down again; “if I have to buy Wegg up, I shan’t buy him any cheaper for your being out of it. Instead of his having half the money — it was to have been half, I suppose? Share and share alike?”

“It was to have been half, sir,” answered Venus.

"Instead of that, he'll now have all. I shall pay the same, if not more. For you tell me he's an unconscionable dog, a ravenous rascal."

"He is," said Venus.

"Don't you think, Venus," insinuated Mr. Boffin, after looking at the fire for a while — "don't you feel as if — you might like to pretend to be in it till Wegg was bought up, and then ease your mind by handing over to me what you had made believe to pocket?"

"No, I don't, sir," returned Venus, very positively.

"Not to make amends?" insinuated Mr. Boffin.

"No, sir. It seems to me, after maturely thinking it over, that the best amends for having got out of the square is to get back into the square."

"Humph!" mused Mr. Boffin. "When you say the square, you mean" —

"I mean," said Venus, stoutly and shortly, "the right."

"It appears to me," said Mr. Boffin, grumbling over the fire in an injured manner, "that the right is with me, if it's anywhere. I have much more right to the old man's money than the Crown can ever have. What was the Crown to him except the King's Taxes? Whereas, me and my wife, we was all in all to him."

Mr. Venus, with his head upon his hands, rendered melancholy by the contemplation of Mr. Boffin's avarice, only murmured to steep himself in the luxury of that frame of mind: "She did not wish so to regard herself, nor yet to be so regarded."

"And how am I to live," asked Mr. Boffin, piteously, "if I'm to be going buying fellows up out of the little that I've got? And how am I to set about it? When am I to get my money ready? When am I to make a bid? You have n't told me when he threatens to drop down upon me."

Venus explained under what conditions, and with what views, the dropping down upon Mr. Boffin was held over until the Mounds should be cleared away. Mr. Boffin listened attentively. "I suppose," said he, with a gleam of hope, "there's no doubt about the genuineness and date of this confounded will?"

"None whatever," said Mr. Venus.

"Where might it be deposited at present?" asked Mr. Boffin, in a wheedling tone.

"It's in my possession, sir."

"Is it?" he cried, with great eagerness. "Now, for any liberal sum of money that could be agreed upon, Venus, would you put it in the fire?"

"No, sir, I would n't," interrupted Mr. Venus.

"Nor pass it over to me?"

"That would be the same thing. No, sir," said Mr. Venus.

The Golden Dustman seemed about to pursue these questions, when a stumping noise was heard outside, coming towards the door. "Hush! here's Wegg?" said Venus. "Get behind the young alligator in the corner, Mr. Boffin, and judge him for yourself. I won't light a candle till he's gone; there'll only be the glow of the fire; Wegg's well acquainted with the alligator, and he won't take particular notice of him. Draw your legs in, Mr. Boffin, at present I see a pair of shoes at the end of his tail. Get your head well behind his smile, Mr. Boffin, and you'll lie comfortable there; you'll find plenty of room behind his smile. He's a little dusty, but he's very like you in tone. Are you right, sir?"

Mr. Boffin had but whispered an affirmative response, when Wegg came stumping in. "Partner," said that gentleman in a sprightly manner, "how's yourself?"

"Tolerable," returned Mr. Venus. "Not much to boast of."

"In-deed!" said Wegg: "sorry, partner, that you're not picking up faster, but your soul's too large for your body, sir; that's where it is. And how's our stock in trade, partner? Safe bind, safe find, partner? 'Is that about it?'"

"Do you wish to see it?" asked Venus.

"If you please, partner," said Wegg, rubbing his hands. "I wish to see it jintly with yourself. Or, in similar words to some that was set to music some time back:

"I wish you to see it with your eyes,
And I will pledge with mine."

Turning his back and turning a key, Mr. Venus produced the document, holding on by his usual corner. Mr. Wegg, holding on by the opposite corner, sat down on the seat so lately vacated by Mr. Boffin, and looked it over. "All right, sir," he slowly and unwillingly admitted, in his reluctance to loose his hold, "all right!" And greedily watched his partner as he turned his back again, and turned his key again.

"There's nothing new, I suppose?" said Venus, resuming his low chair behind the counter.

"Yes there is, sir," replied Wegg; "there was something new this morning. That foxey old grasper and griper" —

"Mr. Boffin?" inquired Venus, with a glance towards the alligator's yard or two of smile.

"Mister be blowed!" cried Wegg, yielding to his honest indignation. "Boffin. Dusty Boffin. That foxey old grunter and grinder, sir, turns into the yard this morning, to meddle with our property, a menial tool of his own, a young man by the name of Sloppy. Ecod, when I say

to him, 'What do you want here, young man? This is a private yard,' he pulls out a paper from Boffin's other blackguard, the one I was passed over for. 'This is to authorize Sloppy to overlook the carting and to watch the work.' That's pretty strong, I think, Mr. Venus?"

"Remember he does n't know yet of our claim on the property," suggested Venus.

"Then he must have a hint of it," said Wegg, "and a strong one that'll jog his terrors a bit. Give him an inch, and he'll take an ell. Let him alone this time, and what'll he do with our property next? I tell you what, Mr. Venus; it comes to this; I must be overbearing with Boffin, or I shall fly into several pieces. I can't contain myself when I look at him. Every time I see him putting his hand in his pocket, I see him putting it into my pocket. Every time I hear him jingling his money, I hear him taking liberties with my money. Flesh and blood can't bear it. No," said Mr. Wegg, greatly exasperated, "and I'll go further. A wooden leg can't bear it!"

"But, Mr. Wegg," urged Venus, "it was your own idea that he should not be exploded upon, till the Mounds were carted away."

"But it was likewise my idea, Mr. Venus," retorted Wegg, "that if he came sneaking and sniffing about the property, he should be threatened, given to understand that he has no right to it, and be made our slave. Was n't that my idea, Mr. Venus?"

"It certainly was, Mr. Wegg."

"It certainly was, as you say, partner," assented Wegg, put into a better humor by the ready admission. "Very well. I consider his planting one of his menial tools in the yard, an act of sneaking and sniffing. And his nose shall be put to the grindstone for it."

"It was not your fault, Mr. Wegg, I must admit," said Venus, "that he got off with the Dutch bottle that night."

"As you handsomely say again, partner! No, it was not my fault. I'd have had that bottle out of him. Was it to be borne that he should come, like a thief in the dark, digging among stuff that was far more ours than his (seeing that we could deprive him of every grain of it, if he did n't buy us at our own figure), and carrying off treasure from its bowels? No, it was not to be borne. And for that, too, his nose shall be put to the grindstone."

"How do you propose to do it, Mr. Wegg?"

"To put his nose to the grindstone? I propose," returned that estimable man, "to insult him openly. And, if looking into this eye of mine, he dares to offer a word in answer, to retort upon him before he can take his breath, 'Add another word to that, you dusty old dog, and you're a beggar.'"

"Suppose he says nothing, Mr. Wegg?"

"Then," replied Wegg, "we shall have come to an understanding with very little trouble, and I'll break him and drive him, Mr. Venus. I'll put him in harness, and I'll bear him up tight, and I'll break him and drive him. The harder the old Dust is driven, sir, the higher he'll pay. And I mean to be paid high, Mr. Venus, I promise you."

"You speak quite revengefully, Mr. Wegg."

"Revengefully, sir? Is it for him that I have declined and falled, night after night? Is it for his pleasure that I've waited at home of an evening, like a set of skittles, to be set up and knocked over, set up and knocked over, by whatever balls — or books — he chose

to bring against me? Why, I'm a hundred times the man he is, sir; five hundred times!"

Perhaps it was with the malicious intent of urging him on to his worst that Mr. Venus looked as if he doubted that.

"What? Was it outside the house at present ockypied, to its disgrace, by that minion of fortune and worm of the hour," said Wegg, falling back upon his strongest terms of reprobation, and slapping the counter, "that I, Silas Wegg, five hundred times the man he ever was, sat in all weathers, waiting for a errand or a customer? Was it outside that very house as I first set eyes upon him, rolling in the lap of luxury, when I was a selling halfpenny ballads there for a living? And am I to grovel in the dust for *him* to walk over? No!"

There was a grin upon the ghastly countenance of the French gentleman under the influence of the firelight, as if he were computing how many thousand slanderers and traitors array themselves against the fortunate, on premises exactly answering to those of Mr. Wegg. One might have fancied that the big-headed babies were toppling over with their hydrocephalic attempts to reckon up the children of men who transform their benefactors into their injurers by the same process. The yard or two of smile on the part of the alligator might have been invested with the meaning, "All about this was quite familiar knowledge down in the depths of the slime, ages ago."

"But," said Wegg, possibly with some slight perception to the foregoing effect, "your speaking countenance remarks, Mr. Venus, that I'm duller and savager than usual. Perhaps I *have* allowed myself to brood too much. Begone, dull Care! 'T is gone, sir. I've looked

in upon you, and empire resumes her sway. For, as the song says — subject to your correction, sir —

“ ‘ When the heart of a man is depressed with cares,
The mist is dispelled if Venus appears.
Like the notes of a fiddle, you sweetly, sir, sweetly,
Raises our spirits and charms our ears.’ ”

Good-night, sir.”

“ I shall have a word or two to say to you, Mr. Wegg, before long,” remarked Venus, respecting my share in the project we’ve been speaking of.”

“ My time, sir,” returned Wegg, “ is yours. In the mean while let it be fully understood that I shall not neglect bringing the grindstone to bear, nor yet bringing Dusty Boffin’s nose to it. His nose once brought to it, shall be held to it by these hands, Mr. Venus, till the sparks flies out in showers.”

With this agreeable promise Wegg stumped out, and shut the shop-door after him. “ Wait till I light a candle, Mr. Boffin,” said Venus, “ and you ’ll come out more comfortable.” So, he lighting a candle and holding it up at arm’s length, Mr. Boffin disengaged himself from behind the alligator’s smile, with an expression of countenance so very downcast that it not only appeared as if the alligator had the whole of the joke to himself, but further as if it had been conceived and executed at Mr. Boffin’s expense.

“ That ’s a treacherous fellow,” said Mr. Boffin, dusting his arms and legs as he came forth, the alligator having been but musty company. “ That ’s a dreadful fellow.”

“ The alligator, sir ? ” said Venus.

“ No, Venus, no. The Serpent.”

“ You ’ll have the goodness to notice, Mr. Boffin,” re-

marked Venus, "that I said nothing to him about my going out of the affair altogether, because I did n't wish to take you anyways by surprise. But I can't be too soon out of it for my satisfaction, Mr. Boffin, and I now put it to you when it will suit your views for me to retire?"

"Thank'ee, Venus, thank'ee, Venus; but I don't know what to say," returned Mr. Boffin, "I don't know what to do. He'll drop down on me any way. He seems fully determined to drop down; don't he?"

Mr. Venus opined that such was clearly his intention.

"You might be a sort of protection for me, if you remained in it," said Mr. Boffin; "you might stand betwixt him and me, and take the edge off him. Don't you feel as if you could make a show of remaining in it, Venus, till I had time to turn myself round?"

Venus naturally inquired how long Mr. Boffin thought it might take him to turn himself round?

"I am sure I don't know," was the answer, given quite at a loss. "Everything is so at sixes and sevens. If I had never come into the property, I should n't have minded. But being in it, it would be very trying to be turned out; now, don't you acknowledge that it would, Venus?"

Mr. Venus preferred, he said, to leave Mr. Boffin to arrive at his own conclusions on that delicate question.

"I am sure I don't know what to do," said Mr. Boffin. "If I ask advice of any one else, it's only letting in another person to be bought out, and then I shall be ruined that way, and might as well have given up the property and gone slap to the workhouse. If I was to take advice of my young man, Rokesmith, I should have to buy *him* out. Sooner or later, of course, he'd drop

down upon me, like Wegg. I was brought into the world to be dropped down upon, it appears to me."

Mr. Venus listened to these lamentations in silence, while Mr. Boffin jogged to and fro, holding his pockets as if he had a pain in them.

"After all, you haven't said what you mean to do yourself, Venus. When you do go out of it, how do you mean to go?"

Venus replied that as Wegg had found the document and handed it to him, it was his intention to hand it back to Wegg, with the declaration that he himself would have nothing to say to it, or do with it, and that Wegg must act as he chose, and take the consequences.

"And then he drops down with his whole weight upon me!" cried Mr. Boffin, ruefully. "I'd sooner be dropped upon by you than by him, or even by you jointly, than by him alone!"

Mr. Venus could only repeat that it was his fixed intention to betake himself to the paths of science, and to walk in the same all the days of his life; not dropping down upon his fellow-creatures until they were deceased, and then only to articulate them to the best of his humble ability.

"How long could you be persuaded to keep up the appearance of remaining in it?" asked Mr. Boffin, retiring on his other idea. "Could you be got to do so, till the Mounds are gone?"

No. That would protract the mental uneasiness of Mr. Venus too long, he said.

"Not if I was to show you reason now?" demanded Mr. Boffin; "not if I was to show you good and sufficient reason?"

If by good and sufficient reason Mr. Boffin meant

honest and unimpeachable reason, that might weigh with Mr. Venus against his personal wishes and convenience. But he must add that he saw no opening to the possibility of such reason being shown him.

"Come and see me, Venus," said Mr. Boffin, "at my house."

"Is the reason there, sir?" asked Mr. Venus, with an incredulous smile and blink.

"It may be, or may not be," said Mr. Boffin, "just as you view it. But in the mean time don't go out of the matter. Look here. Do this. Give me your word that you won't take any steps with Wegg, without my knowledge, just as I have given you my word that I won't without yours."

"Done, Mr. Boffin!" said Venus, after brief consideration.

"Thank'ee, Venus, thank'ee, Venus! Done!"

"When shall I come to see you, Mr. Boffin?"

"When you like. The sooner the better. I must be going now. Good-night, Venus."

"Good-night, sir."

"And good-night to the rest of the present company," said Mr. Boffin, glancing round the shop. "They make a queer show, Venus, and I should like to be better acquainted with them some day. Good-night, Venus, good-night! Thank'ee, Venus, thank'ee, Venus!" With that he jogged out into the street, and jogged upon his homeward way.

"Now, I wonder," he meditated as he went along, nursing his stick, "whether it can be, that Venus is setting himself to get the better of Wegg? Whether it can be, that he means, when I have bought Wegg out, to have me all to himself, and to pick me clean to the bones!"

It was a cunning and suspicious idea, quite in the way of his school of Misers, and he looked very cunning and suspicious as he went jogging through the streets. More than once or twice, more than twice or thrice, say half a dozen times, he took his stick from the arm on which he nursed it, and hit a straight sharp rap at the air with its head. Possibly the wooden countenance of Mr. Silas Wegg was incorporeally before him at those moments, for he hit with intense satisfaction.

He was within a few streets of his own house, when a little private carriage, coming in the contrary direction, passed him, turned round, and passed him again. It was a little carriage of eccentric movement, for again he heard it stop behind him and turn round, and again he saw it pass him. Then it stopped, and then went on, out of sight. But, not far out of sight, for, when he came to the corner of his own street, there it stood again.

There was a lady's face at the window as he came up with this carriage, and he was passing it when the lady softly called to him by his name.

"I beg your pardon, Ma'am?" said Mr. Boffin, coming to a stop.

"It is Mrs. Lammle," said the lady.

Mr. Boffin went up to the window, and hoped Mrs. Lammle was well.

"Not very well, dear Mr. Boffin; I have fluttered myself by being — perhaps foolishly — uneasy and anxious. I have been waiting for you some time. Can I speak to you?"

Mr. Boffin proposed that Mrs. Lammle should drive on to his house, a few hundred yards further.

"I would rather not, Mr. Boffin, unless you particu-

larly wish it. I feel the difficulty and delicacy of the matter so much that I would rather avoid speaking to you at your own home. You must think this very strange?"

Mr. Boffin said no, but meant yes.

"It is because I am so grateful for the good opinion of all my friends, and am so touched by it, that I cannot bear to run the risk of forfeiting it in any case, even in the cause of duty. I have asked my husband (my dear Alfred, Mr. Boffin) whether it is the cause of duty, and he has most emphatically said Yes. I wish I had asked him sooner. It would have spared me much distress."

("Can this be more dropping down upon me!" thought Mr. Boffin, quite bewildered.)

"It was Alfred who sent me to you, Mr. Boffin. Alfred said, 'Don't come back, Sophronia, until you have seen Mr. Boffin, and told him all. Whatever he may think of it, he ought certainly to know it.' Would your mind coming into the carriage?"

Mr. Boffin answered, "Not at all," and took his seat at Mrs. Lamble's side.

"Drive slowly anywhere," Mrs. Lamble called to her coachman, "and don't let the carriage rattle."

"It *must* be more dropping down, I think," said Mr. Boffin to himself. "What next?"

CHAPTER XV.

THE GOLDEN DUSTMAN AT HIS WORST.

THE breakfast-table at Mr. Boffin's was usually a very pleasant one, and was always presided over by Bella. As though he began each new day in his healthy natural character, and some waking hours were necessary to his relapse into the corrupting influences of his wealth, the face and the demeanor of the Golden Dustman were generally unclouded at that meal. It would have been easy to believe then, that there was no change in him. It was as the day went on that the clouds gathered, and the brightness of the morning became obscured. One might have said that the shadows of avarice and distrust lengthened as his own shadow lengthened, and that the night closed around him gradually.

But, one morning long afterwards to be remembered, it was black midnight with the Golden Dustman when he first appeared. His altered character had never been so grossly marked. His bearing towards his Secretary was so charged with insolent distrust and arrogance, that the latter rose and left the table before breakfast was half done. The look he directed at the Secretary's retiring figure was so cunningly malignant, that Bella would have sat astounded and indignant, even though he had not gone the length of secretly threatening Rokesmith with his clenched fist as he closed the door. This unlucky morning, of all mornings in the year, was the morning

next after Mr. Boffin's interview with Mrs. Lamble in her little carriage.

Bella looked to Mrs. Boffin's face for comment on, or explanation of, this stormy humor in her husband, but none was there. An anxious and a distressed observation of her own face was all she could read in it. When they were left alone together — which was not until noon, for Mr. Boffin sat long in his easy-chair, by turns jogging up and down the breakfast-room, clenching his fist and muttering — Bella, in consternation, asked her what had happened, what was wrong? "I am forbidden to speak to you about it, Bella dear; I must n't tell you," was all the answer she could get. And still, whenever, in her wonder and dismay, she raised her eyes to Mrs. Boffin's face, she saw in it the same anxious and distressed observation of her own.

Oppressed by her sense that trouble was impending, and lost in speculations why Mrs. Boffin should look at her as if she had any part in it, Bella found the day long and dreary. It was far on in the afternoon when, she being in her own room, a servant brought her a message from Mr. Boffin begging her to come to his.

Mrs. Boffin was there, seated on a sofa, and Mr. Boffin was jogging up and down. On seeing Bella he stopped, beckoned her to him, and drew her arm through his. "Don't be alarmed, my dear," he said, gently; "I am not angry with you. Why, you actually tremble! Don't be alarmed, Bella my dear. I'll see you righted."

"See me righted?" thought Bella. And then repeated aloud in a tone of astonishment: "see me righted, sir?"

"Ay, ay!" said Mr. Boffin. "See you righted. Send Mr. Rokesmith here, you sir."

Bella would have been lost in perplexity if there had been pause enough; but the servant found Mr. Roke-smith near at hand, and he almost immediately presented himself.

"Shut the door, sir!" said Mr. Boffin. "I have got something to say to you which I fancy you'll not be pleased to hear."

"I am sorry to reply, Mr. Boffin," returned the Secretary, as, having closed the door, he turned and faced him, "that I think that very likely."

"What do you mean?" blustered Mr. Boffin.

"I mean that it has become no novelty to me to hear from your lips what I would rather not hear."

"Oh! Perhaps we shall change that," said Mr. Boffin, with a threatening roll of his head.

"I hope so," returned the Secretary. He was quiet and respectful; but stood, as Bella thought (and was glad to think), on his manhood too.

"Now, sir," said Mr. Boffin, "look at this young lady on my arm."

Bella involuntarily raising her eyes, when this sudden reference was made to herself, met those of Mr. Roke-smith. He was pale and seemed agitated. Then her eyes passed on to Mrs. Boffin's, and she met the look again. In a flash it enlightened her, and she began to understand what she had done.

"I say to you, sir," Mr. Boffin repeated, "look at this young lady on my arm."

"I do so," returned the Secretary.

As his glance rested again on Bella for a moment, she thought there was reproach in it. But it is possible that the reproach was within herself.

"How dare you, sir," said Mr. Boffin, "tamper, un-

known to me, with this young lady? How dare you come out of your station, and your place in my house, to pester this young lady with your impudent addresses?"

"I must decline to answer questions," said the Secretary, "that are so offensively asked."

"You decline to answer?" retorted Mr. Boffin. "You decline to answer, do you? Then I'll tell you what it is, Rokesmith; I'll answer for you. There are two sides to this matter, and I'll take 'em separately. The first side is, sheer Insolence. That's the first side."

The Secretary smiled with some bitterness, as though he would have said, "So I see and hear."

"It was sheer Insolence in you, I tell you," said Mr. Boffin, "even to think of this young lady. This young lady was far above *you*. This young lady was no match for *you*. This young lady was lying in wait (as she was qualified to do) for money, and you had no money."

Bella hung her head and seemed to shrink a little from Mr. Boffin's protecting arm.

"What are you, I should like to know," pursued Mr. Boffin, "that you were to have the audacity to follow up this young lady? This young lady was looking about the market for a good bid; she was n't in it to be snapped up by fellows that had no money to lay out; nothing to buy with."

"Oh, Mr. Boffin! Mrs. Boffin, pray say something for me!" murmured Bella, disengaging her arm, and covering her face with her hands.

"Old lady," said Mr. Boffin, anticipating his wife, "you hold your tongue. Bella, my dear, don't you let yourself be put out. I'll right you."

"But you don't, you don't right me!" exclaimed Bella, with great emphasis. "You wrong me, wrong me!"

"Don't you be put out, my dear," complacently retorted Mr. Boffin. "I'll bring this young man to book. Now, you Rokesmith! You can't decline to hear, you know, as well as to answer. You hear me tell you that the first side of your conduct was Insolence — Insolence and Presumption. Answer me one thing, if you can. Did n't this young lady tell you so herself?"

"Did I, Mr. Rokesmith?" asked Bella with her face still covered. "O say, Mr. Rokesmith! Did I?"

"Don't be distressed, Miss Wilfer; it matters very little now."

"Ah! You can't deny it, though!" said Mr. Boffin, with a knowing shake of his head.

"But I have asked him to forgive me since," cried Bella; "and I would ask him to forgive me now again, upon my knees, if it would spare him!"

Here Mrs. Boffin broke out a-crying.

"Old lady," said Mr. Boffin, "stop that noise! Tender-hearted in you, Miss Bella; but I mean to have it out right through with this young man, having got him into a corner. Now, you Rokesmith. I tell you that's one side of your conduct — Insolence and Presumption. "Now, I'm a-coming to the other, which is much worse. This was a speculation of yours."

"I indignantly deny it."

"It's of no use your denying it; it does n't signify a bit whether you deny it or not; I've got a head upon my shoulders, and it ain't a baby's. What!" said Mr. Boffin, gathering himself together in his most suspicious attitude, and wrinkling his face into a very map of curves and corners. "Don't I know what grabs are made at a man with money? If I did n't keep my eyes open, and my pockets buttoned, should n't I be brought

to the workhouse before I knew where I was? Was n't the experience of Dancer, and Elwes, and Hopkins, and Blewbury Jones, and ever so many more of 'em, similar to mine? Did n't everybody want to make grabs at what they'd got, and bring 'em to poverty and ruin? Were n't they forced to hide everything belonging to 'em, for fear it should be snatched from 'em? Of course they was. I shall be told next that they did n't know human nature!"

"They! Poor creatures," murmured the Secretary.

"What do you say?" asked Mr. Boffin, snapping at him. "However, you need n't be at the trouble of repeating it, for it ain't worth hearing, and won't go down with *me*. I'm a-going to unfold your plan, before this young lady; I'm a-going to show this young lady the second view of you; and nothing you can say will stave it off. (Now, attend here, Bella, my dear.) Rokesmith, you're a needy chap. You're a chap that I pick up in the street. Are you, or ain't you?"

"Go on, Mr. Boffin; don't appeal to me."

"Not appeal to *you*," retorted Mr. Boffin, as if he had n't done so. "No, I should hope not! Appealing to *you*, would be rather a rum course. As I was saying, you're a needy chap that I pick up in the street. You come and ask me in the street to take you for a Secretary, and I take you. Very good."

"Very bad," murmured the Secretary.

"What do you say?" asked Mr. Boffin, snapping at him again.

He returned no answer. Mr. Boffin, after eyeing him with a comical look of discomfited curiosity, was fain to begin afresh.

"This Rokesmith is a needy young man that I take

for my Secretary out of the open street. This Rokesmith gets acquainted with my affairs, and gets to know that I mean to settle a sum of money on this young lady. 'Oho!' says this Rokesmith" — here Mr. Boffin clapped a finger against his nose, and tapped it several times with a sneaking air, as embodying Rokesmith confidentially confabulating with his own nose — "'This will be a good haul; I'll go in for this!' And so this Rokesmith, greedy and hungering, begins a-creeping on his hands and knees towards the money. Not so bad a speculation either: for if this young lady had had less spirit, or had had less sense, through being at all in the romantic line, by George he might have worked it out and made it pay! But fortunately she was too many for him, and a pretty figure he cuts now he is exposed. There he stands!" said Mr. Boffin, addressing Rokesmith himself with ridiculous inconsistency. "Look at him!"

"Your unfortunate suspicions, Mr. Boffin" — began the Secretary.

"Precious unfortunate for *you*, I can tell you," said Mr. Boffin.

— "are not to be combated by any one, and I address myself to no such hopeless task. But I will say a word upon the truth."

"Yah! Much you care about the truth," said Mr. Boffin, with a snap of his fingers.

"Noddy! My dear love!" expostulated his wife.

"Old lady," returned Mr. Boffin, "you keep still. I say to this Rokesmith here, much he cares about the truth. I tell him again, much he cares about the truth."

"Our connection being at an end, Mr. Boffin," said the Secretary, "it can be of very little moment to me what you say."

"Oh! You are knowing enough," retorted Mr. Boffin with a sly look, "to have found out that our connection's at an end, eh? But you can't get beforehand with me. Look at this in my hand. This is your pay, on your discharge. You can only follow suit. You can't deprive me of the lead. Let's have no pretending that you discharge yourself. I discharge you."

"So that I go," remarked the Secretary, waving the point aside with his hand, "it is all one to me."

"Is it?" said Mr. Boffin. "But it's two to me, let me tell you. Allowing a fellow that's found out, to discharge himself, is one thing; discharging him for insolence and presumption, and likewise for designs upon his master's money, is another. One and one's two; not one. (Old lady, don't you cut in. You keep still.)"

"Have you said all you wish to say to me?" demanded the Secretary.

"I don't know whether I have or not," answered Mr. Boffin. "It depends" —

"Perhaps you will consider whether there are any other strong expressions that you would like to bestow upon me?"

"I'll consider that," said Mr. Boffin, obstinately, "at my convenience, and not at yours. You want the last word. It may not be suitable to let you have it."

"Noddy! My dear, dear Noddy! You sound so hard!" cried poor Mrs. Boffin, not to be quite repressed.

"Old lady," said her husband, but without harshness, "if you cut in when requested not, I'll get a pillow and carry you out of the room upon it. What do you want to say, you Rokesmith?"

"To you, Mr. Boffin, nothing. But to Miss Wilfer and to your good kind wife, a word."

“Out with it then,” replied Mr. Boffin, “and cut it short, for we’ve had enough of you.”

“I have borne,” said the Secretary, in a low voice, “with my false position here, that I might not be separated from Miss Wilfer. To be near her, has been a recompense to me from day to day, even for the undeserved treatment I have had here, and for the degraded aspect in which she has often seen me. Since Miss Wilfer rejected me, I have never again urged my suit, to the best of my belief, with a spoken syllable or a look. But I have never changed in my devotion to her, except — if she will forgive my saying so — that it is deeper than it was, and better founded.”

“Now, mark this chap’s saying Miss Wilfer, when he means £ s. d. !” cried Mr. Boffin, with a cunning wink. “Now, mark this chap’s making Miss Wilfer stand for Pounds, Shillings, and Pence !”

“My feeling for Miss Wilfer,” pursued the Secretary, without deigning to notice him, “is not one to be ashamed of. I avow it. I love her. Let me go where I may when I presently leave this house, I shall go into a blank life, leaving her.”

“Leaving £ s. d. behind me,” said Mr. Boffin, by way of commentary, with another wink.

“That I am incapable,” the Secretary went on, still without heeding him, “of a mercenary project, or a mercenary thought, in connection with Miss Wilfer, is nothing meritorious in me, because any prize that I could put before my fancy would sink into insignificance beside her. If the greatest wealth or the highest rank were hers, it would only be important in my sight as removing her still farther from me, and making me more hopeless, if that could be. Say,” remarked the Secretary, looking

full at his late master, "say that with a word she could strip Mr. Boffin of his fortune and take possession of it, she would be of no greater worth in my eyes than she is."

"What do you think by this time, old lady," asked Mr. Boffin, turning to his wife in a bantering tone, "about this Rokesmith here, and his caring for the truth? You need n't say what you think, my dear, because I don't want you to cut in, but you can think it all the same. As to taking possession of my property, I warrant you he would n't do that himself if he could."

"No," returned the Secretary, with another full look.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Mr. Boffin. "There's nothing like a good 'un while you *are* about it."

"I have been for a moment," said the Secretary, turning from him and falling into his former manner, "diverted from the little I have to say. My interest in Miss Wilfer began when I first saw her; even began when I had only heard of her. It was, in fact, the cause of my throwing myself in Mr. Boffin's way, and entering his service. Miss Wilfer has never known this until now. I mention it now, only as a corroboration (though I hope it may be needless) of my being free from the sordid design attributed to me."

"Now, this is a very artful dog," said Mr. Boffin, with a deep look. "This is a longer-headed schemer than I thought him. See how patiently and methodically he goes to work. He gets to know about me and my property, and about this young lady, and her share in poor young John's story, and he puts this and that together, and he says to himself, 'I'll get in with Boffin, and I'll get in with this young lady, and I'll work 'em both at the same time, and I'll bring my pigs to market some-

where.' I hear him say it, bless you! Why, I look at him, now, and I see him say it!"

Mr. Boffin pointed at the culprit, as it were in the act, and hugged himself in his great penetration.

"But luckily he had n't to deal with the people he supposed, Bella my dear!" said Mr. Boffin. "No! Luckily he had to deal with you, and with me, and with Daniel and Miss Dancer, and with Elwes, and with Vulture Hopkins, and with Blewbury Jones, and all the rest of us, one down t'other come on. And he's beat; that's what he is; regularly beat. He thought to squeeze money out of us, and he has done for himself instead, Bella my dear!"

Bella my dear made no response, gave no sign of acquiescence. When she had first covered her face she had sunk upon a chair with her hands resting on the back of it, and had never moved since. There was a short silence at this point, and Mrs. Boffin softly rose as if to go to her. But Mr. Boffin stopped her with a gesture, and she obediently sat down again and stayed where she was.

"There's your pay, Mister Rokesmith," said the Golden Dustman, jerking the folded scrap of paper he had in his hand, towards his late Secretary. "I dare say you can stoop to pick it up, after what you have stooped to here."

"I have stooped to nothing but this," Rokesmith answered as he took it from the ground; "and this is mine, for I have earned it by the hardest of hard labor."

"You're a pretty quick packer, I hope," said Mr. Boffin; "because the sooner you are gone, bag and baggage, the better for all parties."

"You need have no fear of my lingering."

"There's just one thing though," said Mr. Boffin, "that I should like to ask you before we come to a good riddance, if it was only to show this young lady how conceited you schemers are, in thinking that nobody finds out how you contradict yourselves."

"Ask me anything you wish to ask," returned Rokesmith, "but use the expedition that you recommend."

"You pretend to have a mighty admiration for this young lady?" said Mr. Boffin, laying his hand protectingly on Bella's head, without looking down at her.

"I do not pretend."

"Oh! Well. You *have* a mighty admiration for this young lady — since you are so particular?"

"Yes."

"How do you reconcile that, with this young lady's being a weak-spirited, improvident idiot, not knowing what was due to herself, flinging up her money to the church-weathercocks, and racing off at a splitting pace for the workhouse?"

"I don't understand you."

"Don't you? Or won't you? What else could you have made this young lady out to be, if she had listened to such addresses as yours?"

"What else, if I had been so happy as to win her affections and possess her heart?"

"Win her affections," retorted Mr. Boffin, with ineffable contempt, "and possess her heart! Mew says the cat, Quack-quack says the duck, Bow-wow-wow says the dog! Win her affections and possess her heart! Mew, Quack-quack, Bow-wow!"

John Rokesmith stared at him in his outburst, as if with some faint idea that he had gone mad.

"What is due to this young lady," said Mr. Boffin, "is Money, and this young lady right well knows it."

“You slander the young lady.”

“*You* slander the young lady; you with your affections and hearts and trumpery,” returned Mr. Boffin. “It’s of a piece with the rest of your behavior. I heard of these doings of yours only last night, or you should have heard of ’em from me, sooner, take your oath of it. I heard of ’em from a lady with as good a headpiece as the best, and she knows this young lady, and I know this young lady, and we all three know that it’s Money she makes a stand for, — money, money, money, — and that you and your affections and hearts are a Lie, sir!”

“Mrs. Boffin,” said Rokesmith, quietly turning to her, “for your delicate and unvarying kindness I thank you with the warmest gratitude. Good-bye! Miss Wilfer, good-bye!”

“And now, my dear,” said Mr. Boffin, laying his hand on Bella’s head again, “you may begin to make yourself quite comfortable, and I hope you feel that you’ve been righted.”

But Bella was so far from appearing to feel it, that she shrank from his hand and from the chair, and starting up in an incoherent passion of tears, and stretching out her arms, cried, “O Mr. Rokesmith, before you go, if you could but make me poor again! O! Make me poor again, Somebody, I beg and pray, or my heart will break if this goes on! Pa, dear, make me poor again and take me home! I was bad enough there, but I have been so much worse here. Don’t give me money, Mr. Boffin, I won’t have money. Keep it away from me, and only let me speak to good little Pa, and lay my head upon his shoulder, and tell him all my griefs. Nobody else can understand me, nobody else can comfort me, nobody else knows how unworthy I am, and yet can love me like a

little child. I am better with Pa than any one — more innocent, more sorry, more glad!" So, crying out in a wild way that she could not bear this, Bella drooped her head on Mrs. Boffin's ready breast.

John Rokesmith from his place in the room, and Mr. Boffin from his, looked on at her in silence until she was silent herself. Then Mr. Boffin observed in a soothing and comfortable tone, "There, my dear, there; you are righted now, and it's *all* right. I don't wonder, I'm sure, at your being a little flurried by having a scene with this fellow, but it's all over, my dear, and you're righted, and it's — and it's *all* right!" Which Mr. Boffin repeated with a highly satisfied air of completeness and finality.

"I hate you!" cried Bella, turning suddenly upon him, with a stamp of her little foot — "at least, I can't hate you, but I don't like you!"

"HUL—LO!" exclaimed Mr. Boffin in an amazed under-tone.

"You're a scolding, unjust, abusive, aggravating, bad old creature!" cried Bella. "I am angry with my ungrateful self for calling you names; but you are, you are; you know you are!"

Mr. Boffin stared here, and stared there, as misdoubting that he must be in some sort of fit.

"I have heard you with shame," said Bella. "With shame for myself, and with shame for you. You ought to be above the base tale-bearing of a time-serving woman; but you are above nothing now."

Mr. Boffin, seeming to become convinced that this was a fit, rolled his eyes and loosened his neckcloth.

"When I came here, I respected you and honored you, and I soon loved you," cried Bella. "And now I can't bear the sight of you. At least, I don't know that I

ought to go so far as that — only you're a — you're a Monster!" Having shot this bolt out with a great expenditure of force, Bella hysterically laughed and cried together.

"The best wish I can wish you is," said Bella, returning to the charge, "that you had not one single farthing in the world. If any true friend and well-wisher could make you a bankrupt, you would be a Duck; but as a man of property you are a Demon!"

After despatching this second bolt with a still greater expenditure of force, Bella laughed and cried still more.

"Mr. Rokesmith, pray stay one moment. Pray hear one word from me before you go! I am deeply sorry for the reproaches you have borne on my account. Out of the depths of my heart I earnestly and truly beg your pardon."

As she stepped towards him, he met her. As she gave him her hand, he put it to his lips, and said, "God bless you!" No laughing was mixed with Bella's crying then; her tears were pure and fervent.

"There is not an ungenerous word that I have heard addressed to you — heard with scorn and indignation, Mr. Rokesmith — but it has wounded me far more than you, for I have deserved it, and you never have. Mr. Rokesmith, it is to me you owe this perverted account of what passed between us that night. I parted with the secret, even while I was angry with myself for doing so. It was very bad in me, but indeed it was not wicked. I did it in a moment of conceit and folly — one of my many such moments — one of my many such hours — years. As I am punished for it severely, try to forgive it!"

"I do with all my soul."

"Thank you. O thank you! Don't part from me till I have said one other word, to do you justice. The only fault you can be truly charged with, in having spoken to me as you did that night — with how much delicacy and how much forbearance no one but I can know or be grateful to you for — is, that you laid yourself open to be slighted by a worldly shallow girl whose head was turned, and who was quite unable to rise to the worth of what you offered her. Mr. Rokesmith, that girl has often seen herself in a pitiful and poor light since, but never in so pitiful and poor a light as now, when the mean tone in which she answered you — sordid and vain girl that she was — has been echoed in her ears by Mr. Boffin."

He kissed her hand again.

"Mr. Boffin's speeches were detestable to me, shocking to me," said Bella, startling that gentleman with another stamp of her little foot. "It is quite true that there was a time, and very lately, when I deserved to be so 'righted,' Mr. Rokesmith; but I hope that I shall never deserve it again!"

He once more put her hand to his lips, and then relinquished it, and left the room. Bella was hurrying back to the chair in which she had hidden her face so long, when, catching sight of Mrs. Boffin by the way, she stopped at her. "He is gone," sobbed Bella indignantly, despairingly, in fifty ways at once, with her arms round Mrs. Boffin's neck. "He has been most shamefully abused, and most unjustly and most basely driven away, and I am the cause of it!"

All this time Mr. Boffin had been rolling his eyes over his loosened neckerchief, as if his fit were still upon him. Appearing now to think that he was coming to, he

stared straight before him for a while, tied his neckerchief again, took several long inspirations, swallowed several times, and ultimately exclaimed with a deep sigh, as if he felt himself on the whole better: "Well!"

No word, good or bad, did Mrs. Boffin say; but she tenderly took care of Bella, and glanced at her husband as if for orders. Mr. Boffin, without imparting any, took his seat on a chair over against them, and there sat leaning forward, with a fixed countenance, his legs apart, a hand on each knee, and his elbows squared, until Bella should dry her eyes and raise her head, which in the fulness of time she did.

"I must go home," said Bella, rising hurriedly. "I am very grateful to you for all you have done for me, but I can't stay here."

"My darling girl!" remonstrated Mrs. Boffin.

"No, I can't stay here," said Bella; "I can't indeed. Ugh! you vicious old thing!" (This to Mr. Boffin.)

"Don't be rash, my love," urged Mrs. Boffin. "Think well of what you do."

"Yes, you had better think well," said Mr. Boffin.

"I shall never more think well of *you*," cried Bella, cutting him short, with intense defiance in her expressive little eyebrows, and championship of the late Secretary in every dimple. "No! Never again! Your money has changed you to marble. You are a hard-hearted Miser. You are worse than Dancer, worse than Hopkins, worse than Blackberry Jones, worse than any of the wretches. And more!" proceeded Bella, breaking into tears again, "you were wholly undeserving of the Gentleman you have lost."

"Why, you don't mean to say, Miss Bella," the Golden Dustman slowly remonstrated, "that you set up Bokesmith against me?"

"I do!" said Bella. "He is worth a Million of you."

Very pretty she looked, though very angry, as she made herself as tall as she possibly could (which was not extremely tall), and utterly renounced her patron with a lofty toss of her rich brown head.

"I would rather he thought well of me," said Bella, "though he swept the street for bread, than that you did, though you splashed the mud upon him from the wheels of a chariot of pure gold. — There!"

"Well, I'm sure!" cried Mr. Boffin, staring.

"And for a long time past, when you have thought you set yourself above him, I have only seen you under his feet," said Bella — "There! And throughout I saw in him the master, and I saw in you the man — There! And when you used him shamefully, I took his part and loved him — There! I boast of it!"

After which strong avowal Bella underwent reaction, and cried to any extent, with her face on the back of her chair.

"Now, look here," said Mr. Boffin, as soon as he could find an opening for breaking the silence and striking in. "Give me your attention, Bella. I am not angry."

"I am!" said Bella.

"I say," resumed the Golden Dustman, "I am not angry, and I mean kindly to you, and I want to overlook this. So you'll stay where you are, and we'll agree to say no more about it."

"No, I can't stay here," cried Bella, rising hurriedly again; "I can't think of staying here. I must go home for good."

"Now, don't be silly," Mr. Boffin reasoned. "Don't do what you can't undo; don't do what you're sure to be sorry for."

"I shall never be sorry for it," said Bella; "and I should always be sorry, and should every minute of my life despise myself, if I remained here after what has happened."

"At least, Bella," argued Mr. Boffin, "let there be no mistake about it. Look before you leap, you know. Stay where you are, and all 's well, and all 's as it was to be. Go away, and you can never come back."

"I know that I can never come back, and that 's what I mean," said Bella.

"You must n't expect," Mr. Boffin pursued, "that I 'm a-going to settle money on you, if you leave us like this, because I am not. No, Bella! Be careful! Not one brass farthing."

"Expect!" said Bella, haughtily. "Do you think that any power on earth could make me take it, if you did, sir?"

But there was Mrs. Boffin to part from, and, in the full flush of her dignity, the impressible little soul collapsed again. Down upon her knees before that good woman, she rocked herself upon her breast, and cried, and sobbed, and folded her in her arms with all her might.

"You 're a dear, a dear, the best of dears!" cried Bella. "You 're the best of human creatures. I can never be thankful enough to you, and can never forget you. If I should live to be blind and deaf, I know I shall see and hear you, in my fancy, to the last of my dim old days!"

Mrs. Boffin wept most heartily, and embraced her with all fondness; but said not one single word except that she was her dear girl. She said that often enough, to be sure, for she said it over and over again; but not one word else.

Bella broke from her at length, and was going weeping out of the room, when in her own little queer affectionate way, she half relented towards Mr. Boffin.

"I am very glad," sobbed Bella, "that I called you names, sir, because you richly deserved it. But I am very sorry that I called you names, because you used to be so different. Say good-bye!"

"Good-bye," said Mr. Boffin, shortly.

"If I knew which of your hands was the least spoilt, I would ask you to let me touch it," said Bella, "for the last time. But not because I repent of what I have said to you. For I don't. It's true!"

"Try the left hand," said Mr. Boffin, holding it out in a stolid manner; "it's the least used."

"You have been wonderfully good and kind to me," said Bella, "and I kiss it for that. You have been as bad as bad could be to Mr. Rokesmith, and I throw it away for that. Thank you for myself, and good-bye!"

"Good-bye," said Mr. Boffin as before.

Bella caught him round the neck and kissed him, and ran out forever.

She ran up-stairs, and sat down on the floor in her own room, and cried abundantly. But the day was declining, and she had no time to lose. She opened all the places where she kept her dresses; selected only those she had brought with her, leaving all the rest; and made a great misshapen bundle of them, to be sent for afterwards.

"I won't take one of the others," said Bella, tying the knots of the bundle very tight, in the severity of her resolution. "I'll leave all the presents behind, and begin again entirely on my own account." That the resolution might be thoroughly carried into practice, she

even changed the dress she wore, for that in which she had come to the grand mansion. Even the bonnet she put on was the bonnet that had mounted into the Boffin chariot at Holloway.

"Now, I am complete," said Bella. "It's a little trying, but I have steeped my eyes in cold water, and I won't cry any more. You have been a pleasant room to me, dear room. Adieu! We shall never see each other again."

With a parting kiss of her fingers to it, she softly closed the door, and went with a light foot down the great staircase, pausing and listening as she went, that she might meet none of the household. No one chanced to be about, and she got down to the hall in quiet. The door of the late Secretary's room stood open. She peeped in as she passed, and divined from the emptiness of his table, and the general appearance of things, that he was already gone. Softly opening the great hall-door, and softly closing it upon herself, she turned and kissed it on the outside—insensible old combination of wood and iron that it was!—before she ran away from the house at a swift pace.

"That was well done!" panted Bella, slackening in the next street, and subsiding into a walk. "If I had left myself any breath to cry with, I should have cried again. Now poor dear darling little Pa, you are going to see your lovely woman unexpectedly."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FEAST OF THE THREE HOBGOBLINS.

THE City looked unpromising enough, as Bella made her way along its gritty streets. Most of its money-mills were slackening sail, or had left off grinding for the day. The master-millers had already departed, and the journeymen were departing. There was a jaded aspect on the business lanes and courts, and the very pavements had a weary appearance, confused by the tread of a million of feet. There must be hours of night to temper down the day's distraction of so feverish a place. As yet the worry of the newly stopped whirling and grinding on the part of the money-mills seemed to linger in the air, and the quiet was more like the prostration of a spent giant than the repose of one who was renewing his strength.

If Bella thought, as she glanced at the mighty Bank, how agreeable it would be to have an hour's gardening there, with a bright copper shovel, among the money, still she was not in an avaricious vein. Much improved in that respect, and with certain half-formed images which had little gold in their composition dancing before her bright eyes, she arrived in the drug-flavored region of Mincing Lane, with the sensation of having just opened a drawer in a chemist's shop.

The counting-house of Chicksey, Veneering, and Stobles was pointed out by an elderly female accustomed to

the care of offices, who dropped upon Bella out of a public-house, wiping her mouth, and accounted for its humidity on natural principles well known to the physical sciences, by explaining that she had looked in at the door to see what o'clock it was. The counting-house was a wall-eyed ground-floor by a dark gateway, and Bella was considering, as she approached it, could there be any precedent in the City for her going in and asking for R. Wilfer, when whom should she see, sitting at one of the windows with the plate-glass sash raised, but R. Wilfer himself, preparing to take a slight refectation!

On approaching nearer, Bella discerned that the refectation had the appearance of a small cottage-loaf and a pennyworth of milk. Simultaneously with this discovery on her part, her father discovered her, and invoked the echoes of Mincing Lane to exclaim "My gracious me!"

He then came cherubically flying out without a hat, and embraced her, and handed her in. "For it's after hours and I am all alone, my dear," he explained, "and am having — as I sometimes do when they are all gone — a quiet tea."

Looking round the office, as if her father were a captive and this his cell, Bella hugged him and choked him to her heart's content.

"I never was so surprised, my dear!" said her father. "I could n't believe my eyes. Upon my life, I thought they had taken to lying! The idea of your coming down the Lane yourself! Why did n't you send the footman down the Lane, my dear?"

"I have brought no footman with me, Pa."

"Oh indeed! But you have brought the elegant turnout, my love?"

"No, Pa."

"You never can have walked, my dear?"

"Yes, I have, Pa."

He looked so very much astonished, that Bella could not make up her mind to break it to him just yet.

"The consequence is, Pa, that your lovely woman feels a little faint, and would very much like to share your tea."

The cottage-loaf and the pennyworth of milk had been set forth on a sheet of paper on the window-seat. The cherubic pocket-knife, with the first bit of the loaf still on its point, lay beside them where it had been hastily thrown down. Bella took the bit off, and put it in her mouth. "My dear child," said her father, "the idea of your partaking of such lowly fare! But at least you must have your own loaf and your own penn'orth. One moment, my dear. The Dairy is just over the way and round the corner."

Regardless of Bella's dissuasions he ran out, and quickly returned with the new supply. "My dear child," he said, as he spread it on another piece of paper before her, "the idea of a splendid" — and then looked at her figure, and stopped short.

"What's the matter, Pa?"

— "of a splendid female," he resumed more slowly, "putting up with such accommodation as the present! — Is that a new dress you have on, my dear?"

"No, Pa, an old one. Don't you remember it?"

"Why, I *thought* I remembered it, my dear!"

"You should, for you bought it, Pa."

"Yes, I *thought* I bought it, my dear!" said the cherub, giving himself a little shake, as if to rouse his faculties.

"And have you grown so fickle that you don't like your own taste, Pa dear?"

"Well, my love," he returned, swallowing a bit of the cottage-loaf with considerable effort, for it seemed to stick by the way, — "I should have thought it was hardly sufficiently splendid for existing circumstances."

"And so, Pa," said Bella, moving coaxingly to his side instead of remaining opposite, "you sometimes have a quiet tea here all alone? I am not in the tea's way, if I draw my arm over your shoulder like this, Pa?"

"Yes, my dear, and no, my dear. Yes to the first question, and Certainly Not to the second. Respecting the quiet tea, my dear, why, you see the occupations of the day are sometimes a little wearing; and if there's nothing interposed between the day and your mother, why *she* is sometimes a little wearing, too."

"I know, Pa."

"Yes, my dear. So sometimes I put a quiet tea at the window here, with a little quiet contemplation of the Lane (which comes soothing), between the day and domestic" —

"Bliss," suggested Bella, sorrowfully.

"And domestic Bliss," said her father, quite contented to accept the phrase.

Bella kissed him. "And it is in this dark, dingy place of captivity, poor dear, that you pass all the hours of your life when you are not at home?"

"Not at home, or not on the road there, or on the road here, my love. Yes. You see that little desk in the corner?"

"In the dark corner, furthest both from the light and from the fireplace? The shabbiest desk of all the desks?"

"Now, does it really strike you in that point of view, my dear?" said her father, surveying it artistically with

his head on one side: "that's mine. That's called Rumty's Perch."

"Whose Perch?" asked Bella, with great indignation.

"Rumty's. You see, being rather high and up two steps they call it a Perch. And they call *me* Rumty."

"How dare they!" exclaimed Bella.

"They're playful, Bella my dear; they're playful. They're more or less younger than I am, and they're playful. What does it matter? It might be Surly, or Sulky, or fifty disagreeable things that I really should n't like to be considered. But Rumty! Lor, why not Rumty?"

To inflict a heavy disappointment on this sweet nature, which had been, through all her caprices, the object of her recognition, love, and admiration from infancy, Bella felt to be the hardest task of her hard day. "I should have done better," she thought, "to tell him at first; I should have done better to tell him just now, when he had some slight misgiving; he is quite happy again, and I shall make him wretched."

He was falling back on his loaf and milk, with the pleasantest composure, and Bella stealing her arm a little closer about him, and at the same time sticking up his hair with an irresistible propensity to play with him founded on the habit of her whole life, had prepared herself to say: "Pa dear, don't be cast down, but I must tell you something disagreeable!" when he interrupted her in an unlooked-for manner.

"My gracious me!" he exclaimed, invoking the Mincing Lane echoes as before. "This is very extraordinary!"

"What is, Pa?"

"Why, here's Mr. Rokesmith now!"

"No, no, Pa, no," cried Bella, greatly flurried.
"Surely not."

"Yes there is! Look here!"

Sooth to say, Mr. Rokesmith not only passed the window, but came into the counting-house. And not only came into the counting-house, but, finding himself alone there with Bella and her father, rushed at Bella and caught her in his arms, with the rapturous words, "My dear, dear girl; my gallant, generous, disinterested, courageous, noble girl!" And not only that even, (which one might have thought astonishment enough for one dose), but Bella, after hanging her head for a moment, lifted it up and laid it on his breast, as if that were her head's chosen and lasting resting-place!

"I knew you would come to him, and I followed you," said Rokesmith. "My love, my life! You ARE mine?"

To which Bella responded, "Yes, I AM yours if you think me worth taking!" And after that, seemed to shrink to next to nothing in the clasp of his arms, partly because it was such a strong one on his part, and partly because there was such a yielding to it on hers.

The cherub, whose hair would have done for itself, under the influence of this amazing spectacle, what Bella had just now done for it, staggered back into the window-seat from which he had risen, and surveyed the pair with his eyes dilated to their utmost.

"But we must think of dear Pa," said Bella; "I have n't told dear Pa; let us speak to Pa." Upon which they turned to do so.

"I wish first, my dear," remarked the cherub faintly, "that you'd have the kindness to sprinkle me with a little milk, for I feel as if I was — Going."

In fact, the good little fellow had become alarmingly limp, and his senses seemed to be rapidly escaping, from the knees upward. Bella sprinkled him with kisses instead of milk, but gave him a little of that article to drink; and he gradually revived under her caressing care.

"We'll break it to you gently, dearest Pa," said Bella.

"My dear," returned the cherub, looking at them both, "you broke so much in the first — Gush, if I may so express myself — that I think I am equal to a good large breakage now."

"Mr. Wilfer," said John Rokesmith, excitedly and joyfully, "Bella takes me, though I have no fortune, even no present occupation; nothing but what I can get in the life before us. Bella takes me!"

"Yes, I should rather have inferred, my dear sir," returned the cherub feebly, "that Bella took you, from what I have within these few minutes remarked."

"You don't know, Pa," said Bella, "how ill I have used him!"

"You don't know, sir," said Rokesmith, "what a heart she has!"

"You don't know, Pa," said Bella, "what a shocking creature I was growing, when he saved me from myself!"

"You don't know, sir," said Rokesmith, "what a sacrifice she has made for me!"

"My dear Bella," replied the cherub, still pathetically scared, "and my dear John Rokesmith, if you will allow me so to call you" —

"Yes, do, Pa, do!" urged Bella. "I allow you, and my will is his law. Is n't it — dear John Rokesmith?"

There was an engaging shyness in Bella, coupled with an engaging tenderness of love and confidence and pride, in thus first calling him by name, which made it quite excusable in John Rokesmith to do what he did. What he did was, once more to give her the appearance of vanishing as aforesaid.

"I think, my dears," observed the cherub, "that if you could make it convenient to sit one on one side of me, and the other on the other, we should get on rather more consecutively, and make things rather plainer. John Rokesmith mentioned, awhile ago, that he had no present occupation."

"None," said Rokesmith.

"No, Pa, none," said Bella.

"From which I argue," proceeded the cherub, "that he has left Mr. Boffin?"

"Yes, Pa. And so" —

"Stop a bit, my dear. I wish to lead up to it by degrees. And that Mr. Boffin has not treated him well?"

"Has treated him most shamefully, dear Pa!" cried Bella with a flashing face.

"Of which," pursued the cherub, enjoining patience with his hand, "a certain mercenary young person distantly related to myself, could not approve? Am I leading up to it right?"

"Could not approve, sweet Pa," said Bella, with a tearful laugh and a joyful kiss.

"Upon which," pursued the cherub, "the certain mercenary young person distantly related to myself, having previously observed and mentioned to myself that prosperity was spoiling Mr. Boffin, felt that she must not sell her sense of what was right and what was wrong, and what was true and what was false, and what was just and

what was unjust, for any price that could be paid to her by any one alive? Am I leading up to it right?"

With another tearful laugh Bella joyfully kissed him again.

"And therefore — and therefore," the cherub went on in a glowing voice, as Bella's hand stole gradually up his waistcoat to his neck, "this mercenary young person distantly related to myself, refused the price, took off the splendid fashions that were part of it, put on the comparatively poor dress that I had last given her, and trusting to my supporting her in what was right, came straight to me. Have I led up to it?"

Bella's hand was round his neck by this time, and her face was on it.

"The mercenary young person distantly related to myself," said her good father, "did well! The mercenary young person distantly related to myself, did not trust to me in vain! I admire this mercenary young person distantly related to myself, more in this dress than if she had come to me in China silks, Cashmere shawls, and Golconda diamonds. I love this young person dearly. I say to the man of this young person's heart, out of my heart and with all of it, 'My blessing on this engagement betwixt you, and she brings you a good fortune when she brings you the poverty she has accepted for your sake and the honest truth's!'"

The stanch little man's voice failed him as he gave John Rokesmith his hand, and he was silent, bending his face low over his daughter. But, not for long. He soon looked up, saying in a sprightly tone:

"And now, my dear child, if you think you can entertain John Rokesmith for a minute and a half, I'll run over to the Dairy, and fetch *him* a cottage-loaf and a drink of milk, that we all may have tea together."

It was, as Bella gayly said, like the supper provided for the three nursery hobgoblins at their house in the forest, without their thunderous low growlings of the alarming discovery, "Somebody's been drinking *my* milk!" It was a delicious repast; by far the most delicious that Bella, or John Rokesmith, or even R. Wilfer had ever made. The uncongenial oddity of its surroundings, with the two brass knobs of the iron safe of Chicksey, Veneering, and Stobbles staring from a corner, like the eyes of some dull dragon, only made it the more delightful.

"To think," said the cherub, looking round the office with unspeakable enjoyment, "that anything of a tender nature should come off here, is what tickles me. To think that ever I should have seen my Bella folded in the arms of her future husband, *here*, you know!"

It was not until the cottage-loaves and the milk had for some time disappeared, and the foreshadowings of night were creeping over Mincing Lane, that the cherub by degrees became a little nervous, and said to Bella, as he cleared his throat:

"Hem! — Have you thought at all about your mother, my dear?"

"Yes, Pa."

"And your sister Lavvy, for instance, my dear?"

"Yes, Pa. I think we had better not enter into particulars at home. I think it will be quite enough to say that I had a difference with Mr. Boffin, and have left for good."

"John Rokesmith, being acquainted with your Ma, my love," said her father, after some slight hesitation, "I need have no delicacy in hinting before him that you may perhaps find your Ma a little wearing."

“A little patient, Pa?” said Bella with a tuneful laugh: the tuncfuller for being so loving in its tone.

“Well! We’ll say, strictly in confidence among ourselves, wearing; we won’t qualify it,” the cherub stoutly admitted. “And your sister’s temper is wearing.”

“I don’t mind, Pa.”

“And you must prepare yourself, you know, my precious,” said her father, with much gentleness, “for our looking very poor and meagre at home, and being at the best but very uncomfortable, after Mr. Boffin’s house.”

“I don’t mind, Pa. I could bear much harder trials — for John.”

The closing words were not so softly and blushingly said but that John heard them, and showed that he heard them by again assisting Bella to another of those mysterious disappearances.

“Well!” said the cherub gayly, and not expressing disapproval, “when you — when you come back from retirement, my love, and reappear on the surface, I think it will be time to lock up and go.”

If the counting-house of Chicksey, Veneering, and Stobbles had ever been shut up by three happier people, glad as most people were to shut it up, they must have been superlatively happy indeed. But first Bella mounted upon Rumty’s Perch, and said, “Show me what you do here all day long, dear Pa. Do you write like this?” laying her round cheek upon her plump left arm, and losing sight of her pen in waves of hair, in a highly unbusiness-like manner. Though John Rokesmith seemed to like it.

So, the three hobgoblins, having effaced all traces of their feast, and swept up the crumbs, came out of Mincing Lane to walk to Holloway; and if two of the hob-

goblins did n't wish the distance twice as long as it was, the third hobgoblin was much mistaken. Indeed, that modest spirit deemed himself so much in the way of their deep enjoyment of the journey, that he apologetically remarked: "I think, my dears, I'll take the lead on the other side of the road, and seem not to belong to you." Which he did, cherubically strewing the path with smiles, in the absence of flowers.

It was almost ten o'clock when they stopped within view of Wilfer Castle; and then, the spot being quiet and deserted, Bella began a series of disappearances which threatened to last all night.

"I think, John," the cherub hinted at last, "that if you can spare me the young person distantly related to myself, I'll take her in."

"I can't spare her," answered John, "but I must lend her to you.—My Darling!" A word of magic which caused Bella instantly to disappear again.

"Now, dearest Pa," said Bella, when she became visible, "put your hand in mine, and we'll run home as fast as ever we can run, and get it over. Now, Pa. Once!" —

"My dear," the cherub faltered, with something of a craven air, "I was going to observe that if your mother" —

"You must n't hang back, sir, to gain time," cried Bella, putting out her right foot; "do you see that, sir? That's the mark; come up to the mark, sir. Once! Twice! Three times and away, Pa!" Off she skimmed, bearing the cherub along, nor ever stopped, nor suffered him to stop, until she had pulled at the bell. "Now, dear Pa," said Bella, taking him by both ears as if he were a pitcher, and conveying his face to her rosy lips, "we are in for it!"

Miss Lavvy came out to the open gate, waited on by that attentive cavalier and friend of the family, Mr. George Sampson. "Why, it's never Bella!" exclaimed Miss Lavvy, starting back at the sight. And then bawled, "Ma! Here's Bella!"

This produced, before they could get into the house, Mrs. Wilfer. Who, standing in the portal, received them with ghostly gloom, and all her other appliances of ceremony.

"My child is welcome, though unlooked for," said she, at the time presenting her cheek as if it were a cool slate for visitors to enrol themselves upon. "You too, R. W., are welcome, though late. Does the male domestic of Mrs. Boffin hear me there?" This deep-toned inquiry was cast forth into the night, for response from the menial in question.

"There is no one waiting, Ma, dear," said Bella.

"There is no one waiting?" repeated Mrs. Wilfer in majestic accents.

"No, Ma, dear."

A dignified shiver pervaded Mrs. Wilfer's shoulders and gloves, as who should say, "An Enigma!" and then she marched at the head of the procession to the family keeping-room, where she observed:

"Unless, R. W.," — who started on being solemnly turned upon, — "you have taken the precaution of making some addition to our frugal supper on your way home, it will prove but a distasteful one to Bella. Cold neck of mutton and a lettuce can ill compete with the luxuries of Mr. Boffin's board."

"Pray don't talk like that, Ma dear," said Bella; "Mr. Boffin's board is nothing to me."

But here Miss Lavinia, who had been intently eyeing Bella's bonnet, struck in with "Why, Bella!"

“Yes, Lavvy, I know.”

The Irrepressible lowered her eyes to Bella's dress, and stooped to look at it, exclaiming again: “Why, Bella!”

“Yes, Lavvy, I know what I have got on. I was going to tell Ma when you interrupted. I have left Mr. Boffin's house for good, Ma, and I have come home again.”

Mrs. Wilfer spoke no word, but, having glared at her offspring for a minute or two in an awful silence, retired into her corner of state backward, and sat down: like a frozen article on sale in a Russian market.

“In short, dear Ma,” said Bella, taking off the depreciated bonnet and shaking out her hair, “I have had a very serious difference with Mr. Boffin on the subject of his treatment of a member of his household, and it's a final difference, and there's an end of all.”

“And I am bound to tell you, my dear,” added R. W., submissively, “that Bella has acted in a truly brave spirit, and with a truly right feeling. And therefore I hope, my dear, you'll not allow yourself to be greatly disappointed.”

“George!” said Miss Lavvy, in a sepulchral, warning voice, founded on her mother's; “George Sampson, speak! What did I tell you about those Boffins?”

Mr. Sampson perceiving his frail bark to be laboring among shoals and breakers, thought it safest not to refer back to any particular thing that he had been told, lest he should refer back to the wrong thing. With admirable seamanship he got his bark into deep water by murmuring “Yes indeed.”

“Yes! I told George Sampson, as George Sampson tells you,” said Miss Lavvy, “that those hateful Boffins

would pick a quarrel with Bella, as soon as her novelty had worn off. Have they done it, or have they not? Was I right, or was I wrong? And what do you say to us, Bella, of your Boffins now?"

"Lavvy and Ma," said Bella, "I say of Mr. and Mrs. Boffin what I always have said; and I always shall say of them what I always have said. But nothing will induce me to quarrel with any one to-night. I hope you are not sorry to see me, Ma dear," kissing her; "and I hope you are not sorry to see me, Lavvy," kissing her too; "and as I notice the lettuce Ma mentioned on the table, I'll make the salad."

Bella playfully setting herself about the task, Mrs. Wilfer's impressive countenance followed her with glaring eyes, presenting a combination of the once popular sign of the Saracen's Head, with a piece of Dutch clock-work, and suggesting to an imaginative mind that from the composition of the salad, her daughter might prudently omit the vinegar. But no word issued from the majestic matron's lips. And this was more terrific to her husband (as perhaps she knew) than any flow of eloquence with which she could have edified the company.

"Now, Ma dear," said Bella in due course, "the salad's ready, and it's past supper-time."

Mrs. Wilfer rose, but remained speechless. "George!" said Miss Lavinia in her voice of warning, "Ma's chair!" Mr. Sampson flew to the excellent lady's back, and followed her up close, chair in hand, as she stalked to the banquet. Arrived at the table, she took her rigid seat, after favoring Mr. Sampson with a glare for himself, which caused the young gentleman to retire to his place in much confusion.

The cherub not presuming to address so tremendous an object, transacted her supper through the agency of a third person, as "Mutton to your Ma, Bella, my dear;" and "Lavvy, I dare say your Ma would take some lettuce, if you were to put it on her plate." Mrs. Wilfer's manner of receiving those viands was marked by petrified absence of mind; in which state, likewise, she partook of them, occasionally laying down her knife and fork, as saying within her own spirit, "What is this I am doing?" and glaring at one or other of the party, as if in indignant search of information. A magnetic result of such glaring was, that the person glared at could not by any means successfully pretend to be ignorant of the fact: so that a bystander, without beholding Mrs. Wilfer at all, must have known at whom she was glaring, by seeing her refracted from the countenance of the beglared one.

Miss Lavinia was extremely affable to Mr. Sampson on this special occasion, and took the opportunity of informing her sister why.

"It was not worth troubling you about, Bella, when you were in a sphere so far removed from your family as to make it a matter in which you could be expected to take very little interest," said Lavinia with a toss of her chin; "but George Sampson is paying his addresses to me."

Bella was glad to hear it. Mr. Sampson became thoughtfully red, and felt called upon to encircle Miss Lavinia's waist with his arm; but, encountering a large pin in the young lady's belt, scarified a finger, uttered a sharp exclamation, and attracted the lightning of Mrs. Wilfer's glare.

"George is getting on very well," said Miss Lavinia,

— which might not have been supposed at the moment, — “and I dare say we shall be married, one of these days. I did n’t care to mention it when you were with your Bof” — here Miss Lavinia checked herself in a bounce, and added more placidly, “when you were with Mr. and Mrs. Boffin; but now I think it sisterly to name the circumstance.”

“Thank you, Lavvy dear. I congratulate you.”

“Thank you, Bella. The truth is, George and I did discuss whether I should tell you; but I said to George that you would n’t be much interested in so paltry an affair, and that it was far more likely you would rather detach yourself from us altogether, than have him added to the rest of us.”

“That was a mistake, dear Lavvy,” said Bella.

“It turns out to be,” replied Miss Lavinia; “but circumstances have changed, you know, my dear. George is in a new situation, and his prospects are very good indeed. I should n’t have had the courage to tell you so yesterday, when you would have thought his prospects poor, and not worth notice; but I feel quite bold to-night.”

“When did you begin to feel timid, Lavvy?” inquired Bella, with a smile.

“I did n’t say that I ever felt timid, Bella,” replied the Irrepressible. “But perhaps I might have said, if I had not been restrained by delicacy towards a sister’s feelings, that I have for some time felt independent; too independent, my dear, to subject myself to have my intended match (you’ll prick yourself again, George) looked down upon. It is not that I could have blamed you for looking down upon it, when you were looking up to a rich and great match, Bella; it is only that I was independent.”

Whether the Irrepressible felt slighted by Bella's declaration that she would not quarrel, or whether her spitefulness was evoked by Bella's return to the sphere of Mr. George Sampson's courtship, or whether it was a necessary fillip to her spirits that she should come into collision with somebody on the present occasion, — anyhow she made a dash at her stately parent now, with the greatest impetuosity.

"Ma, pray don't sit staring at me in that intensely aggravating manner! If you see a black on my nose, tell me so; if you don't, leave me alone."

"Do you address Me in those words?" said Mrs. Wilfer. "Do you presume?"

"Don't talk about presuming, Ma, for goodness's sake. A girl who is old enough to be engaged, is quite old enough to object to be stared at as if she was a Clock."

"Audacious one!" said Mrs. Wilfer. "Your grandmamma, if so addressed by one of her daughters, at any age, would have insisted on her retiring to a dark apartment."

"My grandmamma," returned Lavvy, folding her arms and leaning back in her chair, "would n't have sat staring people out of countenance, I think."

"She would!" said Mrs. Wilfer.

"Then it's a pity she did n't know better," said Lavvy. "And if my grandmamma was n't in her dotage when she took to insisting on people's retiring to dark apartments, she ought to have been. A pretty exhibition my grandmamma must have made of herself! I wonder whether she ever insisted on people's retiring into the ball of St. Paul's; and if she did, how she got them there!"

"Silence!" proclaimed Mrs. Wilfer. "I command silence!"

"I have not the slightest intention of being silent, Ma," returned Lavinia coolly, "but quite the contrary. I am not going to be eyed as if *I* had come from the Boffins, and sit silent under it. I am not going to have George Sampson eyed as if *he* had come from the Boffins, and sit silent under it. If Pa thinks proper to be eyed as if *he* had come from the Boffins also, well and good. I don't choose to. And I won't!"

Lavinia's engineering having made this crooked opening at Bella, Mrs. Wilfer strode into it.

"You rebellious spirit! You mutinous child! Tell me this, Lavinia. If, in violation of your mother's sentiments, you had condescended to allow yourself to be patronized by the Boffins, and if you had come from those halls of slavery" —

"That's mere nonsense, Ma," said Lavinia.

"How!" exclaimed Mrs. Wilfer, with sublime severity.

"Halls of slavery, Ma, is mere stuff and nonsense," returned the unmoved Irrepressible.

"I say, presumptuous child, if you had come from the neighborhood of Portland Place, bending under the yoke of patronage and attended by its domestics in glittering garb to visit me, do you think my deep-seated feelings could have been expressed in looks?"

"All I think about it is," returned Lavinia, "that I should wish them expressed to the right person."

"And if," pursued her mother, "if, making light of my warnings that the face of Mrs. Boffin alone was a face teeming with evil, you had clung to Mrs. Boffin instead of to me, and had after all come home rejected by Mrs. Boffin, trampled under foot by Mrs. Boffin, and cast out by Mrs. Boffin, do you think my feelings could have been expressed in looks?"

Lavinia was about replying to her honored parent that she might as well have dispensed with her looks altogether then, when Bella rose and said, "Good-night, dear Ma. I have had a tiring day, and I'll go to bed." This broke up the agreeable party. Mr. George Sampson shortly afterwards took his leave, accompanied by Miss Lavinia with a candle as far as the hall, and without a candle as far as the garden gate; Mrs. Wilfer, washing her hands of the Boffins, went to bed after the manner of Lady Macbeth; and R. W. was left alone among the dilapidations of the supper-table, in a melancholy attitude.

But, a light footstep roused him from his meditations, and it was Bella's. Her pretty hair was hanging all about her, and she had tripped down softly, brush in hand, and barefoot, to say good-night to him.

"My dear, you most unquestionably *are* a lovely woman," said the cherub, taking up a tress in his hand.

"Look here, sir," said Bella; "when your lovely woman marries, you shall have that piece if you like, and she'll make you a chain of it. Would you prize that remembrance of the dear creature?"

"Yes, my precious."

"Then you shall have it if you're good, sir. I am very, very sorry, dearest Pa, to have brought home all this trouble."

"My pet," returned her father, in the simplest good faith, "don't make yourself uneasy about that. It really is not worth mentioning, because things at home would have taken pretty much the same turn any way. If your mother and sister don't find one subject to get at times a little wearing on, they find another. We're never out of a wearing subject, my dear, I assure you.

I am afraid you find your old room with Lavvy, dreadfully inconvenient, Bella?"

"No, I don't, Pa; I don't mind. Why don't I mind, do you think, Pa?"

"Well, my child, you used to complain of it when it was n't such a contrast as it must be now. Upon my word, I can only answer, because you are so much improved."

"No, Pa. Because I am so thankful and so happy!"

Here she choked him until her long hair made him sneeze, and then she laughed until she made him laugh, and then she choked him again that they might not be overheard.

"Listen, sir," said Bella. "Your lovely woman was told her fortune to-night on her way home. It won't be a large fortune, because if the lovely woman's Intended gets a certain appointment that he hopes to get soon, she will marry on a hundred and fifty pounds a year. But that's at first, and even if it should never be more, the lovely woman will make it quite enough. But that's not all, sir. In the fortune there's a certain fair man — a little man, the fortune-teller said — who, it seems, will always find himself near the lovely woman, and will always have kept, expressly for him, such a peaceful corner in the lovely woman's little house as never was. Tell me the name of that man, sir."

"Is he a Knave in the pack of cards?" inquired the cherub, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Yes!" cried Bella, in high glee, choking him again. "He's the Knave of Wilfers! Dear Pa, the lovely woman means to look forward to this fortune that has been told for her, so delightfully, and to cause it to make her a much better lovely woman than she ever has been

yet. What the little fair man is expected to do, sir, is to look forward to it also, by saying to himself when he is in danger of being over-worried, 'I see land at last!'

"I see land at last!" repeated her father.

"There's a dear Knave of Wilfers!" exclaimed Bella; then putting out her small white bare foot, "That's the mark, sir. Come to the mark. Put your boot against it. We keep to it together, mind! Now, sir, you may kiss the lovely woman before she runs away, so thankful and so happy. O yes, fair little man, so thankful and so happy!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A SOCIAL CHORUS.

AMAZEMENT sits enthroned upon the countenances of Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Lammle's circle of acquaintance, when the disposal of their first-class furniture and effects (including a Billiard Table in capital letters), "by auction, under a bill of sale," is publicly announced on a waving hearth-rug in Sackville Street. But, nobody is half so much amazed as Hamilton Veneering, Esq., M. P. for Pocket Breaches, who instantly begins to find out that the Lammles are the only people ever entered on his soul's register, who are *not* the oldest and dearest friends he has in the world. Mrs. Veneering, W. M. P. for Pocket Breaches, like a faithful wife shares her husband's discovery and inexpressible astonishment. Perhaps the Veneerings twain may deem the last unutterable feeling particularly due to their reputation, by reason that once upon a time some of the longer heads in the City are whispered to have shaken themselves, when Veneering's extensive dealings and great wealth were mentioned. But, it is certain that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Veneering can find words to wonder in, and it becomes necessary that they give to the oldest and dearest friends they have in the world, a wondering dinner.

For, it is by this time noticeable that, whatever befalls, the Veneerings must give a dinner upon it. Lady Tip-pins lives in a chronic state of invitation to dine with the

Veneerings, and in a chronic state of inflammation arising from the dinners. Boots and Brewer go about in cabs, with no other intelligible business on earth than to beat up people to come and dine with the Veneerings. Veneering pervades the legislative lobbies, intent upon entrapping his fellow-legislators to dinner. Mrs. Veneering dined with five-and-twenty bran-new faces over night; calls upon them all to-day; sends them every one a dinner-card to-morrow, for the week after next; before that dinner is digested, calls upon their brothers and sisters, their sons and daughters, their nephews and nieces, their aunts and uncles and cousins, and invites them all to dinner. And still, as at first, howsoever the dining circle widens, it is to be observed that all the diners are consistent in appearing to go to the Veneerings, not to dine with Mr. and Mrs. Veneering (which would seem to be the last thing in their minds), but to dine with one another.

Perhaps, after all, — who knows? — Veneering may find this dining, though expensive, remunerative, in the sense that it makes champions. Mr. Podsnap, as a representative man, is not alone in caring very particularly for his own dignity, if not for that of his acquaintances, and therefore in angrily supporting the acquaintances who have taken out his Permit, lest, in their being lessened, he should be. The gold and silver camels, and the ice-pails, and the rest of the Veneering table decorations, make a brilliant show, and when I, Podsnap, casually remark elsewhere that I dined last Monday with a gorgeous caravan of camels, I find it personally offensive to have it hinted to me that they are broken-kneed camels, or camels laboring under suspicion of any sort. “I don’t display camels myself, I am above them;

I am a more solid man ; but these camels have basked in the light of my countenance, and how dare you, sir, insinuate to me that I have irradiated any but unimpeachable camels ? ”

The camels are polishing up in the Analytical's pantry for the dinner of wonderment on the occasion of the Lammles going to pieces, and Mr. Twemlow feels a little queer on the sofa at his lodgings over the stable-yard in Duke Street, Saint James's, in consequence of having taken two advertised pills at about mid-day, on the faith of the printed representation accompanying the box (price one and a penny halfpenny, government stamp included), that the same “ will be found highly salutary as a precautionary measure in connection with the pleasures of the table.” To whom, while sickly with the fancy of an insoluble pill sticking in his gullet, and also with the sensation of a deposit of warm gum languidly wandering within him a little lower down, a servant enters with the announcement that a lady wishes to speak with him.

“ A lady ! ” says Twemlow, pluming his ruffled feathers. “ Ask the favor of the lady's name.”

The lady's name is Lammle. The lady will not detain Mr. Twemlow longer than a very few minutes. The lady is sure that Mr. Twemlow will do her the kindness to see her, on being told that she particularly desires a short interview. The lady has no doubt whatever of Mr. Twemlow's compliance when he hears her name. Has begged the servant to be particular not to mistake her name. Would have sent in a card, but has none.

“ Show the lady in.” Lady shown in, comes in.

Mr. Twemlow's little rooms are modestly furnished, in an old-fashioned manner (rather like the housekeeper's room at Snigsworthy Park), and would be bare of mere

ornament, were it not for a full-length engraving of the sublime Snigsworth over the chimney-piece, snorting at a Corinthian column, with an enormous roll of paper at his feet, and a heavy curtain going to tumble down on his head; those accessories being understood to represent the noble lord as somehow in the act of saving his country.

"Pray take a seat, Mrs. Lammle," Mrs. Lammle takes a seat and opens the conversation.

"I have no doubt, Mr. Twemlow, that you have heard of a reverse of fortune having befallen us. Of course you have heard of it, for no kind of news travels so fast — among one's friends especially."

Mindful of the wondering dinner, Twemlow, with a little twinge, admits the imputation.

"Probably it will not," says Mrs. Lammle, with a certain hardened manner upon her, that makes Twemlow shrink, "have surprised you so much as some others, after what passed between us at the house which is now turned out at windows. I have taken the liberty of calling upon you, Mr. Twemlow, to add a sort of postscript to what I said that day."

Mr. Twemlow's dry and hollow cheeks become more dry and hollow at the prospect of some new complication.

"Really," says the uneasy little gentleman, "really, Mrs. Lammle, I should take it as a favor if you could excuse me from any further confidence. It has ever been one of the objects of my life — which, unfortunately, has not had many objects — to be inoffensive, and to keep out of cabals and interferences."

Mrs. Lammle, by far the more observant of the two, scarcely finds it necessary to look at Twemlow while he speaks, so easily does she read him.

“My postscript — to retain the term I have used” — says Mrs. Lamble, fixing her eyes on his face, to enforce what she says herself — “coincides exactly with what you say, Mr. Twemlow. So far from troubling you with any new confidence, I merely wish to remind you what the old one was. So far from asking you for interference, I merely wish to claim your strict neutrality.”

Twemlow going on to reply, she rests her eyes again, knowing her ears to be quite enough for the contents of so weak a vessel.

“I can, I suppose,” says Twemlow, nervously, “offer no reasonable objection to hearing anything that you do me the honor to wish to say to me under those heads. But if I may, with all possible delicacy and politeness, entreat you not to range beyond them, I—I beg to do so.”

“Sir,” says Mrs. Lamble, raising her eyes to his face again, and quite daunting him with her hardened manner, “I imparted to you a certain piece of knowledge, to be imparted again, as you thought best, to a certain person.”

“Which I did,” says Twemlow.

“And for doing which, I thank you; though, indeed, I scarcely know why I turned traitress to my husband in the matter, for the girl is a poor little fool. I was a poor little fool once myself; I can find no better reason.” Seeing the effect she produces on him by her indifferent laugh and cold look, she keeps her eyes upon him as she proceeds. “Mr. Twemlow, if you should chance to see my husband, or to see me, or to see both of us, in the favor or confidence of any one else — whether of our common acquaintance or not, is of no consequence — you have no right to use against us the knowledge I intrusted you

with, for one special purpose which has been accomplished. This is what I came to say. It is not a stipulation ; to a gentleman it is simply a reminder."

Twemlow sits murmuring to himself with his hand to his forehead.

"It is so plain a case," Mrs. Lamble goes on, "as between me (from the first relying on your honor) and you, that I will not waste another word upon it." She looks steadily at Mr. Twemlow, until, with a shrug, he makes her a little one-sided bow, as though saying "Yes, I think you have a right to rely upon me," and then she moistens her lips, and shows a sense of relief.

"I trust I have kept the promise I made through your servant, that I would detain you a very few minutes. I need trouble you no longer, Mr. Twemlow."

"Stay!" says Twemlow, rising as she rises. "Pardon me a moment. I should never have sought you out, madam, to say what I am going to say, but since you have sought me out and are here, I will throw it off my mind. Was it quite consistent, in candor, with our taking that resolution against Mr. Fledgeby, that you should afterwards address Mr. Fledgeby as your dear and confidential friend, and entreat a favor of Mr. Fledgeby? Always supposing that you did ; I assert no knowledge of my own on the subject ; it has been represented to me that you did."

"Then he told you?" retorts Mrs. Lamble, who again has saved her eyes while listening, and uses them with strong effect while speaking.

"Yes."

"It is strange that he should have told you the truth," says Mrs. Lamble, seriously pondering. "Pray where did a circumstance so very extraordinary happen?"

Twemlow hesitates. He is shorter than the lady as well as weaker, and, as she stands above him with her hardened manner and her well-used eyes, he finds himself at such a disadvantage that he would like to be of the opposite sex.

"May I ask where it happened, Mr. Twemlow? In strict confidence?"

"I must confess," says the mild little gentleman, coming to his answer by degrees, "that I felt some compunctions when Mr. Fledgeby mentioned it. I must admit that I could not regard myself in an agreeable light. More particularly, as Mr. Fledgeby did, with great civility, which I could not feel that I deserved from him, render me the same service that you had entreated him to render you."

It is a part of the true nobility of the poor gentleman's soul to say this last sentence. "Otherwise," he has reflected, "I shall assume the superior position of having no difficulties of my own, while I know of hers. Which would be mean, very mean."

"Was Mr. Fledgeby's advocacy as effectual in your case as in ours?" Mrs Lammle demands.

"As ineffectual."

"Can you make up your mind to tell me where you saw Mr. Fledgeby, Mr. Twemlow?"

"I beg your pardon. I fully intended to have done so. The reservation was not intentional. I encountered Mr. Fledgeby, quite by accident, on the spot. — By the expression, on the spot, I mean at Mr. Riah's, in Saint Mary Axe."

"Have you the misfortune to be in Mr. Riah's hands then?"

"Unfortunately, madam," returns Twemlow, "the

one money-obligation to which I stand committed, the one debt of my life (but it is a just debt; pray observe that I don't dispute it), has fallen into Mr. Riah's hands."

"Mr. Twemlow," says Mrs. Lamble, fixing his eyes with hers, — which he would prevent her doing if he could, but he can't, — "it has fallen into Mr. Fledgeby's hands. Mr. Riah is his mask. It has fallen into Mr. Fledgeby's hands. Let me tell you that, for your guidance. The information may be of use to you, if only to prevent your credulity, in judging another man's truthfulness by your own, from being imposed upon."

"Impossible!" cries Twemlow, standing aghast. "How do you know it?"

"I scarcely know how I know it. The whole train of circumstances seemed to take fire at once, and show it to me."

"Oh! Then you have no proof?"

"It is very strange," says Mrs. Lamble, coldly and boldly, and with some disdain, "how like men are to one another in some things, though their characters are as different as can be! No two men can have less affinity between them, one would say, than Mr. Twemlow and my husband. Yet my husband replies to me 'You have no proof,' and Mr. Twemlow replies to me with the very same words!"

"But why, madam?" Twemlow ventures gently to argue. "Consider why the very same words? Because they state the fact. Because you *have* no proof."

"Men are very wise in their way," quoth Mrs. Lamble, glancing haughtily at the Snigsworth portrait, and shaking out her dress before departing, "but they have wisdom to learn. My husband, who is not over-con-

ding, ingenuous, or inexperienced, sees this plain thing no more than Mr. Twemlow does — because there is no proof! Yet I believe five women out of six, in my place, would see it as clearly as I do. However, I will never rest (if only in remembrance of Mr. Fledgeby's having kissed my hand) until my husband does see it. And you will do well for yourself to see it from this time forth, Mr. Twemlow, though I *can* give you no proof.”

As she moves towards the door, Mr. Twemlow, attending on her, expresses his soothing hope that the condition of Mr. Lammle's affairs is not irretrievable.

“I don't know,” Mrs. Lammle answers, stopping, and sketching out the pattern of the paper on the wall with the point of her parasol; “it depends. There may be an opening for him dawning now, or there may be none. We shall soon find out. If none, we are bankrupt here, and must go abroad, I suppose.”

Mr. Twemlow, in his good-natured desire to make the best of it, remarks that there are pleasant lives abroad.

“Yes,” returns Mrs. Lammle, still sketching on the wall; “but I doubt whether billiard-playing, card-playing, and so forth, for the means to live under suspicion at a dirty table-d'hôte, is one of them.”

It is much for Mr. Lammle, Twemlow politely intimates (though greatly shocked), to have one always beside him who is attached to him in all his fortunes, and whose restraining influence will prevent him from courses that would be discreditable and ruinous. As he says it, Mrs. Lammle leaves off sketching, and looks at him.

“Restraining influence, Mr. Twemlow? We must eat and drink, and dress, and have a roof over our heads. Always beside him and attached in all his fortunes? Not much to boast of in that; what can a woman at my

age do? My husband and I deceived one another when we married; we must bear the consequences of the deception — that is to say, bear one another, and bear the burden of scheming together for to-day's dinner and to-morrow's breakfast — till death divorces us."

With those words, she walks out into Duke Street, Saint James's. Mr. Twemlow returning to his sofa, lays down his aching head on its slippery little horsehair bolster, with a strong internal conviction that a painful interview is not the kind of thing to be taken after the dinner-pills which are so highly salutary in connection with the pleasures of the table.

But, six o'clock in the evening finds the worthy little gentleman getting better, and also getting himself into his obsolete little silk stockings and pumps, for the wondering dinner at the Veneerings. And seven o'clock in the evening finds him trotting out into Duke Street, to trot to the corner and save a sixpence in coach-hire.

Tippins the divine has dined herself into such a condition by this time, that a morbid mind might desire her, for a blessed change, to sup at last, and turn into bed. Such a mind has Mr. Eugene Wrayburn, whom Twemlow finds contemplating Tippins with the moodiest of visages, while that playful creature rallies him on being so long overdue at the woosack. Skittish is Tippins with Mortimer Lightwood too, and has raps to give him with her fan for having been best man at the nuptials of these deceiving what's-their-names who have gone to pieces. Though, indeed, the fan is generally lively, and taps away at the men in all directions, with something of a grisly sound suggestive of the clattering of Lady Tippins's bones.

A new race of intimate friends has sprung up at

Veneering's since he went into Parliament for the public good, to whom Mrs. Veneering is very attentive. These friends, like astronomical distances, are only to be spoken of in the very largest figures. Boots says that one of them is a Contractor who (it has been calculated) gives employment, directly and indirectly, to five hundred thousand men. Brewer says that another of them is a Chairman, in such request at so many Boards, so far apart, that he never travels less by railway than three thousand miles a week. Buffer says that another of them had n't a sixpence eighteen months ago, and, through the brilliancy of his genius in getting those shares issued at eighty-five, and buying them all up with no money and selling them at par for cash, has now three hundred and seventy-five thousand pounds — Buffer particularly insisting on the odd seventy-five, and declining to take a farthing less. With Buffer, Boots, and Brewer, Lady Tippins is eminently facetious on the subject of these Fathers of the Scrip-Church: surveying them through her eyeglass, and inquiring whether Boots and Brewer and Buffer think they will make her fortune if she makes love to them? with other pleasantries of that nature. Veneering, in his different way, is much occupied with the Fathers too, piously retiring with them into the conservatory, from which retreat the word "Committee" is occasionally heard, and where the Fathers instruct Veneering how he must leave the valley of the piano on his left, take the level of the mantel-piece, cross by an open cutting at the candelabra, seize the carrying-traffic at the console, and cut up the opposition root and branch at the window-curtains.

Mr. and Mrs. Podsnap are of the company, and the Fathers descry in Mrs. Podsnap a fine woman. She is

consigned to a Father, — Boots's Father, who employs five hundred thousand men, — and is brought to anchor on Veneering's left; thus affording opportunity to the sportive Tippins on his right (he, as usual, being mere vacant space) to entreat to be told something about those loves of Navvies, and whether they really do live on raw beefsteaks, and drink porter out of their barrows. But, in spite of such little skirmishes it is felt that this was to be a wondering dinner, and that the wondering must not be neglected. Accordingly, Brewer, as the man who has the greatest reputation to sustain, becomes the interpreter of the general instinct.

"I took," says Brewer in a favorable pause, "a cab this morning, and I rattled off to that Sale."

Boots (devoured by envy) says, "So did I."

Buffer says, "So did I;" but can find nobody to care whether he did or not.

"And what was it like?" inquires Veneering.

"I assure you," replies Brewer, looking about for anybody else to address his answer to, and giving the preference to Lightwood — "I assure you, the things were going for a song. Handsome things enough, but fetching nothing."

"So I heard this afternoon," says Lightwood.

Brewer begs to know now, would it be fair to ask a professional man how — on — earth — these — people — ever — did — come — to — such — a — total smash? (Brewer's divisions being for emphasis.)

Lightwood replies that he was consulted certainly, but could give no opinion which would pay off the Bill of Sale, and therefore violates no confidence in supposing that it came of their living beyond their means.

"But how," says Veneering, "CAN people do that!"

Hah! That is felt on all hands to be a shot in the bull's eye. How CAN people do that! The Analytical Chemist going round with champagne, looks very much as if *he* could give them a pretty good idea how people did that, if he had a mind.

"How," says Mrs. Veneering, laying down her fork to press her aquiline hands together at the tips of the fingers, and addressing the Father who travels the three thousand miles per week — "how a mother can look at her baby, and know that she lives beyond her husband's means, I cannot imagine."

Eugene suggests that Mrs. Lammle, not being a mother, had no baby to look at.

"True," says Mrs. Veneering, "but the principle is the same."

Boots is clear that the principle is the same. So is Buffer. It is the unfortunate destiny of Buffer to damage a cause by espousing it. The rest of the company have meekly yielded to the proposition that the principle is the same, until Buffer says it is; when instantly a general murmur arises that the principle is not the same.

"But I don't understand," says the Father of the three hundred and seventy-five thousand pounds, — "if these people spoken of, occupied the position of being in society — they were in society?"

Veneering is bound to confess that they dined here, and were even married from here.

"Then I don't understand," pursues the Father, "how even their living beyond their means could bring them to what has been termed a total smash. Because, there is always such a thing as an adjustment of affairs, in the case of people of any standing at all."

Eugene (who would seem to be in a gloomy state of suggestiveness) suggests, "Suppose you have no means and live beyond them?"

This is too insolvent a state of things for the Father to entertain. It is too insolvent a state of things for any one with any self-respect to entertain, and is universally scouted. But, it is so amazing how any people can have come to a total smash, that everybody feels bound to account for it specially. One of the Fathers says, "Gambling-table." Another of the Fathers says, "Speculated without knowing that speculation is a science." Boots says "Horses." Lady Tippins says to her fan, "Two establishments." Mr. Podsnap, saying nothing, is referred to for his opinion; which he delivers as follows; much flushed and extremely angry:

"Don't ask me. I desire to take no part in the discussion of these people's affairs. I abhor the subject. It is an odious subject, an offensive subject, a subject that makes me sick, and I" — And with his favorite right-arm flourish which sweeps away everything and settles it forever, Mr. Podsnap sweeps these inconveniently unexplainable wretches who have lived beyond their means and gone to total smash, off the face of the universe.

Eugene, leaning back in his chair, is observing Mr. Podsnap with an irreverent face, and may be about to offer a new suggestion, when the Analytical is beheld in collision with the Coachman; the Coachman manifesting a purpose of coming at the company with a silver salver, as though intent upon making a collection for his wife and family; the Analytical cutting him off at the sideboard. The superior stateliness, if not the superior generalship, of the Analytical prevails over a man who

is as nothing off the box ; and the Coachman, yielding up his salver, retires defeated.

Then, the Analytical, perusing a scrap of paper lying on the salver, with the air of a literary Censor, adjusts it, takes his time about going to the table with it, and presents it to Mr. Eugene Wrayburn. Whereupon the pleasant Tippins says aloud, "The Lord Chancellor has resigned !"

With distracting coolness and slowness — for he knows the curiosity of the Charmer to be always devouring — Eugene makes a pretence of getting out an eyeglass, polishing it, and reading the paper with difficulty, long after he has seen what is written on it. What is written on it in wet ink, is :

"Young Blight."

"Waiting ?" says Eugene over his shoulder, in confidence, with the Analytical.

"Waiting," returns the Analytical in responsive confidence.

Eugene looks "Excuse me," towards Mrs. Veneering, goes out, and finds Young Blight, Mortimer's clerk, at the hall-door.

"You told me to bring him, sir, to wherever you was, if he come while you was out and I was in," says that discreet young gentleman, standing on tiptoe to whisper ; "and I've brought him."

"Sharp boy. Where is he ?" asks Eugene.

"He's in a cab, sir, at the door. I thought it best not to show him, you see, if it could be helped ; for he's a-shaking all over, like" — Blight's simile is perhaps inspired by the surrounding dishes of sweets — "like Glue Monge."

"Sharp boy again," returns Eugene. "I'll go to him."

Goes out straightway, and, leisurely leaning his arms on the open window of a cab in waiting, looks in at Mr. Dolls : who has brought his own atmosphere with him, and would seem from its odor to have brought it, for convenience of carriage, in a rum-cask.

“ Now, Dolls, wake up ! ”

“ Mist Wrayburn ? D'rection ! Fifteen shillings ! ”

After carefully reading the dingy scrap of paper handed to him, and as carefully tucking it into his waistcoat pocket, Eugene tells out the money ; beginning incautiously by telling the first shilling into Mr. Dolls's hand, which instantly jerks it out of window ; and ending by telling the fifteen shillings on the seat.

“ Give him a ride back to Charing Cross, sharp boy, and there get rid of him. ”

“ Returning to the dining-room, and pausing for an instant behind the screen at the door, Eugene overhears, above the hum and clatter, the fair Tippins saying : “ I am dying to ask him what he was called out for ! ”

“ Are you ? ” mutters Eugene ; “ then perhaps if you can't ask him, you'll die. So I'll be a benefactor to society, and go. A stroll and a cigar, and I can think this over. Think this over. ” Thus, with a thoughtful face, he finds his hat and cloak, unseen of the Analytical, and goes his way.

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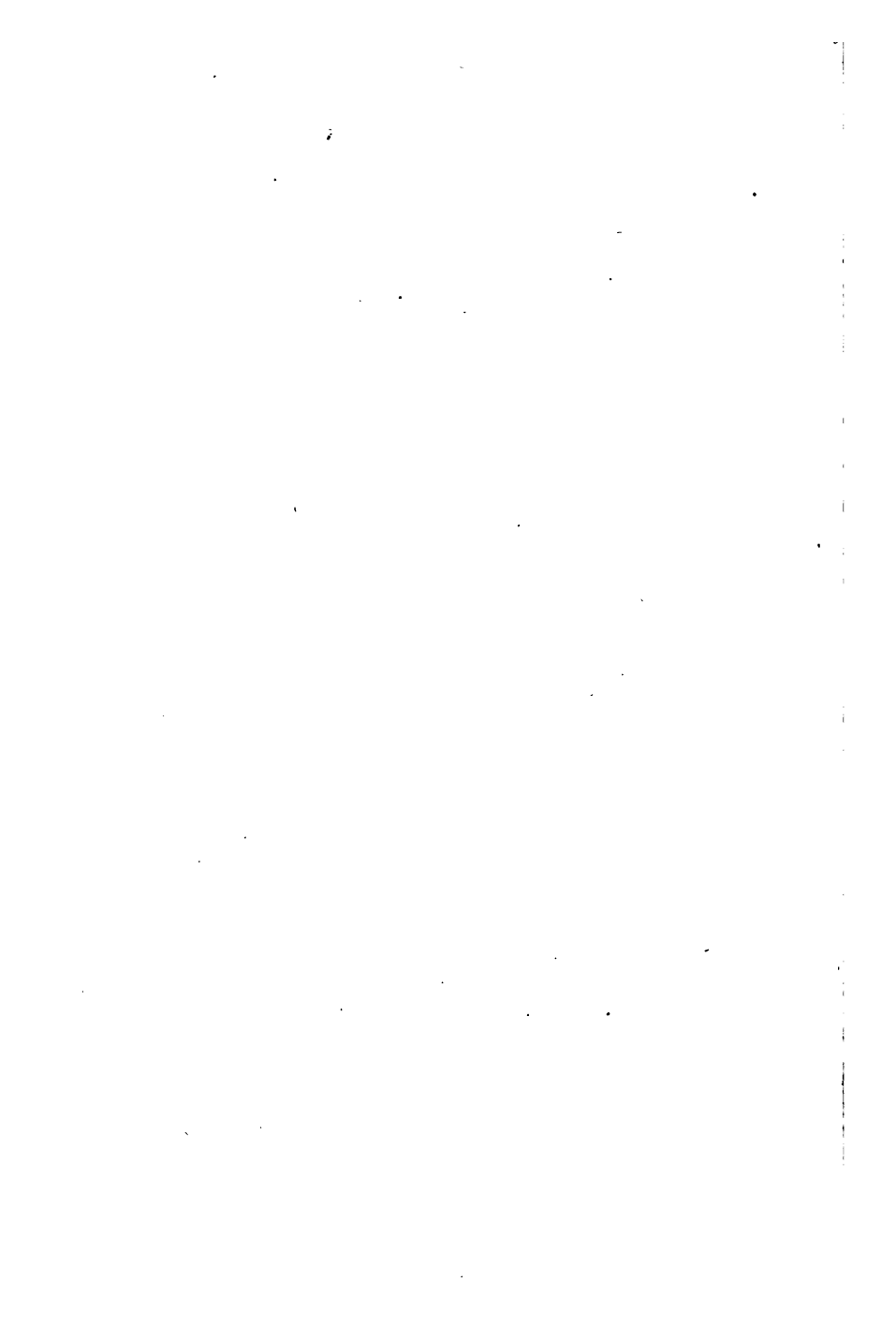
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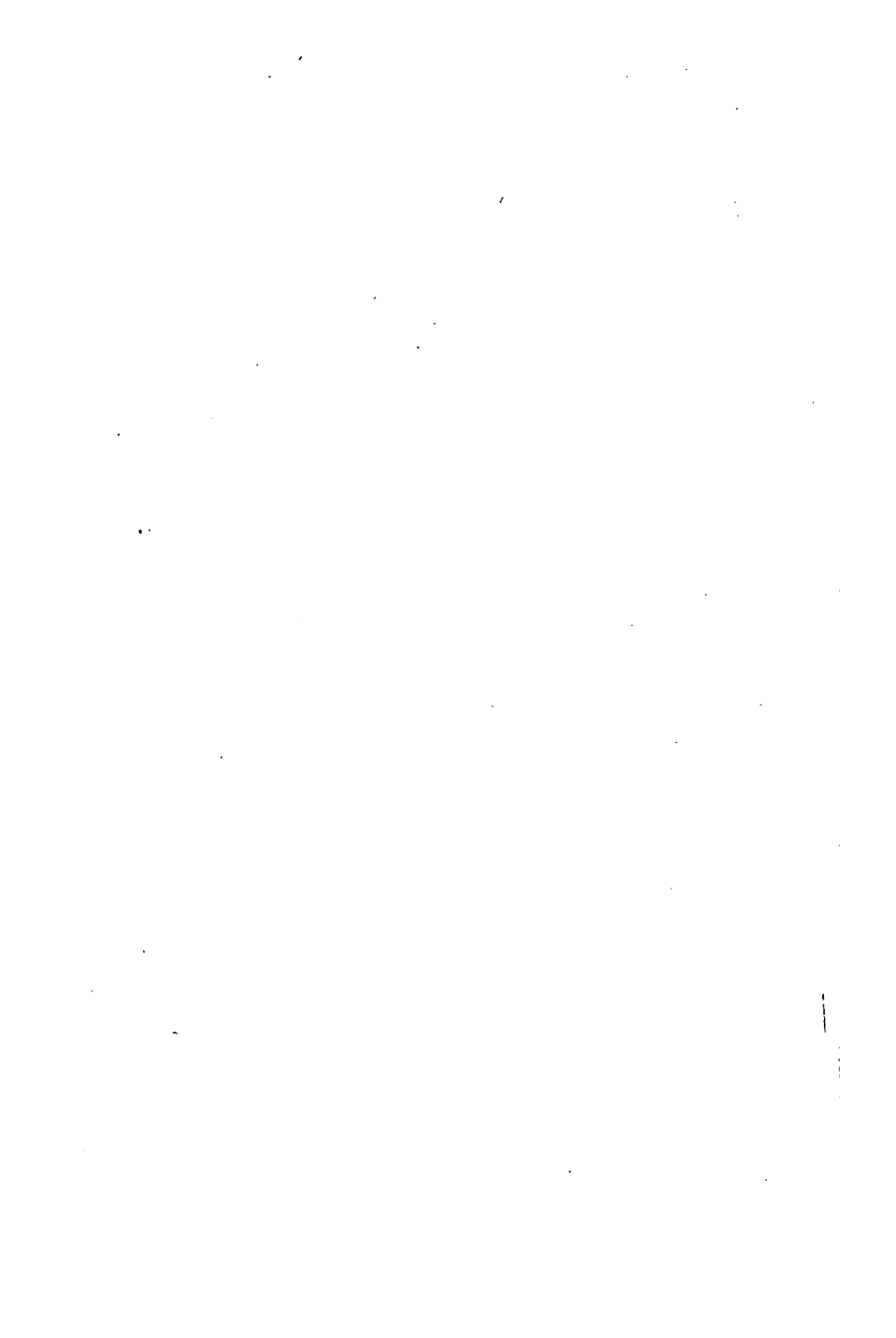
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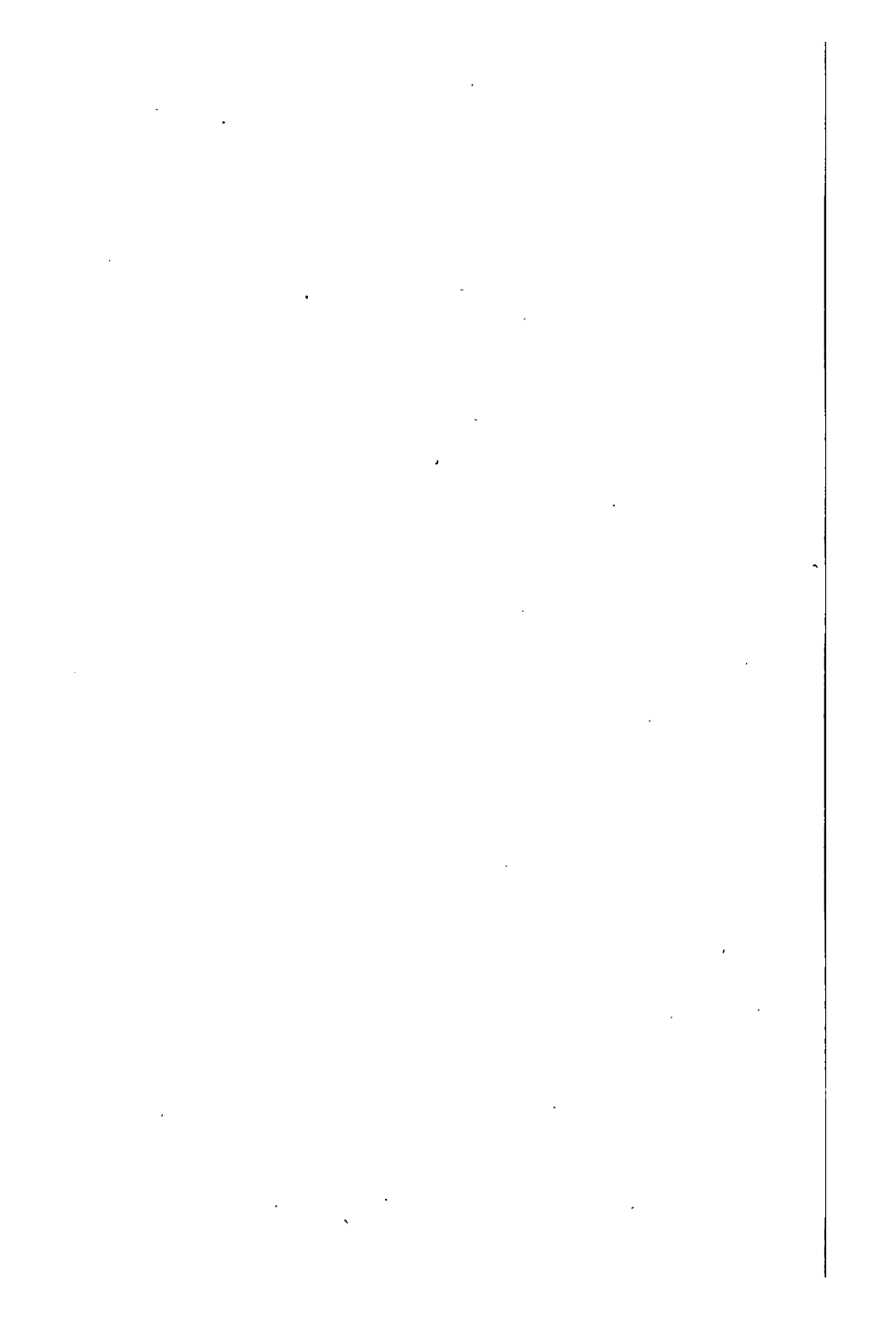
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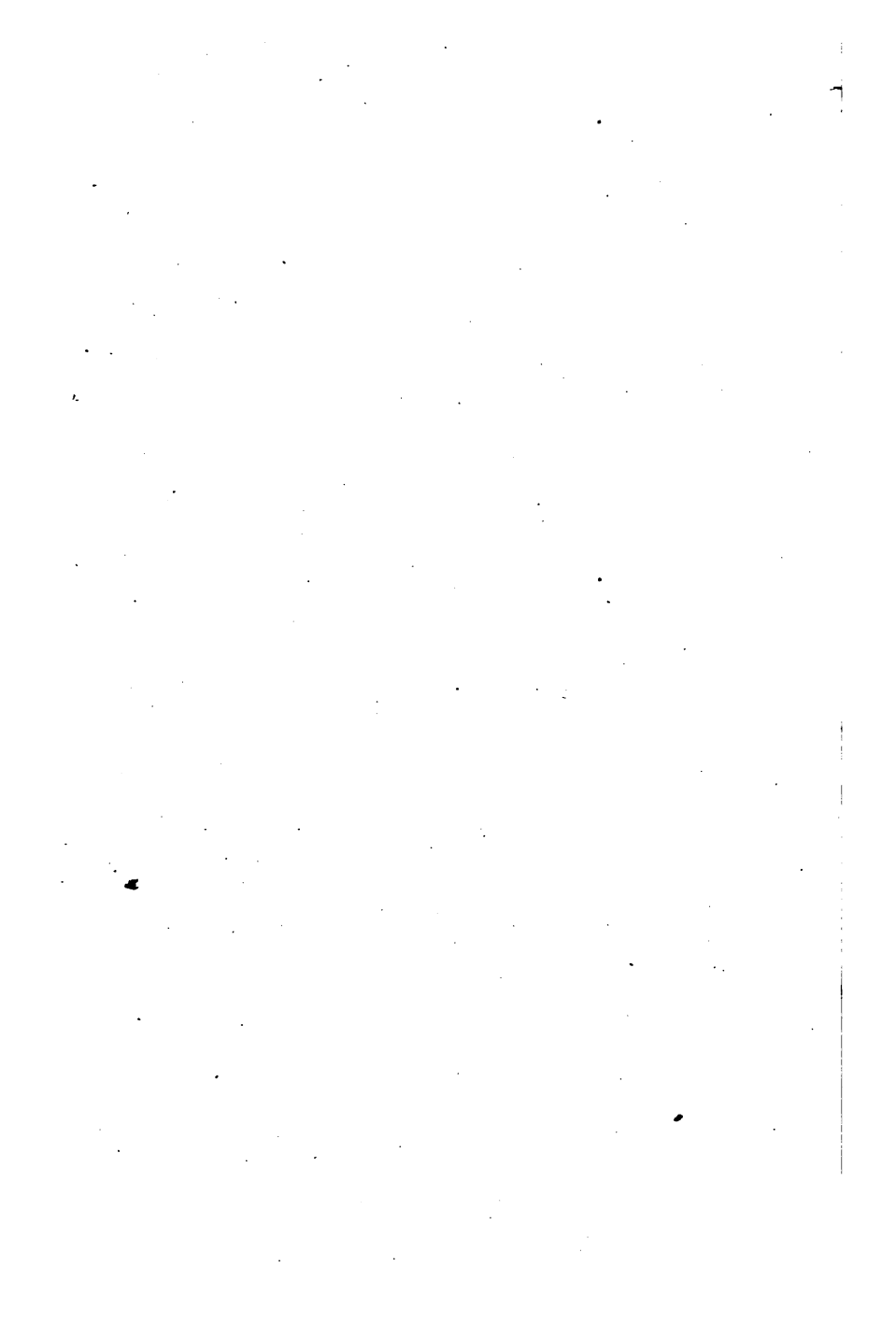
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