Our Mutual Friend Vol.IV

By

Charles Dickens

Our Mutual Friend

Chapter 1

SETTING TRAPS

Plashwater Weir Mill Lock looked tranquil and pretty on an evening in the summer time. A soft air stirred the leaves of the fresh green trees, and passed like a smooth shadow over the river, and like a smoother shadow over the yielding grass. The voice of the falling water, like the voices of the sea and the wind, were as an outer memory to a contemplative listener; but not particularly so to Mr Riderhood, who sat on one of the blunt wooden levers of

his lockgates, dozing. Wine must be got into a butt by some agency before it can be drawn out; and the wine of sentiment never having been got into Mr Riderhood by any agency, nothing in nature tapped him.

As the Rogue sat, ever and again nodding himself off his balance, his recovery was always attended by an angry stare and growl, as if, in the absence of any one else, he had aggressive inclinations towards himself. In one of these starts the cry of 'Lock, ho! Lock!' prevented his relapse into a doze. Shaking himself as he got up like the surly brute he was, he gave his growl a responsive twist at the end, and turned his face downstream to see who hailed.

It was an amateursculler, well up to his work though taking it easily, in so light a boat that the Rogue remarked: 'A little less on you, and you'd a'most ha' been a Wagerbut'; then went to work at his windlass handles and sluices, to let the sculler in. As the latter stood in his boat, holding on by the boathook to the woodwork at the lock side, waiting for the gates to open, Rogue Riderhood recognized his 'T'other governor,' Mr Eugene Wrayburn; who was, however, too indifferent or too much engaged to recognize him.

The creaking lockgates opened slowly, and the light boat passed in as soon as there was room enough, and the creaking lockgates closed upon it, and it floated low down in the dock between the two sets of gates, until the water should rise and the second gates should open and let it out. When Riderhood had run to his second windlass and turned it, and while he leaned against the lever of that gate to help it to swing open presently, he noticed, lying to rest under the green hedge by the towingpath astern of the Lock, a Bargeman.

The water rose and rose as the sluice poured in, dispersing the scum which had formed behind the lumbering gates, and sending the boat up, so that the sculler gradually rose like an apparition against the light from the bargeman's point of view. Riderhood observed that the bargeman rose too, leaning on his arm, and seemed to have his eyes fastened on the rising figure.

But, there was the toll to be taken, as the gates were now complaining and opening. The T'other governor tossed it ashore, twisted in a piece of paper, and as he did so, knew his man.

'Ay, ay? It's you, is it, honest friend?' said Eugene, seating himself preparatory to resuming his sculls. 'You got the place, then?'

'I got the place, and no thanks to you for it, nor yet none to Lawyer Lightwood,' gruffly answered Riderhood.

'We saved our recommendation, honest fellow,' said Eugene, 'for the next candidatethe one who will offer himself when you are transported or hanged.

Don't be long about it; will you be so good?'

So imperturbable was the air with which he gravely bent to his work that Riderhood remained staring at him, without having found a retort, until he had rowed past a line of wooden objects by the weir, which showed like huge teetotums standing at rest in the water, and was almost hidden by the drooping boughs on the left bank, as he rowed away, keeping out of the opposing current. It being then too late to retort with any effectif that could ever have been donethe honest man confined himself to cursing and growling in a grim undertone. Having then got his gates shut, he crossed back by his plank lockbridge to the towingpath side of the river.

If, in so doing, he took another glance at the bargeman, he did it by stealth. He cast himself on the grass by the Lock side, in an indolent way, with his back in that direction, and, having gathered a few blades, fell to chewing them. The dip of Eugene Wrayburn's sculls had become hardly audible in his ears when the bargeman passed him, putting the utmost width that he could between them, and keeping under the hedge. Then, Riderhood sat up and took a long look at his figure, and then cried: 'HiIi! Lock, ho! Lock! Plashwater Weir Mill Lock!'

The bargeman stopped, and looked back.

'Plashwater Weir Mill Lock, T'otherest governorororor!' cried Mr Riderhood, with his hands to his mouth.

The bargeman turned back. Approaching nearer and nearer, the bargeman became Bradley Headstone, in rough waterside secondhand clothing.

'Wish I may die,' said Riderhood, smiting his right leg, and laughing, as he sat on the grass, 'if you ain't ha' been a imitating me, T'otherest governor! Never thought myself so goodlooking afore!'

Truly, Bradley Headstone had taken careful note of the honest man's dress in the course of that nightwalk they had had together. He must have committed it to memory, and slowly got it by heart. It was exactly reproduced in the dress he now wore. And whereas, in his own schoolmaster clothes, he usually looked as if they were the clothes of some other man, he now looked, in the clothes of some other man or men, as if they were his own.

'THIS your Lock?' said Bradley, whose surprise had a genuine air; 'they told me, where I last inquired, it was the third I should come to. This is only the second.'

'It's my belief, governor,' returned Riderhood, with a wink and shake of his

head, 'that you've dropped one in your counting. It ain't Locks as YOU'VE been giving your mind to. No, no!'

As he expressively jerked his pointing finger in the direction the boat had taken, a flush of impatience mounted into Bradley's face, and he looked anxiously up the river.

'It ain't Locks as YOU'VE been a reckoning up,' said Riderhood, when the schoolmaster's eyes came back again. 'No, no!'

'What other calculations do you suppose I have been occupied with? Mathematics?'

'I never heerd it called that. It's a long word for it. Hows'ever, p'raps you call it so,' said Riderhood, stubbornly chewing his grass.

'It. What?'

'I'll say them, instead of it, if you like,' was the coolly growled reply. 'It's safer talk too.'

'What do you mean that I should understand by them?'

'Spites, affronts, offences giv' and took, deadly aggrawations, such like,' answered Riderhood.

Do what Bradley Headstone would, he could not keep that former flush of impatience out of his face, or so master his eyes as to prevent their again looking anxiously up the river.

'Ha ha! Don't be afeerd, T'otherest,' said Riderhood. 'The T'other's got to make way agin the stream, and he takes it easy. You can soon come up with him. But wot's the good of saying that to you! YOU know how fur you could have outwalked him betwixt anywheres about where he lost the tidesay Richmondand this, if you had a mind to it.'

'You think I have been following him?' said Bradley.

'I KNOW you have,' said Riderhood.

'Well! I have, I have,' Bradley admitted. 'But,' with another anxious look up the river, 'he may land.'

'Easy you! He won't be lost if he does land,' said Riderhood. 'He must leave his boat behind him. He can't make a bundle or a parcel on it, and carry it ashore with him under his arm.'

'He was speaking to you just now,' said Bradley, kneeling on one knee on the grass beside the Lockkeeper. 'What did he say?'

'Cheek,' said Riderhood.

'What?'

'Cheek,' repeated Riderhood, with an angry oath; 'cheek is what he said. He can't say nothing but cheek. I'd ha' liked to plump down aboard of him, neck and crop, with a heavy jump, and sunk him.'

Bradley turned away his haggard face for a few moments, and then said, tearing up a tuft of grass:

'Damn him!'

'Hooroar!' cried Riderhood. 'Does you credit! Hooroar! I cry chorus to the T'otherest.'

'What turn,' said Bradley, with an effort at selfrepression that forced him to wipe his face, 'did his insolence take today?'

'It took the turn,' answered Riderhood, with sullen ferocity, 'of hoping as I was getting ready to be hanged.'

'Let him look to that,' cried Bradley. 'Let him look to that! It will be bad for him when men he has injured, and at whom he has jeered, are thinking of getting hanged. Let HIM get ready for HIS fate, when that comes about. There was more meaning in what he said than he knew of, or he wouldn't have had brains enough to say it. Let him look to it; let him look to it! When men he has wronged, and on whom he has bestowed his insolence, are getting ready to be hanged, there is a deathbell ringing. And not for them.'

Riderhood, looking fixedly at him, gradually arose from his recumbent posture while the schoolmaster said these words with the utmost concentration of rage and hatred. So, when the words were all spoken, he too kneeled on one knee on the grass, and the two men looked at one another.

'Oh!' said Riderhood, very deliberately spitting out the grass he had been chewing. 'Then, I make out, T'otherest, as he is agoing to her?'

'He left London,' answered Bradley, 'yesterday. I have hardly a doubt, this time, that at last he is going to her.'

'You ain't sure, then?'

'I am as sure here,' said Bradley, with a clutch at the breast of his coarse shirt,

'as if it was written there;' with a blow or a stab at the sky.

'Ah! But judging from the looks on you,' retorted Riderhood, completely ridding himself of his grass, and drawing his sleeve across his mouth, 'you've made ekally sure afore, and have got disapinted. It has told upon you.'

'Listen,' said Bradley, in a low voice, bending forward to lay his hand upon the Lockkeeper's shoulder. 'These are my holidays.'

'Are they, by George!' muttered Riderhood, with his eyes on the passionwasted face. 'Your working days must be stiff 'uns, if these is your holidays.'

'And I have never left him,' pursued Bradley, waving the interruption aside with an impatient hand, 'since they began. And I never will leave him now, till I have seen him with her.'

'And when you have seen him with her?' said Riderhood.

'I'll come back to you.'

Riderhood stiffened the knee on which he had been resting, got up, and looked gloomily at his new friend. After a few moments they walked side by side in the direction the boat had taken, as if by tacit consent; Bradley pressing forward, and Riderhood holding back; Bradley getting out his neat prim purse into his hand (a present made him by penny subscription among his pupils); and Riderhood, unfolding his arms to smear his coatcuff across his mouth with a thoughtful air.

'I have a pound for you,' said Bradley.

'You've two,' said Riderhood.

Bradley held a sovereign between his fingers. Slouching at his side with his eyes upon the towingpath, Riderhood held his left hand open, with a certain slight drawing action towards himself. Bradley dipped in his purse for another sovereign, and two chinked in Riderhood's hand, the drawing action of which, promptly strengthening, drew them home to his pocket.

'Now, I must follow him,' said Bradley Headstone. 'He takes this riverroadthe fool!to confuse observation, or divert attention, if not solely to baffle me. But he must have the power of making himself invisible before he can shake Me off.'

Riderhood stopped. 'If you don't get disapinted agin, T'otherest, maybe you'll put up at the Lockhouse when you come back?'

'I will.'

Riderhood nodded, and the figure of the bargeman went its way along the soft turf by the side of the towingpath, keeping near the hedge and moving quickly. They had turned a point from which a long stretch of river was visible. A stranger to the scene might have been certain that here and there along the line of hedge a figure stood, watching the bargeman, and waiting for him to come up. So he himself had often believed at first, until his eyes became used to the posts, bearing the dagger that slew Wat Tyler, in the City of London shield.

Within Mr Riderhood's knowledge all daggers were as one. Even to Bradley Headstone, who could have told to the letter without book all about Wat Tyler, Lord Mayor Walworth, and the King, that it is dutiful for youth to know, there was but one subject living in the world for every sharp destructive instrument that summer evening. So, Riderhood looking after him as he went, and he with his furtive hand laid upon the dagger as he passed it, and his eyes upon the boat, were much upon a par.

The boat went on, under the arching trees, and over their tranquil shadows in the water. The bargeman skulking on the opposite bank of the stream, went on after it. Sparkles of light showed Riderhood when and where the rower dipped his blades, until, even as he stood idly watching, the sun went down and the landscape was dyed red. And then the red had the appearance of fading out of it and mounting up to Heaven, as we say that blood, guiltily shed, does.

Turning back towards his Lock (he had not gone out of view of it), the Rogue pondered as deeply as it was within the contracted power of such a fellow to do. 'Why did he copy my clothes? He could have looked like what he wanted to look like, without that.' This was the subjectmatter in his thoughts; in which, too, there came lumbering up, by times, like any half floating and half sinking rubbish in the river, the question, Was it done by accident? The setting of a trap for finding out whether it was accidentally done, soon superseded, as a practical piece of cunning, the abstruser inquiry why otherwise it was done. And he devised a means.

Rogue Riderhood went into his Lockhouse, and brought forth, into the now sober grey light, his chest of clothes. Sitting on the grass beside it, he turned out, one by one, the articles it contained, until he came to a conspicuous bright red neckerchief stained black here and there by wear. It arrested his attention, and he sat pausing over it, until he took off the rusty colourless wisp that he wore round his throat, and substituted the red neckerchief, leaving the long ends flowing. 'Now,' said the Rogue, 'if arter he sees me in this neckhankecher, I see him in a sim'lar neckhankecher, it won't be accident!' Elated by his device, he carried his chest in again and went to supper.

'Lock ho! Lock!' It was a light night, and a barge coming down summoned

him out of a long doze. In due course he had let the barge through and was alone again, looking to the closing of his gates, when Bradley Headstone appeared before him, standing on the brink of the Lock.

'Halloa!' said Riderhood. 'Back a' ready, T'otherest?'

'He has put up for the night, at an Angler's Inn,' was the fatigued and hoarse reply. 'He goes on, up the river, at six in the morning. I have come back for a couple of hours' rest.'

'You want 'em,' said Riderhood, making towards the schoolmaster by his plank bridge.

'I don't want them,' returned Bradley, irritably, 'because I would rather not have them, but would much prefer to follow him all night. However, if he won't lead, I can't follow. I have been waiting about, until I could discover, for a certainty, at what time he starts; if I couldn't have made sure of it, I should have stayed there.This would be a bad pit for a man to be flung into with his hands tied. These slippery smooth walls would give him no chance. And I suppose those gates would suck him down?'

'Suck him down, or swaller him up, he wouldn't get out,' said Riderhood. 'Not even, if his hands warn't tied, he wouldn't. Shut him in at both ends, and I'd give him a pint o' old ale ever to come up to me standing here.'

Bradley looked down with a ghastly relish. 'You run about the brink, and run across it, in this uncertain light, on a few inches width of rotten wood,' said he. 'I wonder you have no thought of being drowned.'

'I can't be!' said Riderhood.

'You can't be drowned?'

'No!' said Riderhood, shaking his head with an air of thorough conviction, 'it's well known. I've been brought out o' drowning, and I can't be drowned. I wouldn't have that there busted B'lowbridger aware on it, or her people might make it tell agin' the damages I mean to get. But it's well known to waterside characters like myself, that him as has been brought out o drowning, can never be drowned.'

Bradley smiled sourly at the ignorance he would have corrected in one of his pupils, and continued to look down into the water, as if the place had a gloomy fascination for him.

'You seem to like it,' said Riderhood.

He took no notice, but stood looking down, as if he had not heard the words. There was a very dark expression on his face; an expression that the Rogue found it hard to understand. It was fierce, and full of purpose; but the purpose might have been as much against himself as against another. If he had stepped back for a spring, taken a leap, and thrown himself in, it would have been no surprising sequel to the look. Perhaps his troubled soul, set upon some violence, did hover for the moment between that violence and another.

'Didn't you say,' asked Riderhood, after watching him for a while with a sidelong glance, 'as you had come back for a couple o' hours' rest?' But, even then he had to jog him with his elbow before he answered.

'Eh? Yes.'

'Hadn't you better come in and take your couple o' hours' rest?'

'Thank you. Yes.'

With the look of one just awakened, he followed Riderhood into the Lockhouse, where the latter produced from a cupboard some cold salt beef and half a loaf, some gin in a bottle, and some water in a jug. The last he brought in, cool and dripping, from the river.

'There, T'otherest,' said Riderhood, stooping over him to put it on the table. 'You'd better take a bite and a sup, afore you takes your snooze.' The draggling ends of the red neckerchief caught the schoolmaster's eyes. Riderhood saw him look at it.

'Oh!' thought that worthy. 'You're ataking notice, are you? Come! You shall have a good squint at it then.' With which reflection he sat down on the other side of the table, threw open his vest, and made a pretence of retying the neckerchief with much deliberation.

Bradley ate and drank. As he sat at his platter and mug, Riderhood saw him, again and yet again, steal a look at the neckerchief, as if he were correcting his slow observation and prompting his sluggish memory. 'When you're ready for your snooze,' said that honest creature, 'chuck yourself on my bed in the corner, T'otherest. It'll be broad day afore three. I'll call you early.'

'I shall require no calling,' answered Bradley. And soon afterwards, divesting himself only of his shoes and coat, laid himself down.

Riderhood, leaning back in his wooden armchair with his arms folded on his breast, looked at him lying with his right hand clenched in his sleep and his teeth set, until a film came over his own sight, and he slept too. He awoke to find that it was daylight, and that his visitor was already astir, and going out to

the riverside to cool his head:'Though I'm blest,' muttered Riderhood at the Lockhouse door, looking after him, 'if I think there's water enough in all the Thames to do THAT for you!' Within five minutes he had taken his departure, and was passing on into the calm distance as he had passed yesterday. Riderhood knew when a fish leaped, by his starting and glancing round.

'Lock ho! Lock!' at intervals all day, and 'Lock ho! Lock!' thrice in the ensuing night, but no return of Bradley. The second day was sultry and oppressive. In the afternoon, a thunderstorm came up, and had but newly broken into a furious sweep of rain when he rushed in at the door, like the storm itself.

'You've seen him with her!' exclaimed Riderhood, starting up.

'I have.'

'Where?'

'At his journey's end. His boat's hauled up for three days. I heard him give the order. Then, I saw him wait for her and meet her. I saw them'he stopped as though he were suffocating, and began again'I saw them walking side by side, last night.'

'What did you do?'

'Nothing.'

'What are you going to do?'

He dropped into a chair, and laughed. Immediately afterwards, a great spirt of blood burst from his nose.

'How does that happen?' asked Riderhood.

'I don't know. I can't keep it back. It has happened twicethree timesfour timesI don't know how many timessince last night. I taste it, smell it, see it, it chokes me, and then it breaks out like this.'

He went into the pelting rain again with his head bare, and, bending low over the river, and scooping up the water with his two hands, washed the blood away. All beyond his figure, as Riderhood looked from the door, was a vast dark curtain in solemn movement towards one quarter of the heavens. He raised his head and came back, wet from head to foot, but with the lower parts of his sleeves, where he had dipped into the river, streaming water.

'Your face is like a ghost's,' said Riderhood.

'Did you ever see a ghost?' was the sullen retort.

'I mean to say, you're quite wore out.'

'That may well be. I have had no rest since I left here. I don't remember that I have so much as sat down since I left here.'

'Lie down now, then,' said Riderhood.

'I will, if you'll give me something to quench my thirst first.'

The bottle and jug were again produced, and he mixed a weak draught, and another, and drank both in quick succession. 'You asked me something,' he said then.

'No, I didn't,' replied Riderhood.

'I tell you,' retorted Bradley, turning upon him in a wild and desperate manner, 'you asked me something, before I went out to wash my face in the river.

'Oh! Then?' said Riderhood, backing a little. 'I asked you wot you wos agoing to do.'

'How can a man in this state know?' he answered, protesting with both his tremulous hands, with an action so vigorously angry that he shook the water from his sleeves upon the floor, as if he had wrung them. 'How can I plan anything, if I haven't sleep?'

'Why, that's what I as good as said,' returned the other. 'Didn't I say lie down?'

'Well, perhaps you did.'

'Well! Anyways I says it again. Sleep where you slept last; the sounder and longer you can sleep, the better you'll know arterwards what you're up to.'

His pointing to the truckle bed in the corner, seemed gradually to bring that poor couch to Bradley's wandering remembrance. He slipped off his worn downtrodden shoes, and cast himself heavily, all wet as he was, upon the bed.

Riderhood sat down in his wooden armchair, and looked through the window at the lightning, and listened to the thunder. But, his thoughts were far from being absorbed by the thunder and the lightning, for again and again and again he looked very curiously at the exhausted man upon the bed. The man had turned up the collar of the rough coat he wore, to shelter himself from the storm, and had buttoned it about his neck. Unconscious of that, and of most things, he had left the coat so, both when he had laved his face in the river, and when he had cast himself upon the bed; though it would have been much easier to him if he had unloosened it.

The thunder rolled heavily, and the forked lightning seemed to make jagged rents in every part of the vast curtain without, as Riderhood sat by the window, glancing at the bed. Sometimes, he saw the man upon the bed, by a red light; sometimes, by a blue; sometimes, he scarcely saw him in the darkness of the storm; sometimes he saw nothing of him in the blinding glare of palpitating white fire. Anon, the rain would come again with a tremendous rush, and the river would seem to rise to meet it, and a blast of wind, bursting upon the door, would flutter the hair and dress of the man, as if invisible messengers were come around the bed to carry him away. From all these phases of the storm, Riderhood would turn, as if they were interruptionsrather striking interruptions possibly, but interruptions stillof his scrutiny of the sleeper.

'He sleeps sound,' he said within himself; 'yet he's that up to me and that noticing of me that my getting out of my chair may wake him, when a rattling peal won't; let alone my touching of him.'

He very cautiously rose to his feet. 'T'otherest,' he said, in a low, calm voice, 'are you a lying easy? There's a chill in the air, governor. Shall I put a coat over you?'

No answer.

'That's about what it is a'ready, you see,' muttered Riderhood in a lower and a different voice; 'a coat over you, a coat over you!'

The sleeper moving an arm, he sat down again in his chair, and feigned to watch the storm from the window. It was a grand spectacle, but not so grand as to keep his eyes, for half a minute together, from stealing a look at the man upon the bed.

It was at the concealed throat of the sleeper that Riderhood so often looked so curiously, until the sleep seemed to deepen into the stupor of the deadtired in mind and body. Then, Riderhood came from the window cautiously, and stood by the bed.

'Poor man!' he murmured in a low tone, with a crafty face, and a very watchful eye and ready foot, lest he should start up; 'this here coat of his must make him uneasy in his sleep. Shall I loosen it for him, and make him more comfortable? Ah! I think I ought to do it, poor man. I think I will.'

He touched the first button with a very cautious hand, and a step backward. But, the sleeper remaining in profound unconsciousness, he touched the other buttons with a more assured hand, and perhaps the more lightly on that account. Softly and slowly, he opened the coat and drew it back.

The draggling ends of a brightred neckerchief were then disclosed, and he had even been at the pains of dipping parts of it in some liquid, to give it the appearance of having become stained by wear. With a muchperplexed face, Riderhood looked from it to the sleeper, and from the sleeper to it, and finally crept back to his chair, and there, with his hand to his chin, sat long in a brown study, looking at both.

Chapter 2

THE GOLDEN DUSTMAN RISES A LITTLE

Mr and Mrs Lammle had come to breakfast with Mr and Mrs Boffin. They were not absolutely uninvited, but had pressed themselves with so much urgency on the golden couple, that evasion of the honour and pleasure of their company would have been difficult, if desired. They were in a charming state of mind, were Mr and Mrs Lammle, and almost as fond of Mr and Mrs Boffin as of one another.

'My dear Mrs Boffin,' said Mrs Lammle, 'it imparts new life to me, to see my Alfred in confidential communication with Mr Boffin. The two were formed to become intimate. So much simplicity combined with so much force of character, such natural sagacity united to such amiability and gentlenessthese are the distinguishing characteristics of both.'

This being said aloud, gave Mr Lammle an opportunity, as he came with Mr Boffin from the window to the breakfast table, of taking up his dear and honoured wife.

'My Sophronia,' said that gentleman, 'your too partial estimate of your husband's character'

'No! Not too partial, Alfred,' urged the lady, tenderly moved; 'never say that.'

'My child, your favourable opinion, then, of your husbandyou don't object to that phrase, darling?'

'How can I, Alfred?'

'Your favourable opinion then, my Precious, does less than justice to Mr Boffin, and more than justice to me.'

'To the first charge, Alfred, I plead guilty. But to the second, oh no, no!'

'Less than justice to Mr Boffin, Sophronia,' said Mr Lammle, soaring into a tone of moral grandeur, 'because it represents Mr Boffin as on my lower level; more than justice to me, Sophronia, because it represents me as on Mr Boffin's higher level. Mr Boffin bears and forbears far more than I could.'

'Far more than you could for yourself, Alfred?'

'My love, that is not the question.'

'Not the question, Lawyer?' said Mrs Lammle, archly.

'No, dear Sophronia. From my lower level, I regard Mr Boffin as too generous, as possessed of too much clemency, as being too good to persons who are unworthy of him and ungrateful to him. To those noble qualities I can lay no claim. On the contrary, they rouse my indignation when I see them in action.'

'Alfred!'

'They rouse my indignation, my dear, against the unworthy persons, and give me a combative desire to stand between Mr Boffin and all such persons. Why? Because, in my lower nature I am more worldly and less delicate. Not being so magnanimous as Mr Boffin, I feel his injuries more than he does himself, and feel more capable of opposing his injurers.'

It struck Mrs Lammle that it appeared rather difficult this morning to bring Mr and Mrs Boffin into agreeable conversation. Here had been several lures thrown out, and neither of them had uttered a word. Here were she, Mrs Lammle, and her husband discoursing at once affectingly and effectively, but discoursing alone. Assuming that the dear old creatures were impressed by what they heard, still one would like to be sure of it, the more so, as at least one of the dear old creatures was somewhat pointedly referred to. If the dear old creatures were too bashful or too dull to assume their required places in the discussion, why then it would seem desirable that the dear old creatures should be taken by their heads and shoulders and brought into it.

'But is not my husband saying in effect,' asked Mrs Lammle, therefore, with an innocent air, of Mr and Mrs Boffin, 'that he becomes unmindful of his own temporary misfortunes in his admiration of another whom he is burning to serve? And is not that making an admission that his nature is a generous one? I am wretched in argument, but surely this is so, dear Mr and Mrs Boffin?'

Still, neither Mr and Mrs Boffin said a word. He sat with his eyes on his plate, eating his muffins and ham, and she sat shyly looking at the teapot. Mrs Lammle's innocent appeal was merely thrown into the air, to mingle with the steam of the urn. Glancing towards Mr and Mrs Boffin, she very slightly

raised her eyebrows, as though inquiring of her husband: 'Do I notice anything wrong here?'

Mr Lammle, who had found his chest effective on a variety of occasions, manoeuvred his capacious shirt front into the largest demonstration possible, and then smiling retorted on his wife, thus:

'Sophronia, darling, Mr and Mrs Boffin will remind you of the old adage, that selfpraise is no recommendation.'

'Selfpraise, Alfred? Do you mean because we are one and the same?'

'No, my dear child. I mean that you cannot fail to remember, if you reflect for a single moment, that what you are pleased to compliment me upon feeling in the case of Mr Boffin, you have yourself confided to me as your own feeling in the case of Mrs Boffin.'

('I shall be beaten by this Lawyer,' Mrs Lammle gaily whispered to Mrs Boffin. 'I am afraid I must admit it, if he presses me, for it's damagingly true.')

Several white dints began to come and go about Mr Lammle's nose, as he observed that Mrs Boffin merely looked up from the teapot for a moment with an embarrassed smile, which was no smile, and then looked down again.

'Do you admit the charge, Sophronia?' inquired Alfred, in a rallying tone.

'Really, I think,' said Mrs Lammle, still gaily, 'I must throw myself on the protection of the Court. Am I bound to answer that question, my Lord?' To Mr Boffin.

'You needn't, if you don't like, ma'am,' was his answer. 'It's not of the least consequence.'

Both husband and wife glanced at him, very doubtfully. His manner was grave, but not coarse, and derived some dignity from a certain repressed dislike of the tone of the conversation.

Again Mrs Lammle raised her eyebrows for instruction from her husband. He replied in a slight nod, 'Try 'em again.'

'To protect myself against the suspicion of covert selflaudation, my dear Mrs Boffin,' said the airy Mrs Lammle therefore, 'I must tell you how it was.'

'No. Pray don't,' Mr Boffin interposed.

Mrs Lammle turned to him laughingly. 'The Court objects?'

'Ma'am,' said Mr Boffin, 'the Court (if I am the Court) does object. The Court objects for two reasons. First, because the Court don't think it fair. Secondly, because the dear old lady, Mrs Court (if I am Mr) gets distressed by it.'

A very remarkable wavering between two bearingsbetween her propitiatory bearing there, and her defiant bearing at Mr Twemlow'swas observable on the part of Mrs Lammle as she said:

'What does the Court not consider fair?'

'Letting you go on,' replied Mr Boffin, nodding his head soothingly, as who should say, We won't be harder on you than we can help; we'll make the best of it. 'It's not aboveboard and it's not fair. When the old lady is uncomfortable, there's sure to be good reason for it. I see she is uncomfortable, and I plainly see this is the good reason wherefore. HAVE you breakfasted, ma'am.'

Mrs Lammle, settling into her defiant manner, pushed her plate away, looked at her husband, and laughed; but by no means gaily.

'Have YOU breakfasted, sir?' inquired Mr Boffin.

'Thank you,' replied Alfred, showing all his teeth. 'If Mrs Boffin will oblige me, I'll take another cup of tea.'

He spilled a little of it over the chest which ought to have been so effective, and which had done so little; but on the whole drank it with something of an air, though the coming and going dints got almost as large, the while, as if they had been made by pressure of the teaspoon. 'A thousand thanks,' he then observed. 'I have breakfasted.'

'Now, which,' said Mr Boffin softly, taking out a pocketbook, 'which of you two is Cashier?'

'Sophronia, my dear,' remarked her husband, as he leaned back in his chair, waving his right hand towards her, while he hung his left hand by the thumb in the armhole of his waistcoat: 'it shall be your department.'

'I would rather,' said Mr Boffin, 'that it was your husband's, ma'am, becausebut never mind, because, I would rather have to do with him. However, what I have to say, I will say with as little offence as possible; if I can say it without any, I shall be heartily glad. You two have done me a service, a very great service, in doing what you did (my old lady knows what it was), and I have put into this envelope a bank note for a hundred pound. I consider the service well worth a hundred pound, and I am well pleased to pay the money. Would you do me the favour to take it, and likewise to accept my thanks?'

With a haughty action, and without looking towards him, Mrs Lammle held out her left hand, and into it Mr Boffin put the little packet. When she had conveyed it to her bosom, Mr Lammle had the appearance of feeling relieved, and breathing more freely, as not having been quite certain that the hundred pounds were his, until the note had been safely transferred out of Mr Boffin's keeping into his own Sophronia's.

'It is not impossible,' said Mr Boffin, addressing Alfred, 'that you have had some general idea, sir, of replacing Rokesmith, in course of time?'

'It is not,' assented Alfred, with a glittering smile and a great deal of nose, 'not impossible.'

'And perhaps, ma'am,' pursued Mr Boffin, addressing Sophronia, 'you have been so kind as to take up my old lady in your own mind, and to do her the honour of turning the question over whether you mightn't one of these days have her in charge, like? Whether you mightn't be a sort of Miss Bella Wilfer to her, and something more?'

'I should hope,' returned Mrs Lammle, with a scornful look and in a loud voice, 'that if I were anything to your wife, sir, I could hardly fail to be something more than Miss Bella Wilfer, as you call her.'

'What do YOU call her, ma'am?' asked Mr Boffin.

Mrs Lammle disdained to reply, and sat defiantly beating one foot on the ground.

'Again I think I may say, that's not impossible. Is it, sir?' asked Mr Boffin, turning to Alfred.

'It is not,' said Alfred, smiling assent as before, 'not impossible.'

'Now,' said Mr Boffin, gently, 'it won't do. I don't wish to say a single word that might be afterwards remembered as unpleasant; but it won't do.'

'Sophronia, my love,' her husband repeated in a bantering manner, 'you hear? It won't do.'

'No,' said Mr Boffin, with his voice still dropped, 'it really won't. You positively must excuse us. If you'll go your way, we'll go ours, and so I hope this affair ends to the satisfaction of all parties.'

Mrs Lammle gave him the look of a decidedly dissatisfied party demanding exemption from the category; but said nothing.

'The best thing we can make of the affair,' said Mr Boffin, 'is a matter of

business, and as a matter of business it's brought to a conclusion. You have done me a great service, a very great service, and I have paid for it. Is there any objection to the price?'

Mr and Mrs Lammle looked at one another across the table, but neither could say that there was. Mr Lammle shrugged his shoulders, and Mrs Lammle sat rigid.

'Very good,' said Mr Boffin. 'We hope (my old lady and me) that you'll give us credit for taking the plainest and honestest shortcut that could be taken under the circumstances. We have talked it over with a deal of care (my old lady and me), and we have felt that at all to lead you on, or even at all to let you go on of your own selves, wouldn't be the right thing. So, I have openly given you to understand that' Mr Boffin sought for a new turn of speech, but could find none so expressive as his former one, repeated in a confidential tone, 'that it won't do. If I could have put the case more pleasantly I would; but I hope I haven't put it very unpleasantly; at all events I haven't meant to. So,' said Mr Boffin, by way of peroration, 'wishing you well in the way you go, we now conclude with the observation that perhaps you'll go it.'

Mr Lammle rose with an impudent laugh on his side of the table, and Mrs Lammle rose with a disdainful frown on hers. At this moment a hasty foot was heard on the staircase, and Georgiana Podsnap broke into the room, unannounced and in tears.

'Oh, my dear Sophronia,' cried Georgiana, wringing her hands as she ran up to embrace her, 'to think that you and Alfred should be ruined! Oh, my poor dear Sophronia, to think that you should have had a Sale at your house after all your kindness to me! Oh, Mr and Mrs Boffin, pray forgive me for this intrusion, but you don't know how fond I was of Sophronia when Pa wouldn't let me go there any more, or what I have felt for Sophronia since I heard from Ma of her having been brought low in the world. You don't, you can't, you never can, think, how I have lain awake at night and cried for my good Sophronia, my first and only friend!'

Mrs Lammle's manner changed under the poor silly girl's embraces, and she turned extremely pale: directing one appealing look, first to Mrs Boffin, and then to Mr Boffin. Both understood her instantly, with a more delicate subtlety than much better educated people, whose perception came less directly from the heart, could have brought to bear upon the case.

'I haven't a minute,' said poor little Georgiana, 'to stay. I am out shopping early with Ma, and I said I had a headache and got Ma to leave me outside in the phaeton, in Piccadilly, and ran round to Sackville Street, and heard that

Sophronia was here, and then Ma came to see, oh such a dreadful old stony woman from the country in a turban in Portland Place, and I said I wouldn't go up with Ma but would drive round and leave cards for the Boffins, which is taking a liberty with the name; but oh my goodness I am distracted, and the phaeton's at the door, and what would Pa say if he knew it!'

'Don't ye be timid, my dear,' said Mrs Boffin. 'You came in to see us.'

'Oh, no, I didn't,' cried Georgiana. 'It's very impolite, I know, but I came to see my poor Sophronia, my only friend. Oh! how I felt the separation, my dear Sophronia, before I knew you were brought low in the world, and how much more I feel it now!'

There were actually tears in the bold woman's eyes, as the softheaded and softhearted girl twined her arms about her neck.

'But I've come on business,' said Georgiana, sobbing and drying her face, and then searching in a little reticule, 'and if I don't despatch it I shall have come for nothing, and oh good gracious! what would Pa say if he knew of Sackville Street, and what would Ma say if she was kept waiting on the doorsteps of that dreadful turban, and there never were such pawing horses as ours unsettling my mind every moment more and more when I want more mind than I have got, by pawing up Mr Boffin's street where they have no business to be. Oh! where is, where is it? Oh! I can't find it!' All this time sobbing, and searching in the little reticule.

'What do you miss, my dear?' asked Mr Boffin, stepping forward.

'Oh! it's little enough,' replied Georgiana, 'because Ma always treats me as if I was in the nursery (I am sure I wish I was!), but I hardly ever spend it and it has mounted up to fifteen pounds, Sophronia, and I hope three fivepound notes are better than nothing, though so little, so little! And now I have found thatoh, my goodness! there's the other gone next! Oh no, it isn't, here it is!'

With that, always sobbing and searching in the reticule, Georgiana produced a necklace.

'Ma says chits and jewels have no business together,' pursued Georgiana, 'and that's the reason why I have no trinkets except this, but I suppose my aunt Hawkinson was of a different opinion, because she left me this, though I used to think she might just as well have buried it, for it's always kept in jewellers' cotton. However, here it is, I am thankful to say, and of use at last, and you'll sell it, dear Sophronia, and buy things with it.'

'Give it to me,' said Mr Boffin, gently taking it. 'I'll see that it's properly

disposed of.'

'Oh! are you such a friend of Sophronia's, Mr Boffin?' cried Georgiana. 'Oh, how good of you! Oh, my gracious! there was something else, and it's gone out of my head! Oh no, it isn't, I remember what it was. My grandmamma's property, that'll come to me when I am of age, Mr Boffin, will be all my own, and neither Pa nor Ma nor anybody else will have any control over it, and what I wish to do it so make some of it over somehow to Sophronia and Alfred, by signing something somewhere that'll prevail on somebody to advance them something. I want them to have something handsome to bring them up in the world again. Oh, my goodness me! Being such a friend of my dear Sophronia's, you won't refuse me, will you?'

'No, no,' said Mr Boffin, 'it shall be seen to.'

'Oh, thank you, thank you!' cried Georgiana. 'If my maid had a little note and half a crown, I could run round to the pastrycook's to sign something, or I could sign something in the Square if somebody would come and cough for me to let 'em in with the key, and would bring a pen and ink with 'em and a bit of blottingpaper. Oh, my gracious! I must tear myself away, or Pa and Ma will both find out! Dear, dear Sophronia, good, goodbye!'

The credulous little creature again embraced Mrs Lammle most affectionately, and then held out her hand to Mr Lammle.

'Goodbye, dear Mr LammleI mean Alfred. You won't think after today that I have deserted you and Sophronia because you have been brought low in the world, will you? Oh me! oh me! I have been crying my eyes out of my head, and Ma will be sure to ask me what's the matter. Oh, take me down, somebody, please, please, please!'

Mr Boffin took her down, and saw her driven away, with her poor little red eyes and weak chin peering over the great apron of the custardcoloured phaeton, as if she had been ordered to expiate some childish misdemeanour by going to bed in the daylight, and were peeping over the counterpane in a miserable flutter of repentance and low spirits. Returning to the breakfastroom, he found Mrs Lammle still standing on her side of the table, and Mr Lammle on his.

'I'll take care,' said Mr Boffin, showing the money and the necklace, 'that these are soon given back.'

Mrs Lammle had taken up her parasol from a side table, and stood sketching with it on the pattern of the damask cloth, as she had sketched on the pattern of Mr Twemlow's papered wall.

'You will not undeceive her I hope, Mr Boffin?' she said, turning her head towards him, but not her eyes.

'No,' said Mr Boffin.

'I mean, as to the worth and value of her friend,' Mrs Lammle explained, in a measured voice, and with an emphasis on her last word.

'No,' he returned. 'I may try to give a hint at her home that she is in want of kind and careful protection, but I shall say no more than that to her parents, and I shall say nothing to the young lady herself.'

'Mr and Mrs Boffin,' said Mrs Lammle, still sketching, and seeming to bestow great pains upon it, 'there are not many people, I think, who, under the circumstances, would have been so considerate and sparing as you have been to me just now. Do you care to be thanked?'

'Thanks are always worth having,' said Mrs Boffin, in her ready good nature.

'Then thank you both.'

'Sophronia,' asked her husband, mockingly, 'are you sentimental?'

'Well, well, my good sir,' Mr Boffin interposed, 'it's a very good thing to think well of another person, and it's a very good thing to be thought well of BY another person. Mrs Lammle will be none the worse for it, if she is.'

'Much obliged. But I asked Mrs Lammle if she was.'

She stood sketching on the tablecloth, with her face clouded and set, and was silent.

'Because,' said Alfred, 'I am disposed to be sentimental myself, on your appropriation of the jewels and the money, Mr Boffin. As our little Georgiana said, three fivepound notes are better than nothing, and if you sell a necklace you can buy things with the produce.'

'IF you sell it,' was Mr Boffin's comment, as he put it in his pocket.

Alfred followed it with his looks, and also greedily pursued the notes until they vanished into Mr Boffin's waistcoat pocket. Then he directed a look, half exasperated and half jeering, at his wife. She still stood sketching; but, as she sketched, there was a struggle within her, which found expression in the depth of the few last lines the parasol point indented into the tablecloth, and then some tears fell from her eyes.

'Why, confound the woman,' exclaimed Lammle, 'she IS sentimental!

She walked to the window, flinching under his angry stare, looked out for a moment, and turned round quite coldly.

'You have had no former cause of complaint on the sentimental score, Alfred, and you will have none in future. It is not worth your noticing. We go abroad soon, with the money we have earned here?'

'You know we do; you know we must.'

'There is no fear of my taking any sentiment with me. I should soon be eased of it, if I did. But it will be all left behind. It IS all left behind. Are you ready, Alfred?'

'What the deuce have I been waiting for but you, Sophronia?'

'Let us go then. I am sorry I have delayed our dignified departure.'

She passed out and he followed her. Mr and Mrs Boffin had the curiosity softly to raise a window and look after them as they went down the long street. They walked arminarm, showily enough, but without appearing to interchange a syllable. It might have been fanciful to suppose that under their outer bearing there was something of the shamed air of two cheats who were linked together by concealed handcuffs; but, not so, to suppose that they were haggardly weary of one another, of themselves, and of all this world. In turning the street corner they might have turned out of this world, for anything Mr and Mrs Boffin ever saw of them to the contrary; for, they set eyes on the Lammles never more.

Chapter 3

THE GOLDEN DUSTMAN SINKS AGAIN

The evening of that day being one of the reading evenings at the Bower, Mr Boffin kissed Mrs Boffin after a five o'clock dinner, and trotted out, nursing his big stick in both arms, so that, as of old, it seemed to be whispering in his ear. He carried so very attentive an expression on his countenance that it appeared as if the confidential discourse of the big stick required to be followed closely. Mr Boffin's face was like the face of a thoughtful listener to an intricate communication, and, in trotting along, he occasionally glanced at that companion with the look of a man who was interposing the remark: 'You don't mean it!'

Mr Boffin and his stick went on alone together, until they arrived at certain crossways where they would be likely to fall in with any one coming, at about the same time, from Clerkenwell to the Bower. Here they stopped, and Mr Boffin consulted his watch.

'It wants five minutes, good, to Venus's appointment,' said he. 'I'm rather early.'

But Venus was a punctual man, and, even as Mr Boffin replaced his watch in its pocket, was to be descried coming towards him. He quickened his pace on seeing Mr Boffin already at the place of meeting, and was soon at his side.

'Thank'ee, Venus,' said Mr Boffin. 'Thank'ee, thank'ee, thank'ee!'

It would not have been very evident why he thanked the anatomist, but for his furnishing the explanation in what he went on to say.

'All right, Venus, all right. Now, that you've been to see me, and have consented to keep up the appearance before Wegg of remaining in it for a time, I have got a sort of a backer. All right, Venus. Thank'ee, Venus. Thank'ee, thank'ee, thank'ee!'

Mr Venus shook the proffered hand with a modest air, and they pursued the direction of the Bower.

'Do you think Wegg is likely to drop down upon me tonight, Venus?' inquired Mr Boffin, wistfully, as they went along.

'I think he is, sir.'

'Have you any particular reason for thinking so, Venus?'

'Well, sir,' returned that personage, 'the fact is, he has given me another lookin, to make sure of what he calls our stockintrade being correct, and he has mentioned his intention that he was not to be put off beginning with you the very next time you should come. And this,' hinted Mr Venus, delicately, 'being the very next time, you know, sir'

'Why, therefore you suppose he'll turn to at the grindstone, eh, Wegg?' said Mr Boffin.

'Just so, sir.'

Mr Boffin took his nose in his hand, as if it were already excoriated, and the sparks were beginning to fly out of that feature. 'He's a terrible fellow, Venus; he's an awful fellow. I don't know how ever I shall go through with it. You must stand by me, Venus like a good man and true. You'll do all you can to stand by me, Venus; won't you?'

Mr Venus replied with the assurance that he would; and Mr Boffin, looking anxious and dispirited, pursued the way in silence until they rang at the Bower gate. The stumping approach of Wegg was soon heard behind it, and as it turned upon its hinges he became visible with his hand on the lock.

'Mr Boffin, sir?' he remarked. 'You're quite a stranger!'

'Yes. I've been otherwise occupied, Wegg.'

'Have you indeed, sir?' returned the literary gentleman, with a threatening sneer. 'Hah! I've been looking for you, sir, rather what I may call specially.'

'You don't say so, Wegg?'

'Yes, I do say so, sir. And if you hadn't come round to me tonight, dash my wig if I wouldn't have come round to you tomorrow. Now! I tell you!'

'Nothing wrong, I hope, Wegg?'

'Oh no, Mr Boffin,' was the ironical answer. 'Nothing wrong! What should be wrong in Boffinses Bower! Step in, sir.'

'"If you'll come to the Bower I've shaded for you,

Your bed shan't be roses all spangled with doo:

Will you, will you, will you, will you, come to the Bower?

Oh, won't you, won't you, won't you, won't you, come to the

Bower?"'

An unholy glare of contradiction and offence shone in the eyes of Mr Wegg, as he turned the key on his patron, after ushering him into the yard with this vocal quotation. Mr Boffin's air was crestfallen and submissive. Whispered Wegg to Venus, as they crossed the yard behind him: 'Look at the worm and minion; he's down in the mouth already.' Whispered Venus to Wegg: 'That's because I've told him. I've prepared the way for you.'

Mr Boffin, entering the usual chamber, laid his stick upon the settle usually reserved for him, thrust his hands into his pockets, and, with his shoulders raised and his hat drooping back upon them, looking disconsolately at Wegg. 'My friend and partner, Mr Venus, gives me to understand,' remarked that man of might, addressing him, 'that you are aware of our power over you. Now, when you have took your hat off, we'll go into that pint.'

Mr Boffin shook it off with one shake, so that it dropped on the floor behind

him, and remained in his former attitude with his former rueful look upon him.

'First of all, I'm agoing to call you Boffin, for short,' said Wegg. 'If you don't like it, it's open to you to lump it.'

'I don't mind it, Wegg,' Mr Boffin replied.

'That's lucky for you, Boffin. Now, do you want to be read to?'

'I don't particularly care about it tonight, Wegg.'

'Because if you did want to,' pursued Mr Wegg, the brilliancy of whose point was dimmed by his having been unexpectedly answered: 'you wouldn't be. I've been your slave long enough. I'm not to be trampled underfoot by a dustman any more. With the single exception of the salary, I renounce the whole and total sitiwation.'

'Since you say it is to be so, Wegg,' returned Mr Boffin, with folded hands, 'I suppose it must be.'

'I suppose it must be,' Wegg retorted. 'Next (to clear the ground before coming to business), you've placed in this yard a skulking, a sneaking, and a sniffing, menial.'

'He hadn't a cold in his head when I sent him here,' said Mr Boffin.

'Boffin!' retorted Wegg, 'I warn you not to attempt a joke with me!'

Here Mr Venus interposed, and remarked that he conceived Mr Boffin to have taken the description literally; the rather, forasmuch as he, Mr Venus, had himself supposed the menial to have contracted an affliction or a habit of the nose, involving a serious drawback on the pleasures of social intercourse, until he had discovered that Mr Wegg's description of him was to be accepted as merely figurative.

'Anyhow, and every how,' said Wegg, 'he has been planted here, and he is here. Now, I won't have him here. So I call upon Boffin, before I say another word, to fetch him in and send him packing to the rightabout.'

The unsuspecting Sloppy was at that moment airing his many buttons within view of the window. Mr Boffin, after a short interval of impassive discomfiture, opened the window and beckoned him to come in.

'I call upon Boffin,' said Wegg, with one arm akimbo and his head on one side, like a bullying counsel pausing for an answer from a witness, 'to inform that menial that I am Master here!'

In humble obedience, when the buttongleaming Sloppy entered Mr Boffin said to him: 'Sloppy, my fine fellow, Mr Wegg is Master here. He doesn't want you, and you are to go from here.'

'For good!' Mr Wegg severely stipulated.

'For good,' said Mr Boffin.

Sloppy stared, with both his eyes and all his buttons, and his mouth wide open; but was without loss of time escorted forth by Silas Wegg, pushed out at the yard gate by the shoulders, and locked out.

'The atomspear,' said Wegg, stumping back into the room again, a little reddened by his late exertion, 'is now freer for the purposes of respiration. Mr Venus, sir, take a chair. Boffin, you may sit down.'

Mr Boffin, still with his hands ruefully stuck in his pockets, sat on the edge of the settle, shrunk into a small compass, and eyed the potent Silas with conciliatory looks.

'This gentleman,' said Silas Wegg, pointing out Venus, 'this gentleman, Boffin, is more milk and watery with you than I'll be. But he hasn't borne the Roman yoke as I have, nor yet he hasn't been required to pander to your depraved appetite for miserly characters.'

'I never meant, my dear Wegg' Mr Boffin was beginning, when Silas stopped him.

'Hold your tongue, Boffin! Answer when you're called upon to answer. You'll find you've got quite enough to do. Now, you're awareare youthat you're in possession of property to which you've no right at all? Are you aware of that?'

'Venus tells me so,' said Mr Boffin, glancing towards him for any support he could give.

'I tell you so,' returned Silas. 'Now, here's my hat, Boffin, and here's my walkingstick. Trifle with me, and instead of making a bargain with you, I'll put on my hat and take up my walkingstick, and go out, and make a bargain with the rightful owner. Now, what do you say?'

'I say,' returned Mr Boffin, leaning forward in alarmed appeal, with his hands on his knees, 'that I am sure I don't want to trifle, Wegg. I have said so to Venus.'

'You certainly have, sir,' said Venus.

'You're too milk and watery with our friend, you are indeed,' remonstrated

Silas, with a disapproving shake of his wooden head. 'Then at once you confess yourself desirous to come to terms, do you Boffin? Before you answer, keep this hat well in your mind and also this walkingstick.'

'I am willing, Wegg, to come to terms.'

'Willing won't do, Boffin. I won't take willing. Are you desirous to come to terms? Do you ask to be allowed as a favour to come to terms?' Mr Wegg again planted his arm, and put his head on one side.

'Yes.'

'Yes what?' said the inexorable Wegg: 'I won't take yes. I'll have it out of you in full, Boffin.'

'Dear me!' cried that unfortunate gentleman. 'I am so worrited! I ask to be allowed to come to terms, supposing your document is all correct.'

'Don't you be afraid of that,' said Silas, poking his head at him. 'You shall be satisfied by seeing it. Mr Venus will show it you, and I'll hold you the while. Then you want to know what the terms are. Is that about the sum and substance of it? Will you or won't you answer, Boffin?' For he had paused a moment.

'Dear me!' cried that unfortunate gentleman again, 'I am worrited to that degree that I'm almost off my head. You hurry me so. Be so good as name the terms, Wegg.'

'Now, mark, Boffin,' returned Silas: 'Mark 'em well, because they're the lowest terms and the only terms. You'll throw your Mound (the little Mound as comes to you any way) into the general estate, and then you'll divide the whole property into three parts, and you'll keep one and hand over the others.'

Mr Venus's mouth screwed itself up, as Mr Boffin's face lengthened itself, Mr Venus not having been prepared for such a rapacious demand.

'Now, wait a bit, Boffin,' Wegg proceeded, 'there's something more. You've been a squandering this propertylaying some of it out on yourself. THAT won't do. You've bought a house. You'll be charged for it.'

'I shall be ruined, Wegg!' Mr Boffin faintly protested.

'Now, wait a bit, Boffin; there's something more. You'll leave me in sole custody of these Mounds till they're all laid low. If any waluables should be found in 'em, I'll take care of such waluables. You'll produce your contract for the sale of the Mounds, that we may know to a penny what they're worth, and

you'll make out likewise an exact list of all the other property. When the Mounds is cleared away to the last shovelfull, the final diwision will come off.'

'Dreadful, dreadful, dreadful! I shall die in a workhouse!' cried the Golden Dustman, with his hands to his head.

'Now, wait a bit, Boffin; there's something more. You've been unlawfully ferreting about this yard. You've been seen in the act of ferreting about this yard. Two pair of eyes at the present moment brought to bear upon you, have seen you dig up a Dutch bottle.'

'It was mine, Wegg,' protested Mr Boffin. 'I put it there myself.'

'What was in it, Boffin?' inquired Silas.

'Not gold, not silver, not bank notes, not jewels, nothing that you could turn into money, Wegg; upon my soul!'

'Prepared, Mr Venus,' said Wegg, turning to his partner with a knowing and superior air, 'for an ewasive answer on the part of our dusty friend here, I have hit out a little idea which I think will meet your views. We charge that bottle against our dusty friend at a thousand pound.'

Mr Boffin drew a deep groan.

'Now, wait a bit, Boffin; there's something more. In your employment is an underhanded sneak, named Rokesmith. It won't answer to have HIM about, while this business of ours is about. He must be discharged.'

'Rokesmith is already discharged,' said Mr Boffin, speaking in a muffled voice, with his hands before his face, as he rocked himself on the settle.

'Already discharged, is he?' returned Wegg, surprised. 'Oh! Then, Boffin, I believe there's nothing more at present.'

The unlucky gentleman continuing to rock himself to and fro, and to utter an occasional moan, Mr Venus besought him to bear up against his reverses, and to take time to accustom himself to the thought of his new position. But, his taking time was exactly the thing of all others that Silas Wegg could not be induced to hear of. 'Yes or no, and no half measures!' was the motto which that obdurate person many times repeated; shaking his fist at Mr Boffin, and pegging his motto into the floor with his wooden leg, in a threatening and alarming manner.

At length, Mr Boffin entreated to be allowed a quarter of an hour's grace, and

a cooling walk of that duration in the yard. With some difficulty Mr Wegg granted this great favour, but only on condition that he accompanied Mr Boffin in his walk, as not knowing what he might fraudulently unearth if he were left to himself. A more absurd sight than Mr Boffin in his mental irritation trotting very nimbly, and Mr Wegg hopping after him with great exertion, eager to watch the slightest turn of an eyelash, lest it should indicate a spot rich with some secret, assuredly had never been seen in the shadow of the Mounds. Mr Wegg was much distressed when the quarter of an hour expired, and came hopping in, a very bad second.

'I can't help myself!' cried Mr Boffin, flouncing on the settle in a forlorn manner, with his hands deep in his pockets, as if his pockets had sunk. 'What's the good of my pretending to stand out, when I can't help myself? I must give in to the terms. But I should like to see the document.'

Wegg, who was all for clinching the nail he had so strongly driven home, announced that Boffin should see it without an hour's delay. Taking him into custody for that purpose, or overshadowing him as if he really were his Evil Genius in visible form, Mr Wegg clapped Mr Boffin's hat upon the back of his head, and walked him out by the arm, asserting a proprietorship over his soul and body that was at once more grim and more ridiculous than anything in Mr Venus's rare collection. That lighthaired gentleman followed close upon their heels, at least backing up Mr Boffin in a literal sense, if he had not had recent opportunities of doing so spiritually; while Mr Boffin, trotting on as hard as he could trot, involved Silas Wegg in frequent collisions with the public, much as a preoccupied blind man's dog may be seen to involve his master.

Thus they reached Mr Venus's establishment, somewhat heated by the nature of their progress thither. Mr Wegg, especially, was in a flaming glow, and stood in the little shop, panting and mopping his head with his pockethandkerchief, speechless for several minutes.

Meanwhile, Mr Venus, who had left the duelling frogs to fight it out in his absence by candlelight for the public delectation, put the shutters up. When all was snug, and the shopdoor fastened, he said to the perspiring Silas: 'I suppose, Mr Wegg, we may now produce the paper?'

'Hold on a minute, sir,' replied that discreet character; 'hold on a minute. Will you obligingly shove that boxwhich you mentioned on a former occasion as containing miscellaniestowards me in the midst of the shop here?'

Mr Venus did as he was asked.

'Very good,' said Silas, looking about: 'very good. Will you hand me that chair, sir, to put atop of it?'

Venus handed him the chair.

'Now, Boffin,' said Wegg, 'mount up here and take your seat, will you?'

Mr Boffin, as if he were about to have his portrait painted, or to be electrified, or to be made a Freemason, or to be placed at any other solitary disadvantage, ascended the rostrum prepared for him.

'Now, Mr Venus,' said Silas, taking off his coat, 'when I catches our friend here round the arms and body, and pins him tight to the back of the chair, you may show him what he wants to see. If you'll open it and hold it well up in one hand, sir, and a candle in the other, he can read it charming.'

Mr Boffin seemed rather inclined to object to these precautionary arrangements, but, being immediately embraced by Wegg, resigned himself. Venus then produced the document, and Mr Boffin slowly spelt it out aloud: so very slowly, that Wegg, who was holding him in the chair with the grip of a wrestler, became again exceedingly the worse for his exertions. 'Say when you've put it safe back, Mr Venus,' he uttered with difficulty, 'for the strain of this is terrimenjious.'

At length the document was restored to its place; and Wegg, whose uncomfortable attitude had been that of a very persevering man unsuccessfully attempting to stand upon his head, took a seat to recover himself. Mr Boffin, for his part, made no attempt to come down, but remained aloft disconsolate.

'Well, Boffin!' said Wegg, as soon as he was in a condition to speak. 'Now, you know.'

'Yes, Wegg,' said Mr Boffin, meekly. 'Now, I know.'

'You have no doubts about it, Boffin.'

'No, Wegg. No, Wegg. None,' was the slow and sad reply.

'Then, take care, you,' said Wegg, 'that you stick to your conditions. Mr Venus, if on this auspicious occasion, you should happen to have a drop of anything not quite so mild as tea in the 'ouse, I think I'd take the friendly liberty of asking you for a specimen of it.'

Mr Venus, reminded of the duties of hospitality, produced some rum. In answer to the inquiry, 'Will you mix it, Mr Wegg?' that gentleman pleasantly rejoined, 'I think not, sir. On so auspicious an occasion, I prefer to take it in the form of a GumTickler.'

Mr Boffin, declining rum, being still elevated on his pedestal, was in a

convenient position to be addressed. Wegg having eyed him with an impudent air at leisure, addressed him, therefore, while refreshing himself with his dram.

'Boffin!'

'Yes, Wegg,' he answered, coming out of a fit of abstraction, with a sigh.

'I haven't mentioned one thing, because it's a detail that comes of course. You must be followed up, you know. You must be kept under inspection.'

'I don't quite understand,' said Mr Boffin.

'Don't you?' sneered Wegg. 'Where's your wits, Boffin? Till the Mounds is down and this business completed, you're accountable for all the property, recollect. Consider yourself accountable to me. Mr Venus here being too milk and watery with you, I am the boy for you.'

'I've been athinking,' said Mr Boffin, in a tone of despondency, 'that I must keep the knowledge from my old lady.'

'The knowledge of the diwision, d'ye mean?' inquired Wegg, helping himself to a third GumTicklerfor he had already taken a second.

'Yes. If she was to die first of us two she might then think all her life, poor thing, that I had got the rest of the fortune still, and was saving it.'

'I suspect, Boffin,' returned Wegg, shaking his head sagaciously, and bestowing a wooden wink upon him, 'that you've found out some account of some old chap, supposed to be a Miser, who got himself the credit of having much more money than he had. However, I don't mind.'

'Don't you see, Wegg?' Mr Boffin feelingly represented to him: 'don't you see? My old lady has got so used to the property. It would be such a hard surprise.'

'I don't see it at all,' blustered Wegg. 'You'll have as much as I shall. And who are you?'

'But then, again,' Mr Boffin gently represented; 'my old lady has very upright principles.'

'Who's your old lady,' returned Wegg, 'to set herself up for having uprighter principles than mine?'

Mr Boffin seemed a little less patient at this point than at any other of the negotiations. But he commanded himself, and said tamely enough: 'I think it must be kept from my old lady, Wegg.'

'Well,' said Wegg, contemptuously, though, perhaps, perceiving some hint of danger otherwise, 'keep it from your old lady. I ain't going to tell her. I can have you under close inspection without that. I'm as good a man as you, and better. Ask me to dinner. Give me the run of your 'ouse. I was good enough for you and your old lady once, when I helped you out with your weal and hammers. Was there no Miss Elizabeth, Master George, Aunt Jane, and Uncle Parker, before YOU two?'

'Gently, Mr Wegg, gently,' Venus urged.

'Milk and watererily you mean, sir,' he returned, with some little thickness of speech, in consequence of the GumTicklers having tickled it. 'I've got him under inspection, and I'll inspect him.

"Along the line the signal ran

England expects as this present man

Will keep Boffin to his duty."

Boffin, I'll see you home.'

Mr Boffin descended with an air of resignation, and gave himself up, after taking friendly leave of Mr Venus. Once more, Inspector and Inspected went through the streets together, and so arrived at Mr Boffin's door.

But even there, when Mr Boffin had given his keeper goodnight, and had let himself in with his key, and had softly closed the door, even there and then, the allpowerful Silas must needs claim another assertion of his newlyasserted power.

'Boffin!' he called through the keyhole.

'Yes, Wegg,' was the reply through the same channel.

'Come out. Show yourself again. Let's have another look at you!' Mr Boffinah, how fallen from the high estate of his honest simplicity!opened the door and obeyed.

'Go in. You may get to bed now,' said Wegg, with a grin.

The door was hardly closed, when he again called through the keyhole: 'Boffin!'

'Yes, Wegg.'

This time Silas made no reply, but laboured with a will at turning an imaginary

grindstone outside the keyhole, while Mr Boffin stooped at it within; he then laughed silently, and stumped home.

Chapter 4

A RUNAWAY MATCH

Cherubic Pa arose with as little noise as possible from beside majestic Ma, one morning early, having a holiday before him. Pa and the lovely woman had a rather particular appointment to keep.

Yet Pa and the lovely woman were not going out together. Bella was up before four, but had no bonnet on. She was waiting at the foot of the stairswas sitting on the bottom stair, in factto receive Pa when he came down, but her only object seemed to be to get Pa well out of the house.

'Your breakfast is ready, sir,' whispered Bella, after greeting him with a hug, 'and all you have to do, is, to eat it up and drink it up, and escape. How do you feel, Pa?'

'To the best of my judgement, like a housebreaker new to the business, my dear, who can't make himself quite comfortable till he is off the premises.'

Bella tucked her arm in his with a merry noiseless laugh, and they went down to the kitchen on tiptoe; she stopping on every separate stair to put the tip of her forefinger on her rosy lips, and then lay it on his lips, according to her favourite petting way of kissing Pa.

'How do YOU feel, my love?' asked R. W., as she gave him his breakfast.

'I feel as if the Fortuneteller was coming true, dear Pa, and the fair little man was turning out as was predicted.'

'Ho! Only the fair little man?' said her father.

Bella put another of those fingerseals upon his lips, and then said, kneeling down by him as he sat at table: 'Now, look here, sir. If you keep well up to the mark this day, what do you think you deserve? What did I promise you should have, if you were good, upon a certain occasion?'

'Upon my word I don't remember, Precious. Yes, I do, though. Wasn't it one of these beautiful tresses?' with his caressing hand upon her hair.

'Wasn't it, too!' returned Bella, pretending to pout. 'Upon my word! Do you know, sir, that the Fortuneteller would give five thousand guineas (if it was quite convenient to him, which it isn't) for the lovely piece I have cut off for you? You can form no idea, sir, of the number of times he kissed quite a scrubby little piecein comparisonthat I cut off for HIM. And he wears it, too, round his neck, I can tell you! Near his heart!' said Bella, nodding. 'Ah! very near his heart! However, you have been a good, good boy, and you are the best of all the dearest boys that ever were, this morning, and here's the chain I have made of it, Pa, and you must let me put it round your neck with my own loving hands.'

As Pa bent his head, she cried over him a little, and then said (after having stopped to dry her eyes on his white waistcoat, the discovery of which incongruous circumstance made her laugh): 'Now, darling Pa, give me your hands that I may fold them together, and do you say after me:My little Bella.'

'My little Bella,' repeated Pa.

'I am very fond of you.'

'I am very fond of you, my darling,' said Pa.

'You mustn't say anything not dictated to you, sir. You daren't do it in your responses at Church, and you mustn't do it in your responses out of Church.'

'I withdraw the darling,' said Pa.

'That's a pious boy! Now again:You were always'

'You were always,' repeated Pa.

'A vexatious'

'No you weren't,' said Pa.

'A vexatious (do you hear, sir?), a vexatious, capricious, thankless, troublesome, Animal; but I hope you'll do better in the time to come, and I bless you and forgive you!' Here, she quite forgot that it was Pa's turn to make the responses, and clung to his neck. 'Dear Pa, if you knew how much I think this morning of what you told me once, about the first time of our seeing old Mr Harmon, when I stamped and screamed and beat you with my detestable little bonnet! I feel as if I had been stamping and screaming and beating you with my hateful little bonnet, ever since I was born, darling!'

'Nonsense, my love. And as to your bonnets, they have always been nice bonnets, for they have always become youor you have become them; perhaps

it was thatat every age.'

'Did I hurt you much, poor little Pa?' asked Bella, laughing (notwithstanding her repentance), with fantastic pleasure in the picture, 'when I beat you with my bonnet?'

'No, my child. Wouldn't have hurt a fly!'

'Ay, but I am afraid I shouldn't have beat you at all, unless I had meant to hurt you,' said Bella. 'Did I pinch your legs, Pa?'

'Not much, my dear; but I think it's almost time I'

'Oh, yes!' cried Bella. 'If I go on chattering, you'll be taken alive. Fly, Pa, fly!'

So, they went softly up the kitchen stairs on tiptoe, and Bella with her light hand softly removed the fastenings of the house door, and Pa, having received a parting hug, made off. When he had gone a little way, he looked back. Upon which, Bella set another of those finger seals upon the air, and thrust out her little foot expressive of the mark. Pa, in appropriate action, expressed fidelity to the mark, and made off as fast as he could go.

Bella walked thoughtfully in the garden for an hour and more, and then, returning to the bedroom where Lavvy the Irrepressible still slumbered, put on a little bonnet of quiet, but on the whole of sly appearance, which she had yesterday made. 'I am going for a walk, Lavvy,' she said, as she stooped down and kissed her. The Irrepressible, with a bounce in the bed, and a remark that it wasn't time to get up yet, relapsed into unconsciousness, if she had come out of it.

Behold Bella tripping along the streets, the dearest girl afoot under the summer sun! Behold Pa waiting for Bella behind a pump, at least three miles from the parental rooftree. Behold Bella and Pa aboard an early steamboat for Greenwich.

Were they expected at Greenwich? Probably. At least, Mr John Rokesmith was on the pier looking out, about a couple of hours before the coaly (but to him golddusty) little steamboat got her steam up in London. Probably. At least, Mr John Rokesmith seemed perfectly satisfied when he descried them on board. Probably. At least, Bella no sooner stepped ashore than she took Mr John Rokesmith's arm, without evincing surprise, and the two walked away together with an ethereal air of happiness which, as it were, wafted up from the earth and drew after them a gruff and glum old pensioner to see it out. Two wooden legs had this gruff and glum old pensioner, and, a minute before Bella stepped out of the boat, and drew that confiding little arm of hers through Rokesmith's,

he had had no object in life but tobacco, and not enough of that. Stranded was Gruff and Glum in a harbour of everlasting mud, when all in an instant Bella floated him, and away he went.

Say, cherubic parent taking the lead, in what direction do we steer first? With some such inquiry in his thoughts, Gruff and Glum, stricken by so sudden an interest that he perked his neck and looked over the intervening people, as if he were trying to stand on tiptoe with his two wooden legs, took an observation of R. W. There was no 'first' in the case, Gruff and Glum made out; the cherubic parent was bearing down and crowding on direct for Greenwich church, to see his relations.

For, Gruff and Glum, though most events acted on him simply as tobaccostoppers, pressing down and condensing the quids within him, might be imagined to trace a family resemblance between the cherubs in the church architecture, and the cherub in the white waistcoat. Some remembrance of old Valentines, wherein a cherub, less appropriately attired for a proverbially uncertain climate, had been seen conducting lovers to the altar, might have been fancied to inflame the ardour of his timber toes. Be it as it might, he gave his moorings the slip, and followed in chase.

The cherub went before, all beaming smiles; Bella and John Rokesmith followed; Gruff and Glum stuck to them like wax. For years, the wings of his mind had gone to look after the legs of his body; but Bella had brought them back for him per steamer, and they were spread again.

He was a slow sailer on a wind of happiness, but he took a cross cut for the rendezvous, and pegged away as if he were scoring furiously at cribbage. When the shadow of the churchporch swallowed them up, victorious Gruff and Glum likewise presented himself to be swallowed up. And by this time the cherubic parent was so fearful of surprise, that, but for the two wooden legs on which Gruff and Glum was reassuringly mounted, his conscience might have introduced, in the person of that pensioner, his own stately lady disguised, arrived at Greenwich in a car and griffins, like the spiteful Fairy at the christenings of the Princesses, to do something dreadful to the marriage service. And truly he had a momentary reason to be pale of face, and to whisper to Bella, 'You don't think that can be your Ma; do you, my dear?' on account of a mysterious rustling and a stealthy movement somewhere in the remote neighbourhood of the organ, though it was gone directly and was heard no more. Albeit it was heard of afterwards, as will afterwards be read in this veracious register of marriage.

Who taketh? I, John, and so do I, Bella. Who giveth? I, R. W. Forasmuch, Gruff and Glum, as John and Bella have consented together in holy wedlock,

you may (in short) consider it done, and withdraw your two wooden legs from this temple. To the foregoing purport, the Minister speaking, as directed by the Rubric, to the People, selectly represented in the present instance by G. and G. above mentioned.

And now, the churchporch having swallowed up Bella Wilfer for ever and ever, had it not in its power to relinquish that young woman, but slid into the happy sunlight, Mrs John Rokesmith instead. And long on the bright steps stood Gruff and Glum, looking after the pretty bride, with a narcotic consciousness of having dreamed a dream.

After which, Bella took out from her pocket a little letter, and read it aloud to Pa and John; this being a true copy of the same.

'DEAREST MA,

I hope you won't be angry, but I am most happily married to Mr John Rokesmith, who loves me better than I can ever deserve, except by loving him with all my heart. I thought it best not to mention it beforehand, in case it should cause any little difference at home. Please tell darling Pa. With love to Lavvy,

Ever dearest Ma, Your affectionate daughter, BELLA (P.S.Rokesmith).'

Then, John Rokesmith put the queen's countenance on the letterwhen had Her Gracious Majesty looked so benign as on that blessed morning!and then Bella popped it into the postoffice, and said merrily, 'Now, dearest Pa, you are safe, and will never be taken alive!'

Pa was, at first, in the stirred depths of his conscience, so far from sure of being safe yet, that he made out majestic matrons lurking in ambush among the harmless trees of Greenwich Park, and seemed to see a stately countenance tied up in a wellknown pockethandkerchief glooming down at him from a window of the Observatory, where the Familiars of the Astronomer Royal nightly outwatch the winking stars. But, the minutes passing on and no Mrs Wilfer in the flesh appearing, he became more confident, and so repaired with good heart and appetite to Mr and Mrs John Rokesmith's cottage on Blackheath, where breakfast was ready.

A modest little cottage but a bright and a fresh, and on the snowy tablecloth the prettiest of little breakfasts. In waiting, too, like an attendant summer breeze, a fluttering young damsel, all pink and ribbons, blushing as if she had been married instead of Bella, and yet asserting the triumph of her sex over both John and Pa, in an exulting and exalted flurry: as who should say, 'This is what you must all come to, gentlemen, when we choose to bring you to book.'

This same young damsel was Bella's servingmaid, and unto her did deliver a bunch of keys, commanding treasures in the way of drysaltery, groceries, jams and pickles, the investigation of which made pastime after breakfast, when Bella declared that 'Pa must taste everything, John dear, or it will never be lucky,' and when Pa had all sorts of things poked into his mouth, and didn't quite know what to do with them when they were put there.

Then they, all three, out for a charming ride, and for a charming stroll among heath in bloom, and there behold the identical Gruff and Glum with his wooden legs horizontally disposed before him, apparently sitting meditating on the vicissitudes of life! To whom said Bella, in her lighthearted surprise: 'Oh! How do you do again? What a dear old pensioner you are!' To which Gruff and Glum responded that he see her married this morning, my Beauty, and that if it warn't a liberty he wished her ji and the fairest of fair wind and weather; further, in a general way requesting to know what cheer? and scrambling up on his two wooden legs to salute, hat in hand, shipshape, with the gallantry of a manofwarsman and a heart of oak.

It was a pleasant sight, in the midst of the golden bloom, to see this salt old Gruff and Glum, waving his shovel hat at Bella, while his thin white hair flowed free, as if she had once more launched him into blue water again. 'You are a charming old pensioner,' said Bella, 'and I am so happy that I wish I could make you happy, too.' Answered Gruff and Glum, 'Give me leave to kiss your hand, my Lovely, and it's done!' So it was done to the general contentment; and if Gruff and Glum didn't in the course of the afternoon splice the main brace, it was not for want of the means of inflicting that outrage on the feelings of the Infant Bands of Hope.

But, the marriage dinner was the crowning success, for what had bride and bridegroom plotted to do, but to have and to hold that dinner in the very room of the very hotel where Pa and the lovely woman had once dined together! Bella sat between Pa and John, and divided her attentions pretty equally, but felt it necessary (in the waiter's absence before dinner) to remind Pa that she was HIS lovely woman no longer.

'I am well aware of it, my dear,' returned the cherub, 'and I resign you willingly.'

'Willingly, sir? You ought to be brokenhearted.'

'So I should be, my dear, if I thought that I was going to lose you.'

'But you know you are not; don't you, poor dear Pa? You know that you have only made a new relation who will be as fond of you and as thankful to youfor my sake and your own sake bothas I am; don't you, dear little Pa? Look here,

Pa!' Bella put her finger on her own lip, and then on Pa's, and then on her own lip again, and then on her husband's. 'Now, we are a partnership of three, dear Pa.'

The appearance of dinner here cut Bella short in one of her disappearances: the more effectually, because it was put on under the auspices of a solemn gentleman in black clothes and a white cravat, who looked much more like a clergyman than THE clergyman, and seemed to have mounted a great deal higher in the church: not to say, scaled the steeple. This dignitary, conferring in secrecy with John Rokesmith on the subject of punch and wines, bent his head as though stooping to the Papistical practice of receiving auricular confession. Likewise, on John's offering a suggestion which didn't meet his views, his face became overcast and reproachful, as enjoining penance.

What a dinner! Specimens of all the fishes that swim in the sea, surely had swum their way to it, and if samples of the fishes of divers colours that made a speech in the Arabian Nights (quite a ministerial explanation in respect of cloudiness), and then jumped out of the fryingpan, were not to be recognized, it was only because they had all become of one hue by being cooked in batter among the whitebait. And the dishes being seasoned with Blissan article which they are sometimes out of, at Greenwichwere of perfect flavour, and the golden drinks had been bottled in the golden age and hoarding up their sparkles ever since.

The best of it was, that Bella and John and the cherub had made a covenant that they would not reveal to mortal eyes any appearance whatever of being a wedding party. Now, the supervising dignitary, the Archbishop of Greenwich, knew this as well as if he had performed the nuptial ceremony. And the loftiness with which his Grace entered into their confidence without being invited, and insisted on a show of keeping the waiters out of it, was the crowning glory of the entertainment.

There was an innocent young waiter of a slender form and with weakish legs, as yet unversed in the wiles of waiterhood, and but too evidently of a romantic temperament, and deeply (it were not too much to add hopelessly) in love with some young female not aware of his merit. This guileless youth, descrying the position of affairs, which even his innocence could not mistake, limited his waiting to languishing admiringly against the sideboard when Bella didn't want anything, and swooping at her when she did. Him, his Grace the Archbishop perpetually obstructed, cutting him out with his elbow in the moment of success, despatching him in degrading quest of melted butter, and, when by any chance he got hold of any dish worth having, bereaving him of it, and ordering him to stand back.

'Pray excuse him, madam,' said the Archbishop in a low stately voice; 'he is a very young man on liking, and we DON'T like him.'

This induced John Rokesmith to observeby way of making the thing more natural'Bella, my love, this is so much more successful than any of our past anniversaries, that I think we must keep our future anniversaries here.'

Whereunto Bella replied, with probably the least successful attempt at looking matronly that ever was seen: 'Indeed, I think so, John, dear.'

Here the Archbishop of Greenwich coughed a stately cough to attract the attention of three of his ministers present, and staring at them, seemed to say: 'I call upon you by your fealty to believe this!'

With his own hands he afterwards put on the dessert, as remarking to the three guests, 'The period has now arrived at which we can dispense with the assistance of those fellows who are not in our confidence,' and would have retired with complete dignity but for a daring action issuing from the misguided brain of the young man on liking. He finding, by illfortune, a piece of orange flower somewhere in the lobbies now approached undetected with the same in a fingerglass, and placed it on Bella's right hand. The Archbishop instantly ejected and excommunicated him; but the thing was done.

'I trust, madam,' said his Grace, returning alone, 'that you will have the kindness to overlook it, in consideration of its being the act of a very young man who is merely here on liking, and who will never answer.'

With that, he solemnly bowed and retired, and they all burst into laughter, long and merry. 'Disguise is of no use,' said Bella; 'they all find me out; I think it must be, Pa and John dear, because I look so happy!'

Her husband feeling it necessary at this point to demand one of those mysterious disappearances on Bella's part, she dutifully obeyed; saying in a softened voice from her place of concealment:

'You remember how we talked about the ships that day, Pa?'

'Yes, my dear.'

'Isn't it strange, now, to think that there was no John in all the ships, Pa?'

'Not at all, my dear.'

'Oh, Pa! Not at all?'

'No, my dear. How can we tell what coming people are aboard the ships that may be sailing to us now from the unknown seas!'

Bella remaining invisible and silent, her father remained at his dessert and wine, until he remembered it was time for him to get home to Holloway. 'Though I positively cannot tear myself away,' he cherubically added, 'it would be a sinwithout drinking to many, many happy returns of this most happy day.'

'Here! ten thousand times!' cried John. 'I fill my glass and my precious wife's.'

'Gentlemen,' said the cherub, inaudibly addressing, in his AngloSaxon tendency to throw his feelings into the form of a speech, the boys down below, who were bidding against each other to put their heads in the mud for sixpence: 'Gentlemenand Bella and Johnyou will readily suppose that it is not my intention to trouble you with many observations on the present occasion. You will also at once infer the nature and even the terms of the toast I am about to propose on the present occasion. Gentlemenand Bella and Johnthe present occasion is an occasion fraught with feelings that I cannot trust myself to express. But gentlemenand Bella and Johnfor the part I have had in it, for the confidence you have placed in me, and for the affectionate goodnature and kindness with which you have determined not to find me in the way, when I am well aware that I cannot be otherwise than in it more or less, I do most heartily thank you. Gentlemenand Bella and Johnmy love to you, and may we meet, as on the present occasion, on many future occasions; that is to say, gentlemenand Bella and Johnon many happy returns of the present happy occasion.'

Having thus concluded his address, the amiable cherub embraced his daughter, and took his flight to the steamboat which was to convey him to London, and was then lying at the floating pier, doing its best to bump the same to bits. But, the happy couple were not going to part with him in that way, and before he had been on board two minutes, there they were, looking down at him from the wharf above.

'Pa, dear!' cried Bella, beckoning him with her parasol to approach the side, and bending gracefully to whisper.

'Yes, my darling.'

'Did I beat you much with that horrid little bonnet, Pa?'

'Nothing to speak of; my dear.'

'Did I pinch your legs, Pa?'

'Only nicely, my pet.'

'You are sure you quite forgive me, Pa? Please, Pa, please, forgive me quite!' Half laughing at him and half crying to him, Bella besought him in the

prettiest manner; in a manner so engaging and so playful and so natural, that her cherubic parent made a coaxing face as if she had never grown up, and said, 'What a silly little Mouse it is!'

'But you do forgive me that, and everything else; don't you, Pa?'

'Yes, my dearest.'

'And you don't feel solitary or neglected, going away by yourself; do you, Pa?'

'Lord bless you! No, my Life!'

'Goodbye, dearest Pa. Goodbye!'

'Goodbye, my darling! Take her away, my dear John. Take her home!'

So, she leaning on her husband's arm, they turned homeward by a rosy path which the gracious sun struck out for them in its setting. And O there are days in this life, worth life and worth death. And O what a bright old song it is, that O 'tis love, 'tis love, 'tis love that makes the world go round!

Chapter 5

CONCERNING THE MENDICANT'S BRIDE

The impressive gloom with which Mrs Wilfer received her husband on his return from the wedding, knocked so hard at the door of the cherubic conscience, and likewise so impaired the firmness of the cherubic legs, that the culprit's tottering condition of mind and body might have roused suspicion in less occupied persons that the grimly heroic lady, Miss Lavinia, and that esteemed friend of the family, Mr George Sampson. But, the attention of all three being fully possessed by the main fact of the marriage, they had happily none to bestow on the guilty conspirator; to which fortunate circumstance he owed the escape for which he was in nowise indebted to himself.

'You do not, R. W.' said Mrs Wilfer from her stately corner, 'inquire for your daughter Bella.'

'To be sure, my dear,' he returned, with a most flagrant assumption of unconsciousness, 'I did omit it. Howor perhaps I should rather say whereIS Bella?'

'Not here,' Mrs Wilfer proclaimed, with folded arms.

The cherub faintly muttered something to the abortive effect of 'Oh, indeed, my dear!'

'Not here,' repeated Mrs Wilfer, in a stern sonorous voice. 'In a word, R. W., you have no daughter Bella.'

'No daughter Bella, my dear?'

'No. Your daughter Bella,' said Mrs Wilfer, with a lofty air of never having had the least copartnership in that young lady: of whom she now made reproachful mention as an article of luxury which her husband had set up entirely on his own account, and in direct opposition to her advice: 'your daughter Bella has bestowed herself upon a Mendicant.'

'Good gracious, my dear!'

'Show your father his daughter Bella's letter, Lavinia,' said Mrs Wilfer, in her monotonous Act of Parliament tone, and waving her hand. 'I think your father will admit it to be documentary proof of what I tell him. I believe your father is acquainted with his daughter Bella's writing. But I do not know. He may tell you he is not. Nothing will surprise me.'

'Posted at Greenwich, and dated this morning,' said the Irrepressible, flouncing at her father in handing him the evidence. 'Hopes Ma won't be angry, but is happily married to Mr John Rokesmith, and didn't mention it beforehand to avoid words, and please tell darling you, and love to me, and I should like to know what you'd have said if any other unmarried member of the family had done it!'

He read the letter, and faintly exclaimed 'Dear me!'

'You may well say Dear me!' rejoined Mrs Wilfer, in a deep tone. Upon which encouragement he said it again, though scarcely with the success he had expected; for the scornful lady then remarked, with extreme bitterness: 'You said that before.'

'It's very surprising. But I suppose, my dear,' hinted the cherub, as he folded the letter after a disconcerting silence, 'that we must make the best of it? Would you object to my pointing out, my dear, that Mr John Rokesmith is not (so far as I am acquainted with him), strictly speaking, a Mendicant.'

'Indeed?' returned Mrs Wilfer, with an awful air of politeness. 'Truly so? I was not aware that Mr John Rokesmith was a gentleman of landed property. But I am much relieved to hear it.'

'I doubt if you HAVE heard it, my dear,' the cherub submitted with hesitation.

'Thank you,' said Mrs Wilfer. 'I make false statements, it appears? So be it. If my daughter flies in my face, surely my husband may. The one thing is not more unnatural than the other. There seems a fitness in the arrangement. By all means!' Assuming, with a shiver of resignation, a deadly cheerfulness.

But, here the Irrepressible skirmished into the conflict, dragging the reluctant form of Mr Sampson after her.

'Ma,' interposed the young lady, 'I must say I think it would be much better if you would keep to the point, and not hold forth about people's flying into people's faces, which is nothing more nor less than impossible nonsense.'

'How!' exclaimed Mrs Wilfer, knitting her dark brows.

'Just impossible nonsense, Ma,' returned Lavvy, 'and George Sampson knows it is, as well as I do.'

Mrs Wilfer suddenly becoming petrified, fixed her indignant eyes upon the wretched George: who, divided between the support due from him to his love, and the support due from him to his love's mamma, supported nobody, not even himself.

'The true point is,' pursued Lavinia, 'that Bella has behaved in a most unsisterly way to me, and might have severely compromised me with George and with George's family, by making off and getting married in this very low and disreputable mannerwith some pewopener or other, I suppose, for a bridesmaidwhen she ought to have confided in me, and ought to have said, "If, Lavvy, you consider it due to your engagement with George, that you should countenance the occasion by being present, then Lavvy, I beg you to BE present, keeping my secret from Ma and Pa." As of course I should have done.'

'As of course you would have done? Ingrate!' exclaimed Mrs Wilfer. 'Viper!'

'I say! You know ma'am. Upon my honour you mustn't,' Mr Sampson remonstrated, shaking his head seriously, 'With the highest respect for you, ma'am, upon my life you mustn't. No really, you know. When a man with the feelings of a gentleman finds himself engaged to a young lady, and it comes (even on the part of a member of the family) to vipers, you know!I would merely put it to your own good feeling, you know,' said Mr Sampson, in rather lame conclusion.

Mrs Wilfer's baleful stare at the young gentleman in acknowledgment of his obliging interference was of such a nature that Miss Lavinia burst into tears, and caught him round the neck for his protection.

'My own unnatural mother,' screamed the young lady, 'wants to annihilate

George! But you shan't be annihilated, George. I'll die first!'

Mr Sampson, in the arms of his mistress, still struggled to shake his head at Mrs Wilfer, and to remark: 'With every sentiment of respect for you, you know, ma'amvipers really doesn't do you credit.'

'You shall not be annihilated, George!' cried Miss Lavinia. 'Ma shall destroy me first, and then she'll be contented. Oh, oh, oh! Have I lured George from his happy home to expose him to this! George, dear, be free! Leave me, ever dearest George, to Ma and to my fate. Give my love to your aunt, George dear, and implore her not to curse the viper that has crossed your path and blighted your existence. Oh, oh, oh!' The young lady who, hysterically speaking, was only just come of age, and had never gone off yet, here fell into a highly creditable crisis, which, regarded as a first performance, was very successful; Mr Sampson, bending over the body meanwhile, in a state of distraction, which induced him to address Mrs Wilfer in the inconsistent expressions: 'Demonwith the highest respect for youbehold your work!'

The cherub stood helplessly rubbing his chin and looking on, but on the whole was inclined to welcome this diversion as one in which, by reason of the absorbent properties of hysterics, the previous question would become absorbed. And so, indeed, it proved, for the Irrepressible gradually coming to herself; and asking with wild emotion, 'George dear, are you safe?' and further, 'George love, what has happened? Where is Ma?' Mr Sampson, with words of comfort, raised her prostrate form, and handed her to Mrs Wilfer as if the young lady were something in the nature of refreshments. Mrs Wilfer with dignity partaking of the refreshments, by kissing her once on the brow (as if accepting an oyster), Miss Lavvy, tottering, returned to the protection of Mr Sampson; to whom she said, 'George dear, I am afraid I have been foolish; but I am still a little weak and giddy; don't let go my hand, George!' And whom she afterwards greatly agitated at intervals, by giving utterance, when least expected, to a sound between a sob and a bottle of soda water, that seemed to rend the bosom of her frock.

Among the most remarkable effects of this crisis may be mentioned its having, when peace was restored, an inexplicable moral influence, of an elevating kind, on Miss Lavinia, Mrs Wilfer, and Mr George Sampson, from which R. W. was altogether excluded, as an outsider and nonsympathizer. Miss Lavinia assumed a modest air of having distinguished herself; Mrs Wilfer, a serene air of forgiveness and resignation; Mr Sampson, an air of having been improved and chastened. The influence pervaded the spirit in which they returned to the previous question.

'George dear,' said Lavvy, with a melancholy smile, 'after what has passed, I

am sure Ma will tell Pa that he may tell Bella we shall all be glad to see her and her husband.'

Mr Sampson said he was sure of it too; murmuring how eminently he respected Mrs Wilfer, and ever must, and ever would. Never more eminently, he added, than after what had passed.

'Far be it from me,' said Mrs Wilfer, making deep proclamation from her corner, 'to run counter to the feelings of a child of mine, and of a Youth,' Mr Sampson hardly seemed to like that word, 'who is the object of her maiden preference. I may feelnay, knowthat I have been deluded and deceived. I may feelnay, knowthat I have been set aside and passed over. I may feelnay, knowthat after having so far overcome my repugnance towards Mr and Mrs Boffin as to receive them under this roof, and to consent to your daughter Bella's,' here turning to her husband, 'residing under theirs, it were well if your daughter Bella,' again turning to her husband, 'had profited in a worldly point of view by a connection so distasteful, so disreputable. I may feelnay, knowthat in uniting herself to Mr Rokesmith she has united herself to one who is, in spite of shallow sophistry, a Mendicant. And I may feel well assured that your daughter Bella,' again turning to her husband, 'does not exalt her family by becoming a Mendicant's bride. But I suppress what I feel, and say nothing of it.'

Mr Sampson murmured that this was the sort of thing you might expect from one who had ever in her own family been an example and never an outrage. And ever more so (Mr Sampson added, with some degree of obscurity,) and never more so, than in and through what had passed. He must take the liberty of adding, that what was true of the mother was true of the youngest daughter, and that he could never forget the touching feelings that the conduct of both had awakened within him. In conclusion, he did hope that there wasn't a man with a beating heart who was capable of something that remained undescribed, in consequence of Miss Lavinia's stopping him as he reeled in his speech.

'Therefore, R. W.' said Mrs Wilfer, resuming her discourse and turning to her lord again, 'let your daughter Bella come when she will, and she will be received. So,' after a short pause, and an air of having taken medicine in it, 'so will her husband.'

'And I beg, Pa,' said Lavinia, 'that you will not tell Bella what I have undergone. It can do no good, and it might cause her to reproach herself.'

'My dearest girl,' urged Mr Sampson, 'she ought to know it.'

'No, George,' said Lavinia, in a tone of resolute selfdenial. 'No, dearest George, let it be buried in oblivion.'

Mr Sampson considered that, 'too noble.'

'Nothing is too noble, dearest George,' returned Lavinia. 'And Pa, I hope you will be careful not to refer before Bella, if you can help it, to my engagement to George. It might seem like reminding her of her having cast herself away. And I hope, Pa, that you will think it equally right to avoid mentioning George's rising prospects, when Bella is present. It might seem like taunting her with her own poor fortunes. Let me ever remember that I am her younger sister, and ever spare her painful contrasts, which could not but wound her sharply.'

Mr Sampson expressed his belief that such was the demeanour of Angels. Miss Lavvy replied with solemnity, 'No, dearest George, I am but too well aware that I am merely human.'

Mrs Wilfer, for her part, still further improved the occasion by sitting with her eyes fastened on her husband, like two great black notes of interrogation, severely inquiring, Are you looking into your breast? Do you deserve your blessings? Can you lay your hand upon your heart and say that you are worthy of so hysterical a daughter? I do not ask you if you are worthy of such a wifeput Me out of the questionbut are you sufficiently conscious of, and thankful for, the pervading moral grandeur of the family spectacle on which you are gazing? These inquiries proved very harassing to R. W. who, besides being a little disturbed by wine, was in perpetual terror of committing himself by the utterance of stray words that would betray his guilty foreknowledge. However, the scene being over, andall things consideredwell over, he sought refuge in a doze; which gave his lady immense offence.

'Can you think of your daughter Bella, and sleep?' she disdainfully inquired.

To which he mildly answered, 'Yes, I think I can, my dear.'

'Then,' said Mrs Wilfer, with solemn indignation, 'I would recommend you, if you have a human feeling, to retire to bed.'

'Thank you, my dear,' he replied; 'I think it IS the best place for me.' And with these unsympathetic words very gladly withdrew.

Within a few weeks afterwards, the Mendicant's bride (arminarm with the Mendicant) came to tea, in fulfilment of an engagement made through her father. And the way in which the Mendicant's bride dashed at the unassailable position so considerately to be held by Miss Lavy, and scattered the whole of the works in all directions in a moment, was triumphant.

'Dearest Ma,' cried Bella, running into the room with a radiant face, 'how do

you do, dearest Ma?' And then embraced her, joyously. 'And Lavvy darling, how do YOU do, and how's George Sampson, and how is he getting on, and when are you going to be married, and how rich are you going to grow? You must tell me all about it, Lavvy dear, immediately. John, love, kiss Ma and Lavvy, and then we shall all be at home and comfortable.'

Mrs Wilfer stared, but was helpless. Miss Lavinia stared, but was helpless. Apparently with no compunction, and assuredly with no ceremony, Bella tossed her bonnet away, and sat down to make the tea.

'Dearest Ma and Lavvy, you both take sugar, I know. And Pa (you good little Pa), you don't take milk. John does. I didn't before I was married; but I do now, because John does. John dear, did you kiss Ma and Lavvy? Oh, you did! Quite correct, John dear; but I didn't see you do it, so I asked. Cut some bread and butter, John; that's a love. Ma likes it doubled. And now you must tell me, dearest Ma and Lavvy, upon your words and honours! Didn't you for a momentjust a momentthink I was a dreadful little wretch when I wrote to say I had run away?'

Before Mrs Wilfer could wave her gloves, the Mendicant's bride in her merriest affectionate manner went on again.

'I think it must have made you rather cross, dear Ma and Lavvy, and I know I deserved that you should be very cross. But you see I had been such a heedless, heartless creature, and had led you so to expect that I should marry for money, and so to make sure that I was incapable of marrying for love, that I thought you couldn't believe me. Because, you see, you didn't know how much of Good, Good, Good, I had learnt from John. Well! So I was sly about it, and ashamed of what you supposed me to be, and fearful that we couldn't understand one another and might come to words, which we should all be sorry for afterwards, and so I said to John that if he liked to take me without any fuss, he might. And as he did like, I let him. And we were married at Greenwich church in the presence of nobodyexcept an unknown individual who dropped in,' here her eyes sparkled more brightly, 'and half a pensioner. And now, isn't it nice, dearest Ma and Lavvy, to know that no words have been said which any of us can be sorry for, and that we are all the best of friends at the pleasantest of teas!'

Having got up and kissed them again, she slipped back to her chair (after a loop on the road to squeeze her husband round the neck) and again went on.

'And now you will naturally want to know, dearest Ma and Lavvy, how we live, and what we have got to live upon. Well! And so we live on Blackheath, in the charmingest of dolls' houses, delightfully furnished, and we have a

clever little servant who is decidedly pretty, and we are economical and orderly, and do everything by clockwork, and we have a hundred and fifty pounds a year, and we have all we want, and more. And lastly, if you would like to know in confidence, as perhaps you may, what is my opinion of my husband, my opinion isthat I almost love him!'

'And if you would like to know in confidence, as perhaps you may,' said her husband, smiling, as he stood by her side, without her having detected his approach, 'my opinion of my wife, my opinion is.' But Bella started up, and put her hand upon his lips.

'Stop, Sir! No, John, dear! Seriously! Please not yet a while! I want to be something so much worthier than the doll in the doll's house.'

'My darling, are you not?'

'Not half, not a quarter, so much worthier as I hope you may some day find me! Try me through some reverse, Johntry me through some trialand tell them after THAT, what you think of me.'

'I will, my Life,' said John. 'I promise it.'

'That's my dear John. And you won't speak a word now; will you?'

'And I won't,' said John, with a very expressive look of admiration around him, 'speak a word now!'

She laid her laughing cheek upon his breast to thank him, and said, looking at the rest of them sideways out of her bright eyes: 'I'll go further, Pa and Ma and Lavvy. John don't suspect ithe has no idea of itbut I quite love him!'

Even Mrs Wilfer relaxed under the influence of her married daughter, and seemed in a majestic manner to imply remotely that if R. W. had been a more deserving object, she too might have condescended to come down from her pedestal for his beguilement. Miss Lavinia, on the other hand, had strong doubts of the policy of the course of treatment, and whether it might not spoil Mr Sampson, if experimented on in the case of that young gentleman. R. W. himself was for his part convinced that he was father of one of the most charming of girls, and that Rokesmith was the most favoured of men; which opinion, if propounded to him, Rokesmith would probably not have contested.

The newlymarried pair left early, so that they might walk at leisure to their startingplace from London, for Greenwich. At first they were very cheerful and talked much; but after a while, Bella fancied that her husband was turning somewhat thoughtful. So she asked him:

'John dear, what's the matter?'

'Matter, my love?'

'Won't you tell me,' said Bella, looking up into his face, 'what you are thinking of?'

'There's not much in the thought, my soul. I was thinking whether you wouldn't like me to be rich?'

'You rich, John?' repeated Bella, shrinking a little.

'I mean, really rich. Say, as rich as Mr Boffin. You would like that?'

'I should be almost afraid to try, John dear. Was he much the better for his wealth? Was I much the better for the little part I once had in it?'

'But all people are not the worse for riches, my own.'

'Most people?' Bella musingly suggested with raised eyebrows.

'Nor even most people, it may be hoped. If you were rich, for instance, you would have a great power of doing good to others.'

'Yes, sir, for instance,' Bella playfully rejoined; 'but should I exercise the power, for instance? And again, sir, for instance; should I, at the same time, have a great power of doing harm to myself?'

Laughing and pressing her arm, he retorted: 'But still, again for instance; would you exercise that power?'

'I don't know,' said Bella, thoughtfully shaking her head. 'I hope not. I think not. But it's so easy to hope not and think not, without the riches.'

'Why don't you say, my darlinginstead of that phrasebeing poor?' he asked, looking earnestly at her.

'Why don't I say, being poor! Because I am not poor. Dear John, it's not possible that you suppose I think we are poor?'

'I do, my love.'

'Oh John!'

'Understand me, sweetheart. I know that I am rich beyond all wealth in having you; but I think OF you, and think FOR you. In such a dress as you are wearing now, you first charmed me, and in no dress could you ever look, to my thinking, more graceful or more beautiful. But you have admired many

finer dresses this very day; and is it not natural that I wish I could give them to you?'

'It's very nice that you should wish it, John. It brings these tears of grateful pleasure into my eyes, to hear you say so with such tenderness. But I don't want them.'

'Again,' he pursued, 'we are now walking through the muddy streets. I love those pretty feet so dearly, that I feel as if I could not bear the dirt to soil the sole of your shoe. Is it not natural that I wish you could ride in a carriage?'

'It's very nice,' said Bella, glancing downward at the feet in question, 'to know that you admire them so much, John dear, and since you do, I am sorry that these shoes are a full size too large. But I don't want a carriage, believe me.'

'You would like one if you could have one, Bella?'

'I shouldn't like it for its own sake, half so well as such a wish for it. Dear John, your wishes are as real to me as the wishes in the Fairy story, that were all fulfilled as soon as spoken. Wish me everything that you can wish for the woman you dearly love, and I have as good as got it, John. I have better than got it, John!'

They were not the less happy for such talk, and home was not the less home for coming after it. Bella was fast developing a perfect genius for home. All the loves and graces seemed (her husband thought) to have taken domestic service with her, and to help her to make home engaging.

Her married life glided happily on. She was alone all day, for, after an early breakfast her husband repaired every morning to the City, and did not return until their late dinner hour. He was 'in a China house,' he explained to Bella: which she found quite satisfactory, without pursuing the China house into minuter details than a wholesale vision of tea, rice, oddsmelling silks, carved boxes, and tighteyed people in more than doublesoled shoes, with their pigtails pulling their heads of hair off, painted on transparent porcelain. She always walked with her husband to the railroad, and was always there again to meet him; her old coquettish ways a little sobered down (but not much), and her dress as daintily managed as if she managed nothing else. But, John gone to business and Bella returned home, the dress would be laid aside, trim little wrappers and aprons would be substituted, and Bella, putting back her hair with both hands, as if she were making the most businesslike arrangements for going dramatically distracted, would enter on the household affairs of the day. Such weighing and mixing and chopping and grating, such dusting and washing and polishing, such snipping and weeding and trowelling and other small gardening, such making and mending and folding and airing, such

diverse arrangements, and above all such severe study! For Mrs J. R., who had never been wont to do too much at home as Miss B. W., was under the constant necessity of referring for advice and support to a sage volume entitled The Complete British Family Housewife, which she would sit consulting, with her elbows on the table and her temples on her hands, like some perplexed enchantress poring over the Black Art. This, principally because the Complete British Housewife, however sound a Briton at heart, was by no means an expert Briton at expressing herself with clearness in the British tongue, and sometimes might have issued her directions to equal purpose in the Kamskatchan language. In any crisis of this nature, Bella would suddenly exclaim aloud, 'Oh you ridiculous old thing, what do you mean by that? You must have been drinking!' And having made this marginal note, would try the Housewife again, with all her dimples screwed into an expression of profound research.

There was likewise a coolness on the part of the British Housewife, which Mrs John Rokesmith found highly exasperating. She would say, 'Take a salamander,' as if a general should command a private to catch a Tartar. Or, she would casually issue the order, 'Throw in a handful' of something entirely unattainable. In these, the Housewife's most glaring moments of unreason, Bella would shut her up and knock her on the table, apostrophising her with the compliment, 'O you ARE a stupid old Donkey! Where am I to get it, do you think?'

Another branch of study claimed the attention of Mrs John Rokesmith for a regular period every day. This was the mastering of the newspaper, so that she might be close up with John on general topics when John came home. In her desire to be in all things his companion, she would have set herself with equal zeal to master Algebra, or Euclid, if he had divided his soul between her and either. Wonderful was the way in which she would store up the City Intelligence, and beamingly shed it upon John in the course of the evening; incidentally mentioning the commodities that were looking up in the markets, and how much gold had been taken to the Bank, and trying to look wise and serious over it until she would laugh at herself most charmingly and would say, kissing him: 'It all comes of my love, John dear.'

For a City man, John certainly did appear to care as little as might be for the looking up or looking down of things, as well as for the gold that got taken to the Bank. But he cared, beyond all expression, for his wife, as a most precious and sweet commodity that was always looking up, and that never was worth less than all the gold in the world. And she, being inspired by her affection, and having a quick wit and a fine ready instinct, made amazing progress in her domestic efficiency, though, as an endearing creature, she made no progress at

all. This was her husband's verdict, and he justified it by telling her that she had begun her married life as the most endearing creature that could possibly be.

'And you have such a cheerful spirit!' he said, fondly. 'You are like a bright light in the house.'

'Am I truly, John?'

'Are you truly? Yes, indeed. Only much more, and much better.'

'Do you know, John dear,' said Bella, taking him by a button of his coat, 'that I sometimes, at odd momentsdon't laugh, John, please.'

Nothing should induce John to do it, when she asked him not to do it.

'That I sometimes think, John, I feel a little serious.'

'Are you too much alone, my darling?'

'O dear, no, John! The time is so short that I have not a moment too much in the week.'

'Why serious, my life, then? When serious?'

'When I laugh, I think,' said Bella, laughing as she laid her head upon his shoulder. 'You wouldn't believe, sir, that I feel serious now? But I do.' And she laughed again, and something glistened in her eyes.

'Would you like to be rich, pet?' he asked her coaxingly.

'Rich, John! How CAN you ask such goose's questions?'

'Do you regret anything, my love?'

'Regret anything? No!' Bella confidently answered. But then, suddenly changing, she said, between laughing and glistening: 'Oh yes, I do though. I regret Mrs Boffin.'

'I, too, regret that separation very much. But perhaps it is only temporary. Perhaps things may so fall out, as that you may sometimes see her againas that we may sometimes see her again.' Bella might be very anxious on the subject, but she scarcely seemed so at the moment. With an absent air, she was investigating that button on her husband's coat, when Pa came in to spend the evening.

Pa had his special chair and his special corner reserved for him on all occasions, andwithout disparagement of his domestic joyswas far happier

there, than anywhere. It was always pleasantly droll to see Pa and Bella together; but on this present evening her husband thought her more than usually fantastic with him.

'You are a very good little boy,' said Bella, 'to come unexpectedly, as soon as you could get out of school. And how have they used you at school today, you dear?'

'Well, my pet,' replied the cherub, smiling and rubbing his hands as she sat him down in his chair, 'I attend two schools. There's the Mincing Lane establishment, and there's your mother's Academy. Which might you mean, my dear?'

'Both,' said Bella.

'Both, eh? Why, to say the truth, both have taken a little out of me today, my dear, but that was to be expected. There's no royal road to learning; and what is life but learning!'

'And what do you do with yourself when you have got your learning by heart, you silly child?'

'Why then, my dear,' said the cherub, after a little consideration, 'I suppose I die.'

'You are a very bad boy,' retorted Bella, 'to talk about dismal things and be out of spirits.'

'My Bella,' rejoined her father, 'I am not out of spirits. I am as gay as a lark.' Which his face confirmed.

'Then if you are sure and certain it's not you, I suppose it must be I,' said Bella; 'so I won't do so any more. John dear, we must give this little fellow his supper, you know.'

'Of course we must, my darling.'

'He has been grubbing and grubbing at school,' said Bella, looking at her father's hand and lightly slapping it, 'till he's not fit to be seen. O what a grubby child!'

'Indeed, my dear,' said her father, 'I was going to ask to be allowed to wash my hands, only you find me out so soon.'

'Come here, sir!' cried Bella, taking him by the front of his coat, 'come here and be washed directly. You are not to be trusted to do it for yourself. Come here, sir!'

The cherub, to his genial amusement, was accordingly conducted to a little washingroom, where Bella soaped his face and rubbed his face, and soaped his hands and rubbed his hands, and splashed him and rinsed him and towelled him, until he was as red as beetroot, even to his very ears: 'Now you must be brushed and combed, sir,' said Bella, busily. 'Hold the light, John. Shut your eyes, sir, and let me take hold of your chin. Be good directly, and do as you are told!'

Her father being more than willing to obey, she dressed his hair in her most elaborate manner, brushing it out straight, parting it, winding it over her fingers, sticking it up on end, and constantly falling back on John to get a good look at the effect of it. Who always received her on his disengaged arm, and detained her, while the patient cherub stood waiting to be finished.

'There!' said Bella, when she had at last completed the final touches. 'Now, you are something like a genteel boy! Put your jacket on, and come and have your supper.'

The cherub investing himself with his coat was led back to his cornerwhere, but for having no egotism in his pleasant nature, he would have answered well enough for that radiant though selfsufficient boy, Jack HornerBella with her own hands laid a cloth for him, and brought him his supper on a tray. 'Stop a moment,' said she, 'we must keep his little clothes clean;' and tied a napkin under his chin, in a very methodical manner.

While he took his supper, Bella sat by him, sometimes admonishing him to hold his fork by the handle, like a polite child, and at other times carving for him, or pouring out his drink. Fantastic as it all was, and accustomed as she ever had been to make a plaything of her good father, ever delighted that she should put him to that account, still there was an occasional something on Bella's part that was new. It could not be said that she was less playful, whimsical, or natural, than she always had been; but it seemed, her husband thought, as if there were some rather graver reason than he had supposed for what she had so lately said, and as if throughout all this, there were glimpses of an underlying seriousness.

It was a circumstance in support of this view of the case, that when she had lighted her father's pipe, and mixed him his glass of grog, she sat down on a stool between her father and her husband, leaning her arm upon the latter, and was very quiet. So quiet, that when her father rose to take his leave, she looked round with a start, as if she had forgotten his being there.

'You go a little way with Pa, John?'

'Yes, my dear. Do you?'

'I have not written to Lizzie Hexam since I wrote and told her that I really had a lovera whole one. I have often thought I would like to tell her how right she was when she pretended to read in the live coals that I would go through fire and water for him. I am in the humour to tell her so tonight, John, and I'll stay at home and do it.'

'You are tired.'

'Not at all tired, John dear, but in the humour to write to Lizzie. Good night, dear Pa. Good night, you dear, good, gentle Pa!'

Left to herself she sat down to write, and wrote Lizzie a long letter. She had but completed it and read it over, when her husband came back. 'You are just in time, sir,' said Bella; 'I am going to give you your first curtain lecture. It shall be a parlourcurtain lecture. You shall take this chair of mine when I have folded my letter, and I will take the stool (though you ought to take it, I can tell you, sir, if it's the stool of repentance), and you'll soon find yourself taken to task soundly.'

Her letter folded, sealed, and directed, and her pen wiped, and her middle finger wiped, and her desk locked up and put away, and these transactions performed with an air of severe business sedateness, which the Complete British Housewife might have assumed, and certainly would not have rounded off and broken down in with a musical laugh, as Bella did: she placed her husband in his chair, and placed herself upon her stool.

'Now, sir! To begin at the beginning. What is your name?'

A question more decidedly rushing at the secret he was keeping from her, could not have astounded him. But he kept his countenance and his secret, and answered, 'John Rokesmith, my dear.'

'Good boy! Who gave you that name?'

With a returning suspicion that something might have betrayed him to her, he answered, interrogatively, 'My godfathers and my godmothers, dear love?'

'Pretty good!' said Bella. 'Not goodest good, because you hesitate about it. However, as you know your Catechism fairly, so far, I'll let you off the rest. Now, I am going to examine you out of my own head. John dear, why did you go back, this evening, to the question you once asked me beforewould I like to be rich?'

Again, his secret! He looked down at her as she looked up at him, with her hands folded on his knee, and it was as nearly told as ever secret was.

Having no reply ready, he could do no better than embrace her.

'In short, dear John,' said Bella, 'this is the topic of my lecture: I want nothing on earth, and I want you to believe it.'

'If that's all, the lecture may be considered over, for I do.'

'It's not all, John dear,' Bella hesitated. 'It's only Firstly. There's a dreadful Secondly, and a dreadful Thirdly to comeas I used to say to myself in sermontime when I was a very smallsized sinner at church.'

'Let them come, my dearest.'

'Are you sure, John dear; are you absolutely certain in your innermost heart of hearts?'

'Which is not in my keeping,' he rejoined.

'No, John, but the key is.Are you absolutely certain that down at the bottom of that heart of hearts, which you have given to me as I have given mine to you, there is no remembrance that I was once very mercenary?'

'Why, if there were no remembrance in me of the time you speak of,' he softly asked her with his lips to hers, 'could I love you quite as well as I do; could I have in the Calendar of my life the brightest of its days; could I whenever I look at your dear face, or hear your dear voice, see and hear my noble champion? It can never have been that which made you serious, darling?'

'No John, it wasn't that, and still less was it Mrs Boffin, though I love her. Wait a moment, and I'll go on with the lecture. Give me a moment, because I like to cry for joy. It's so delicious, John dear, to cry for joy.'

She did so on his neck, and, still clinging there, laughed a little when she said, 'I think I am ready now for Thirdly, John.'

'I am ready for Thirdly,' said John, 'whatever it is.'

'I believe, John,' pursued Bella, 'that you believe that I believe'

'My dear child,' cried her husband gaily, 'what a quantity of believing!'

'Isn't there?' said Bella, with another laugh. 'I never knew such a quantity! It's like verbs in an exercise. But I can't get on with less believing. I'll try again. I believe, dear John, that you believe that I believe that we have as much money as we require, and that we want for nothing.'

'It is strictly true, Bella.'

'But if our money should by any means be rendered not so muchif we had to stint ourselves a little in purchases that we can afford to make nowwould you still have the same confidence in my being quite contented, John?'

'Precisely the same confidence, my soul.'

'Thank you, John dear, thousands upon thousands of times. And I may take it for granted, no doubt,' with a little faltering, 'that you would be quite as contented yourself John? But, yes, I know I may. For, knowing that I should be so, how surely I may know that you would be so; you who are so much stronger, and firmer, and more reasonable and more generous, than I am.'

'Hush!' said her husband, 'I must not hear that. You are all wrong there, though otherwise as right as can be. And now I am brought to a little piece of news, my dearest, that I might have told you earlier in the evening. I have strong reason for confidently believing that we shall never be in the receipt of a smaller income than our present income.'

She might have shown herself more interested in the intelligence; but she had returned to the investigation of the coatbutton that had engaged her attention a few hours before, and scarcely seemed to heed what he said.

'And now we have got to the bottom of it at last,' cried her husband, rallying her, 'and this is the thing that made you serious?'

'No dear,' said Bella, twisting the button and shaking her head, 'it wasn't this.'

'Why then, Lord bless this little wife of mine, there's a Fourthly!' exclaimed John.

'This worried me a little, and so did Secondly,' said Bella, occupied with the button, 'but it was quite another sort of seriousnessa much deeper and quieter sort of seriousnessthat I spoke of John dear.'

As he bent his face to hers, she raised hers to meet it, and laid her little right hand on his eyes, and kept it there.

'Do you remember, John, on the day we were married, Pa's speaking of the ships that might be sailing towards us from the unknown seas?'

'Perfectly, my darling!'

'I think...among them...there is a ship upon the ocean...bringing...to you and me...a little baby, John.'

Chapter 6

A CRY FOR HELP

The Paper Mill had stopped work for the night, and the paths and roads in its neighbourhood were sprinkled with clusters of people going home from their day's labour in it. There were men, women, and children in the groups, and there was no want of lively colour to flutter in the gentle evening wind. The mingling of various voices and the sound of laughter made a cheerful impression upon the ear, analogous to that of the fluttering colours upon the eye. Into the sheet of water reflecting the flushed sky in the foreground of the living picture, a knot of urchins were casting stones, and watching the expansion of the rippling circles. So, in the rosy evening, one might watch the everwidening beauty of the landscapebeyond the newlyreleased workers wending homebeyond the silver riverbeyond the deep green fields of corn, so prospering, that the loiterers in their narrow threads of pathway seemed to float immersed breasthighbeyond the hedgerows and the clumps of treesbeyond the windmills on the ridgeaway to where the sky appeared to meet the earth, as if there were no immensity of space between mankind and Heaven.

It was a Saturday evening, and at such a time the village dogs, always much more interested in the doings of humanity than in the affairs of their own species, were particularly active. At the general shop, at the butcher's and at the publichouse, they evinced an inquiring spirit never to be satiated. Their especial interest in the publichouse would seem to imply some latent rakishness in the canine character; for little was eaten there, and they, having no taste for beer or tobacco (Mrs Hubbard's dog is said to have smoked, but proof is wanting), could only have been attracted by sympathy with loose convivial habits. Moreover, a most wretched fiddle played within; a fiddle so unutterably vile, that one lean longbodied cur, with a better ear than the rest, found himself under compulsion at intervals to go round the corner and howl. Yet, even he returned to the publichouse on each occasion with the tenacity of a confirmed drunkard.

Fearful to relate, there was even a sort of little Fair in the village. Some despairing gingerbread that had been vainly trying to dispose of itself all over the country, and had cast a quantity of dust upon its head in its mortification, again appealed to the public from an infirm booth. So did a heap of nuts, long, long exiled from Barcelona, and yet speaking English so indifferently as to call fourteen of themselves a pint. A Peepshow which had originally started with the Battle of Waterloo, and had since made it every other battle of later

date by altering the Duke of Wellington's nose, tempted the student of illustrated history. A Fat Lady, perhaps in part sustained upon postponed pork, her professional associate being a Learned Pig, displayed her lifesize picture in a low dress as she appeared when presented at Court, several yards round. All this was a vicious spectacle as any poor idea of amusement on the part of the rougher hewers of wood and drawers of water in this land of England ever is and shall be. They MUST NOT vary the rheumatism with amusement. They may vary it with fever and ague, or with as many rheumatic variations as they have joints; but positively not with entertainment after their own manner.

The various sounds arising from this scene of depravity, and floating away into the still evening air, made the evening, at any point which they just reached fitfully, mellowed by the distance, more still by contrast. Such was the stillness of the evening to Eugene Wrayburn, as he walked by the river with his hands behind him.

He walked slowly, and with the measured step and preoccupied air of one who was waiting. He walked between the two points, an osierbed at this end and some floating lilies at that, and at each point stopped and looked expectantly in one direction.

'It is very quiet,' said he.

It was very quiet. Some sheep were grazing on the grass by the riverside, and it seemed to him that he had never before heard the crisp tearing sound with which they cropped it. He stopped idly, and looked at them.

'You are stupid enough, I suppose. But if you are clever enough to get through life tolerably to your satisfaction, you have got the better of me, Man as I am, and Mutton as you are!'

A rustle in a field beyond the hedge attracted his attention. 'What's here to do?' he asked himself leisurely going towards the gate and looking over. 'No jealous papermiller? No pleasures of the chase in this part of the country? Mostly fishing hereabouts!'

The field had been newly mown, and there were yet the marks of the scythe on the yellowgreen ground, and the track of wheels where the hay had been carried. Following the tracks with his eyes, the view closed with the new hayrick in a corner.

Now, if he had gone on to the hayrick, and gone round it? But, say that the event was to be, as the event fell out, and how idle are such suppositions! Besides, if he had gone; what is there of warning in a Bargeman lying on his face?

'A bird flying to the hedge,' was all he thought about it; and came back, and resumed his walk.

'If I had not a reliance on her being truthful,' said Eugene, after taking some halfdozen turns, 'I should begin to think she had given me the slip for the second time. But she promised, and she is a girl of her word.'

Turning again at the waterlilies, he saw her coming, and advanced to meet her.

'I was saying to myself, Lizzie, that you were sure to come, though you were late.'

'I had to linger through the village as if I had no object before me, and I had to speak to several people in passing along, Mr Wrayburn.'

'Are the lads of the villageand the ladiessuch scandalmongers?' he asked, as he took her hand and drew it through his arm.

She submitted to walk slowly on, with downcast eyes. He put her hand to his lips, and she quietly drew it away.

'Will you walk beside me, Mr Wrayburn, and not touch me?' For, his arm was already stealing round her waist.

She stopped again, and gave him an earnest supplicating look. 'Well, Lizzie, well!' said he, in an easy way though ill at ease with himself 'don't be unhappy, don't be reproachful.'

'I cannot help being unhappy, but I do not mean to be reproachful. Mr Wrayburn, I implore you to go away from this neighbourhood, tomorrow morning.'

'Lizzie, Lizzie, Lizzie!' he remonstrated. 'As well be reproachful as wholly unreasonable. I can't go away.'

'Why not?'

'Faith!' said Eugene in his airily candid manner. 'Because you won't let me. Mind! I don't mean to be reproachful either. I don't complain that you design to keep me here. But you do it, you do it.'

'Will you walk beside me, and not touch me;' for, his arm was coming about her again; 'while I speak to you very seriously, Mr Wrayburn?'

'I will do anything within the limits of possibility, for you, Lizzie,' he answered with pleasant gaiety as he folded his arms. 'See here! Napoleon Buonaparte at St Helena.'

'When you spoke to me as I came from the Mill the night before last,' said Lizzie, fixing her eyes upon him with the look of supplication which troubled his better nature, 'you told me that you were much surprised to see me, and that you were on a solitary fishing excursion. Was it true?'

'It was not,' replied Eugene composedly, 'in the least true. I came here, because I had information that I should find you here.'

'Can you imagine why I left London, Mr Wrayburn?'

'I am afraid, Lizzie,' he openly answered, 'that you left London to get rid of me. It is not flattering to my selflove, but I am afraid you did.'

'I did.'

'How could you be so cruel?'

'O Mr Wrayburn,' she answered, suddenly breaking into tears, 'is the cruelty on my side! O Mr Wrayburn, Mr Wrayburn, is there no cruelty in your being here tonight!'

'In the name of all that's goodand that is not conjuring you in my own name, for Heaven knows I am not good'said Eugene, 'don't be distressed!'

'What else can I be, when I know the distance and the difference between us? What else can I be, when to tell me why you came here, is to put me to shame!' said Lizzie, covering her face.

He looked at her with a real sentiment of remorseful tenderness and pity. It was not strong enough to impell him to sacrifice himself and spare her, but it was a strong emotion.

'Lizzie! I never thought before, that there was a woman in the world who could affect me so much by saying so little. But don't be hard in your construction of me. You don't know what my state of mind towards you is. You don't know how you haunt me and bewilder me. You don't know how the cursed carelessness that is overofficious in helping me at every other turning of my life, WON'T help me here. You have struck it dead, I think, and I sometimes almost wish you had struck me dead along with it.'

She had not been prepared for such passionate expressions, and they awakened some natural sparks of feminine pride and joy in her breast. To consider, wrong as he was, that he could care so much for her, and that she had the power to move him so!

'It grieves you to see me distressed, Mr Wrayburn; it grieves me to see you

distressed. I don't reproach you. Indeed I don't reproach you. You have not felt this as I feel it, being so different from me, and beginning from another point of view. You have not thought. But I entreat you to think now, think now!'

'What am I to think of?' asked Eugene, bitterly.

'Think of me.'

'Tell me how NOT to think of you, Lizzie, and you'll change me altogether.'

'I don't mean in that way. Think of me, as belonging to another station, and quite cut off from you in honour. Remember that I have no protector near me, unless I have one in your noble heart. Respect my good name. If you feel towards me, in one particular, as you might if I was a lady, give me the full claims of a lady upon your generous behaviour. I am removed from you and your family by being a working girl. How true a gentleman to be as considerate of me as if I was removed by being a Queen!'

He would have been base indeed to have stood untouched by her appeal. His face expressed contrition and indecision as he asked:

'Have I injured you so much, Lizzie?'

'No, no. You may set me quite right. I don't speak of the past, Mr Wrayburn, but of the present and the future. Are we not here now, because through two days you have followed me so closely where there are so many eyes to see you, that I consented to this appointment as an escape?'

'Again, not very flattering to my selflove,' said Eugene, moodily; 'but yes. Yes. Yes.'

'Then I beseech you, Mr Wrayburn, I beg and pray you, leave this neighbourhood. If you do not, consider to what you will drive me.'

He did consider within himself for a moment or two, and then retorted, 'Drive you? To what shall I drive you, Lizzie?'

'You will drive me away. I live here peacefully and respected, and I am well employed here. You will force me to quit this place as I quitted London, andby following me againwill force me to quit the next place in which I may find refuge, as I quitted this.'

'Are you so determined, Lizzieforgive the word I am going to use, for its literal truthto fly from a lover?'

'I am so determined,' she answered resolutely, though trembling, 'to fly from such a lover. There was a poor woman died here but a little while ago, scores

of years older than I am, whom I found by chance, lying on the wet earth. You may have heard some account of her?'

'I think I have,' he answered, 'if her name was Higden.'

'Her name was Higden. Though she was so weak and old, she kept true to one purpose to the very last. Even at the very last, she made me promise that her purpose should be kept to, after she was dead, so settled was her determination. What she did, I can do. Mr Wrayburn, if I believedbut I do not believethat you could be so cruel to me as to drive me from place to place to wear me out, you should drive me to death and not do it.'

He looked full at her handsome face, and in his own handsome face there was a light of blended admiration, anger, and reproach, which shewho loved him so in secret whose heart had long been so full, and he the cause of its overflowingdrooped before. She tried hard to retain her firmness, but he saw it melting away under his eyes. In the moment of its dissolution, and of his first full knowledge of his influence upon her, she dropped, and he caught her on his arm.

'Lizzie! Rest so a moment. Answer what I ask you. If I had not been what you call removed from you and cut off from you, would you have made this appeal to me to leave you?'

'I don't know, I don't know. Don't ask me, Mr Wrayburn. Let me go back.'

'I swear to you, Lizzie, you shall go directly. I swear to you, you shall go alone. I'll not accompany you, I'll not follow you, if you will reply.'

'How can I, Mr Wrayburn? How can I tell you what I should have done, if you had not been what you are?'

'If I had not been what you make me out to be,' he struck in, skilfully changing the form of words, 'would you still have hated me?'

'O Mr Wrayburn,' she replied appealingly, and weeping, 'you know me better than to think I do!'

'If I had not been what you make me out to be, Lizzie, would you still have been indifferent to me?'

'O Mr Wrayburn,' she answered as before, 'you know me better than that too!'

There was something in the attitude of her whole figure as he supported it, and she hung her head, which besought him to be merciful and not force her to disclose her heart. He was not merciful with her, and he made her do it.

'If I know you better than quite to believe (unfortunate dog though I am!) that you hate me, or even that you are wholly indifferent to me, Lizzie, let me know so much more from yourself before we separate. Let me know how you would have dealt with me if you had regarded me as being what you would have considered on equal terms with you.'

'It is impossible, Mr Wrayburn. How can I think of you as being on equal terms with me? If my mind could put you on equal terms with me, you could not be yourself. How could I remember, then, the night when I first saw you, and when I went out of the room because you looked at me so attentively? Or, the night that passed into the morning when you broke to me that my father was dead? Or, the nights when you used to come to see me at my next home? Or, your having known how uninstructed I was, and having caused me to be taught better? Or, my having so looked up to you and wondered at you, and at first thought you so good to be at all mindful of me?'

'Only "at first" thought me so good, Lizzie? What did you think me after "at first"? So bad?'

'I don't say that. I don't mean that. But after the first wonder and pleasure of being noticed by one so different from any one who had ever spoken to me, I began to feel that it might have been better if I had never seen you.'

'Why?'

'Because you WERE so different,' she answered in a lower voice. 'Because it was so endless, so hopeless. Spare me!'

'Did you think for me at all, Lizzie?' he asked, as if he were a little stung.

'Not much, Mr Wrayburn. Not much until tonight.'

'Will you tell me why?'

'I never supposed until tonight that you needed to be thought for. But if you do need to be; if you do truly feel at heart that you have indeed been towards me what you have called yourself tonight, and that there is nothing for us in this life but separation; then Heaven help you, and Heaven bless you!'

The purity with which in these words she expressed something of her own love and her own suffering, made a deep impression on him for the passing time. He held her, almost as if she were sanctified to him by death, and kissed her, once, almost as he might have kissed the dead.

'I promised that I would not accompany you, nor follow you. Shall I keep you in view? You have been agitated, and it's growing dark.'

'I am used to be out alone at this hour, and I entreat you not to do so.'

'I promise. I can bring myself to promise nothing more tonight, Lizzie, except that I will try what I can do.'

'There is but one means, Mr Wrayburn, of sparing yourself and of sparing me, every way. Leave this neighbourhood tomorrow morning.'

'I will try.'

As he spoke the words in a grave voice, she put her hand in his, removed it, and went away by the riverside.

'Now, could Mortimer believe this?' murmured Eugene, still remaining, after a while, where she had left him. 'Can I even believe it myself?'

He referred to the circumstance that there were tears upon his hand, as he stood covering his eyes. 'A most ridiculous position this, to be found out in!' was his next thought. And his next struck its root in a little rising resentment against the cause of the tears.

'Yet I have gained a wonderful power over her, too, let her be as much in earnest as she will!'

The reflection brought back the yielding of her face and form as she had drooped under his gaze. Contemplating the reproduction, he seemed to see, for the second time, in the appeal and in the confession of weakness, a little fear.

'And she loves me. And so earnest a character must be very earnest in that passion. She cannot choose for herself to be strong in this fancy, wavering in that, and weak in the other. She must go through with her nature, as I must go through with mine. If mine exacts its pains and penalties all round, so must hers, I suppose.'

Pursuing the inquiry into his own nature, he thought, 'Now, if I married her. If, outfacing the absurdity of the situation in correspondence with M. R. F., I astonished M. R. F. to the utmost extent of his respected powers, by informing him that I had married her, how would M. R. F. reason with the legal mind? "You wouldn't marry for some money and some station, because you were frightfully likely to become bored. Are you less frightfully likely to become bored, marrying for no money and no station? Are you sure of yourself?" Legal mind, in spite of forensic protestations, must secretly admit, "Good reasoning on the part of M. R. F. NOT sure of myself."'

In the very act of calling this tone of levity to his aid, he felt it to be profligate and worthless, and asserted her against it.

'And yet,' said Eugene, 'I should like to see the fellow (Mortimer excepted) who would undertake to tell me that this was not a real sentiment on my part, won out of me by her beauty and her worth, in spite of myself, and that I would not be true to her. I should particularly like to see the fellow tonight who would tell me so, or who would tell me anything that could be construed to her disadvantage; for I am wearily out of sorts with one Wrayburn who cuts a sorry figure, and I would far rather be out of sorts with somebody else. "Eugene, Eugene, Eugene, this is a bad business." Ah! So go the Mortimer Lightwood bells, and they sound melancholy tonight.'

Strolling on, he thought of something else to take himself to task for. 'Where is the analogy, Brute Beast,' he said impatiently, 'between a woman whom your father coolly finds out for you and a woman whom you have found out for yourself, and have ever drifted after with more and more of constancy since you first set eyes upon her? Ass! Can you reason no better than that?'

But, again he subsided into a reminiscence of his first full knowledge of his power just now, and of her disclosure of her heart. To try no more to go away, and to try her again, was the reckless conclusion it turned uppermost. And yet again, 'Eugene, Eugene, Eugene, this is a bad business!' And, 'I wish I could stop the Lightwood peal, for it sounds like a knell.'

Looking above, he found that the young moon was up, and that the stars were beginning to shine in the sky from which the tones of red and yellow were flickering out, in favour of the calm blue of a summer night. He was still by the riverside. Turning suddenly, he met a man, so close upon him that Eugene, surprised, stepped back, to avoid a collision. The man carried something over his shoulder which might have been a broken oar, or spar, or bar, and took no notice of him, but passed on.

'Halloa, friend!' said Eugene, calling after him, 'are you blind?'

The man made no reply, but went his way.

Eugene Wrayburn went the opposite way, with his hands behind him and his purpose in his thoughts. He passed the sheep, and passed the gate, and came within hearing of the village sounds, and came to the bridge. The inn where he stayed, like the village and the mill, was not across the river, but on that side of the stream on which he walked. However, knowing the rushy bank and the backwater on the other side to be a retired place, and feeling out of humour for noise or company, he crossed the bridge, and sauntered on: looking up at the stars as they seemed one by one to be kindled in the sky, and looking down at the river as the same stars seemed to be kindled deep in the water. A landingplace overshadowed by a willow, and a pleasureboat lying moored

there among some stakes, caught his eye as he passed along. The spot was in such dark shadow, that he paused to make out what was there, and then passed on again.

The rippling of the river seemed to cause a correspondent stir in his uneasy reflections. He would have laid them asleep if he could, but they were in movement, like the stream, and all tending one way with a strong current. As the ripple under the moon broke unexpectedly now and then, and palely flashed in a new shape and with a new sound, so parts of his thoughts started, unbidden, from the rest, and revealed their wickedness. 'Out of the question to marry her,' said Eugene, 'and out of the question to leave her. The crisis!'

He had sauntered far enough. Before turning to retrace his steps, he stopped upon the margin, to look down at the reflected night. In an instant, with a dreadful crash, the reflected night turned crooked, flames shot jaggedly across the air, and the moon and stars came bursting from the sky.

Was he struck by lightning? With some incoherent halfformed thought to that effect, he turned under the blows that were blinding him and mashing his life, and closed with a murderer, whom he caught by a red neckerchiefunless the raining down of his own blood gave it that hue.

Eugene was light, active, and expert; but his arms were broken, or he was paralysed, and could do no more than hang on to the man, with his head swung back, so that he could see nothing but the heaving sky. After dragging at the assailant, he fell on the bank with him, and then there was another great crash, and then a splash, and all was done.

Lizzie Hexam, too, had avoided the noise, and the Saturday movement of people in the straggling street, and chose to walk alone by the water until her tears should be dry, and she could so compose herself as to escape remark upon her looking ill or unhappy on going home. The peaceful serenity of the hour and place, having no reproaches or evil intentions within her breast to contend against, sank healingly into its depths. She had meditated and taken comfort. She, too, was turning homeward, when she heard a strange sound.

It startled her, for it was like a sound of blows. She stood still, and listened. It sickened her, for blows fell heavily and cruelly on the quiet of the night. As she listened, undecided, all was silent. As she yet listened, she heard a faint groan, and a fall into the river.

Her old bold life and habit instantly inspired her. Without vain waste of breath in crying for help where there were none to hear, she ran towards the spot from which the sounds had come. It lay between her and the bridge, but it was more removed from her than she had thought; the night being so very quiet,

and sound travelling far with the help of water.

At length, she reached a part of the green bank, much and newly trodden, where there lay some broken splintered pieces of wood and some torn fragments of clothes. Stooping, she saw that the grass was bloody. Following the drops and smears, she saw that the watery margin of the bank was bloody. Following the current with her eyes, she saw a bloody face turned up towards the moon, and drifting away.

Now, merciful Heaven be thanked for that old time, and grant, O Blessed Lord, that through thy wonderful workings it may turn to good at last! To whomsoever the drifting face belongs, be it man's or woman's, help my humble hands, Lord God, to raise it from death and restore it to some one to whom it must be dear!

It was thought, fervently thought, but not for a moment did the prayer check her. She was away before it welled up in her mind, away, swift and true, yet steady above allfor without steadiness it could never be doneto the landingplace under the willowtree, where she also had seen the boat lying moored among the stakes.

A sure touch of her old practised hand, a sure step of her old practised foot, a sure light balance of her body, and she was in the boat. A quick glance of her practised eye showed her, even through the deep dark shadow, the sculls in a rack against the redbrick gardenwall. Another moment, and she had cast off (taking the line with her), and the boat had shot out into the moonlight, and she was rowing down the stream as never other woman rowed on English water.

Intently over her shoulder, without slackening speed, she looked ahead for the driving face. She passed the scene of the struggleyonder it was, on her left, well over the boat's sternshe passed on her right, the end of the village street, a hilly street that almost dipped into the river; its sounds were growing faint again, and she slackened; looking as the boat drove, everywhere, everywhere, for the floating face.

She merely kept the boat before the stream now, and rested on her oars, knowing well that if the face were not soon visible, it had gone down, and she would overshoot it. An untrained sight would never have seen by the moonlight what she saw at the length of a few strokes astern. She saw the drowning figure rise to the surface, slightly struggle, and as if by instinct turn over on its back to float. Just so had she first dimly seen the face which she now dimly saw again.

Firm of look and firm of purpose, she intently watched its coming on, until it

was very near; then, with a touch unshipped her sculls, and crept aft in the boat, between kneeling and crouching. Once, she let the body evade her, not being sure of her grasp. Twice, and she had seized it by its bloody hair.

It was insensible, if not virtually dead; it was mutilated, and streaked the water all about it with dark red streaks. As it could not help itself, it was impossible for her to get it on board. She bent over the stern to secure it with the line, and then the river and its shores rang to the terrible cry she uttered.

But, as if possessed by supernatural spirit and strength, she lashed it safe, resumed her seat, and rowed in, desperately, for the nearest shallow water where she might run the boat aground. Desperately, but not wildly, for she knew that if she lost distinctness of intention, all was lost and gone.

She ran the boat ashore, went into the water, released him from the line, and by main strength lifted him in her arms and laid him in the bottom of the boat. He had fearful wounds upon him, and she bound them up with her dress torn into strips. Else, supposing him to be still alive, she foresaw that he must bleed to death before he could be landed at his inn, which was the nearest place for succour.

This done very rapidly, she kissed his disfigured forehead, looked up in anguish to the stars, and blessed him and forgave him, 'if she had anything to forgive.' It was only in that instant that she thought of herself, and then she thought of herself only for him.

Now, merciful Heaven be thanked for that old time, enabling me, without a wasted moment, to have got the boat afloat again, and to row back against the stream! And grant, O Blessed Lord God, that through poor me he may be raised from death, and preserved to some one else to whom he may be dear one day, though never dearer than to me!

She rowed hardrowed desperately, but never wildlyand seldom removed her eyes from him in the bottom of the boat. She had so laid him there, as that she might see his disfigured face; it was so much disfigured that his mother might have covered it, but it was above and beyond disfigurement in her eyes.

The boat touched the edge of the patch of inn lawn, sloping gently to the water. There were lights in the windows, but there chanced to be no one out of doors. She made the boat fast, and again by main strength took him up, and never laid him down until she laid him down in the house.

Surgeons were sent for, and she sat supporting his head. She had oftentimes heard in days that were gone, how doctors would lift the hand of an insensible wounded person, and would drop it if the person were dead. She waited for the

awful moment when the doctors might lift this hand, all broken and bruised, and let it fall.

The first of the surgeons came, and asked, before proceeding to his examination, 'Who brought him in?'

'I brought him in, sir,' answered Lizzie, at whom all present looked.

'You, my dear? You could not lift, far less carry, this weight.'

'I think I could not, at another time, sir; but I am sure I did.'

The surgeon looked at her with great attention, and with some compassion. Having with a grave face touched the wounds upon the head, and the broken arms, he took the hand.

O! would he let it drop?

He appeared irresolute. He did not retain it, but laid it gently down, took a candle, looked more closely at the injuries on the head, and at the pupils of the eyes. That done, he replaced the candle and took the hand again. Another surgeon then coming in, the two exchanged a whisper, and the second took the hand. Neither did he let it fall at once, but kept it for a while and laid it gently down.

'Attend to the poor girl,' said the first surgeon then. 'She is quite unconscious. She sees nothing and hears nothing. All the better for her! Don't rouse her, if you can help it; only move her. Poor girl, poor girl! She must be amazingly strong of heart, but it is much to be feared that she has set her heart upon the dead. Be gentle with her.'

Chapter 7

BETTER TO BE ABEL THAN CAIN

Day was breaking at Plashwater Weir Mill Lock. Stars were yet visible, but there was dull light in the east that was not the light of night. The moon had gone down, and a mist crept along the banks of the river, seen through which the trees were the ghosts of trees, and the water was the ghost of water. This earth looked spectral, and so did the pale stars: while the cold eastern glare, expressionless as to heat or colour, with the eye of the firmament quenched, might have been likened to the stare of the dead.

Perhaps it was so likened by the lonely Bargeman, standing on the brink of the lock. For certain, Bradley Headstone looked that way, when a chill air came up, and when it passed on murmuring, as if it whispered something that made the phantom trees and water trembleor threatenfor fancy might have made it either.

He turned away, and tried the Lockhouse door. It was fastened on the inside.

'Is he afraid of me?' he muttered, knocking.

Rogue Riderhood was soon roused, and soon undrew the bolt and let him in.

'Why, T'otherest, I thought you had been and got lost! Two nights away! I a'most believed as you'd giv' me the slip, and I had as good as half a mind for to advertise you in the newspapers to come for'ard.'

Bradley's face turned so dark on this hint, that Riderhood deemed it expedient to soften it into a compliment.

'But not you, governor, not you,' he went on, stolidly shaking his head. 'For what did I say to myself arter having amused myself with that there stretch of a comic idea, as a sort of a playful game? Why, I says to myself; "He's a man o' honour." That's what I says to myself. "He's a man o' double honour."'

Very remarkably, Riderhood put no question to him. He had looked at him on opening the door, and he now looked at him again (stealthily this time), and the result of his looking was, that he asked him no question.

'You'll be for another forty on 'em, governor, as I judges, afore you turns your mind to breakfast,' said Riderhood, when his visitor sat down, resting his chin on his hand, with his eyes on the ground. And very remarkably again: Riderhood feigned to set the scanty furniture in order, while he spoke, to have a show of reason for not looking at him.

'Yes. I had better sleep, I think,' said Bradley, without changing his position.

'I myself should recommend it, governor,' assented Riderhood. 'Might you be anyways dry?'

'Yes. I should like a drink,' said Bradley; but without appearing to attend much.

Mr Riderhood got out his bottle, and fetched his jugfull of water, and administered a potation. Then, he shook the coverlet of his bed and spread it smooth, and Bradley stretched himself upon it in the clothes he wore. Mr Riderhood poetically remarking that he would pick the bones of his night's

rest, in his wooden chair, sat in the window as before; but, as before, watched the sleeper narrowly until he was very sound asleep. Then, he rose and looked at him close, in the bright daylight, on every side, with great minuteness. He went out to his Lock to sum up what he had seen.

'One of his sleeves is tore right away below the elber, and the t'other's had a good rip at the shoulder. He's been hung on to, pretty tight, for his shirt's all tore out of the neckgathers. He's been in the grass and he's been in the water. And he's spotted, and I know with what, and with whose. Hooroar!'

Bradley slept long. Early in the afternoon a barge came down. Other barges had passed through, both ways, before it; but the Lockkeeper hailed only this particular barge, for news, as if he had made a time calculation with some nicety. The men on board told him a piece of news, and there was a lingering on their part to enlarge upon it.

Twelve hours had intervened since Bradley's lying down, when he got up. 'Not that I swaller it,' said Riderhood, squinting at his Lock, when he saw Bradley coming out of the house, 'as you've been a sleeping all the time, old boy!'

Bradley came to him, sitting on his wooden lever, and asked what o'clock it was? Riderhood told him it was between two and three.

'When are you relieved?' asked Bradley.

'Day arter tomorrow, governor.'

'Not sooner?'

'Not a inch sooner, governor.'

On both sides, importance seemed attached to this question of relief. Riderhood quite petted his reply; saying a second time, and prolonging a negative roll of his head, 'nnnot a inch sooner, governor.'

'Did I tell you I was going on tonight?' asked Bradley.

'No, governor,' returned Riderhood, in a cheerful, affable, and conversational manner, 'you did not tell me so. But most like you meant to it and forgot to it. How, otherways, could a doubt have come into your head about it, governor?'

'As the sun goes down, I intend to go on,' said Bradley.

'So much the more necessairy is a Peck,' returned Riderhood. 'Come in and have it, T'otherest.'

The formality of spreading a tablecloth not being observed in Mr Riderhood's

establishment, the serving of the 'peck' was the affair of a moment; it merely consisting in the handing down of a capacious baking dish with threefourths of an immense meat pie in it, and the production of two pocketknives, an earthenware mug, and a large brown bottle of beer.

Both ate and drank, but Riderhood much the more abundantly. In lieu of plates, that honest man cut two triangular pieces from the thick crust of the pie, and laid them, inside uppermost, upon the table: the one before himself, and the other before his guest. Upon these platters he placed two goodly portions of the contents of the pie, thus imparting the unusual interest to the entertainment that each partaker scooped out the inside of his plate, and consumed it with his other fare, besides having the sport of pursuing the clots of congealed gravy over the plain of the table, and successfully taking them into his mouth at last from the blade of his knife, in case of their not first sliding off it.

Bradley Headstone was so remarkably awkward at these exercises, that the Rogue observed it.

'Look out, T'otherest!' he cried, 'you'll cut your hand!'

But, the caution came too late, for Bradley gashed it at the instant. And, what was more unlucky, in asking Riderhood to tie it up, and in standing close to him for the purpose, he shook his hand under the smart of the wound, and shook blood over Riderhood's dress.

When dinner was done, and when what remained of the platters and what remained of the congealed gravy had been put back into what remained of the pie, which served as an economical investment for all miscellaneous savings, Riderhood filled the mug with beer and took a long drink. And now he did look at Bradley, and with an evil eye.

'T'otherest!' he said, hoarsely, as he bent across the table to touch his arm. 'The news has gone down the river afore you.'

'What news?'

'Who do you think,' said Riderhood, with a hitch of his head, as if he disdainfully jerked the feint away, 'picked up the body? Guess.'

'I am not good at guessing anything.'

'She did. Hooroar! You had him there agin. She did.'

The convulsive twitching of Bradley Headstone's face, and the sudden hot humour that broke out upon it, showed how grimly the intelligence touched

him. But he said not a single word, good or bad. He only smiled in a lowering manner, and got up and stood leaning at the window, looking through it. Riderhood followed him with his eyes. Riderhood cast down his eyes on his own besprinkled clothes. Riderhood began to have an air of being better at a guess than Bradley owned to being.

'I have been so long in want of rest,' said the schoolmaster, 'that with your leave I'll lie down again.'

'And welcome, T'otherest!' was the hospitable answer of his host. He had laid himself down without waiting for it, and he remained upon the bed until the sun was low. When he arose and came out to resume his journey, he found his host waiting for him on the grass by the towingpath outside the door.

'Whenever it may be necessary that you and I should have any further communication together,' said Bradley, 'I will come back. Goodnight!'

'Well, since no better can be,' said Riderhood, turning on his heel, 'Goodnight!' But he turned again as the other set forth, and added under his breath, looking after him with a leer: 'You wouldn't be let to go like that, if my Relief warn't as good as come. I'll catch you up in a mile.'

In a word, his real time of relief being that evening at sunset, his mate came lounging in, within a quarter of an hour. Not staying to fill up the utmost margin of his time, but borrowing an hour or so, to be repaid again when he should relieve his reliever, Riderhood straightway followed on the track of Bradley Headstone.

He was a better follower than Bradley. It had been the calling of his life to slink and skulk and dog and waylay, and he knew his calling well. He effected such a forced march on leaving the Lock House that he was close up with himthat is to say, as close up with him as he deemed it convenient to bebefore another Lock was passed. His man looked back pretty often as he went, but got no hint of him. HE knew how to take advantage of the ground, and where to put the hedge between them, and where the wall, and when to duck, and when to drop, and had a thousand arts beyond the doomed Bradley's slow conception.

But, all his arts were brought to a standstill, like himself when Bradley, turning into a green lane or riding by the riversidea solitary spot run wild in nettles, briars, and brambles, and encumbered with the scathed trunks of a whole hedgerow of felled trees, on the outskirts of a little woodbegan stepping on these trunks and dropping down among them and stepping on them again, apparently as a schoolboy might have done, but assuredly with no schoolboy purpose, or want of purpose.

'What are you up to?' muttered Riderhood, down in the ditch, and holding the hedge a little open with both hands. And soon his actions made a most extraordinary reply. 'By George and the Draggin!' cried Riderhood, 'if he ain't a going to bathe!'

He had passed back, on and among the trunks of trees again, and has passed on to the waterside and had begun undressing on the grass. For a moment it had a suspicious look of suicide, arranged to counterfeit accident. 'But you wouldn't have fetched a bundle under your arm, from among that timber, if such was your game!' said Riderhood. Nevertheless it was a relief to him when the bather after a plunge and a few strokes came out. 'For I shouldn't,' he said in a feeling manner, 'have liked to lose you till I had made more money out of you neither.'

Prone in another ditch (he had changed his ditch as his man had changed his position), and holding apart so small a patch of the hedge that the sharpest eyes could not have detected him, Rogue Riderhood watched the bather dressing. And now gradually came the wonder that he stood up, completely clothed, another man, and not the Bargeman.

'Aha!' said Riderhood. 'Much as you was dressed that night. I see. You're a taking me with you, now. You're deep. But I knows a deeper.'

When the bather had finished dressing, he kneeled on the grass, doing something with his hands, and again stood up with his bundle under his arm. Looking all around him with great attention, he then went to the river's edge, and flung it in as far, and yet as lightly as he could. It was not until he was so decidedly upon his way again as to be beyond a bend of the river and for the time out of view, that Riderhood scrambled from the ditch.

'Now,' was his debate with himself 'shall I foller you on, or shall I let you loose for this once, and go a fishing?' The debate continuing, he followed, as a precautionary measure in any case, and got him again in sight. 'If I was to let you loose this once,' said Riderhood then, still following, 'I could make you come to me agin, or I could find you out in one way or another. If I wasn't to go a fishing, others might.I'll let you loose this once, and go a fishing!' With that, he suddenly dropped the pursuit and turned.

The miserable man whom he had released for the time, but not for long, went on towards London. Bradley was suspicious of every sound he heard, and of every face he saw, but was under a spell which very commonly falls upon the shedder of blood, and had no suspicion of the real danger that lurked in his life, and would have it yet. Riderhood was much in his thoughtshad never been out of his thoughts since the nightadventure of their first meeting; but

Riderhood occupied a very different place there, from the place of pursuer; and Bradley had been at the pains of devising so many means of fitting that place to him, and of wedging him into it, that his mind could not compass the possibility of his occupying any other. And this is another spell against which the shedder of blood for ever strives in vain. There are fifty doors by which discovery may enter. With infinite pains and cunning, he double locks and bars fortynine of them, and cannot see the fiftieth standing wide open.

Now, too, was he cursed with a state of mind more wearing and more wearisome than remorse. He had no remorse; but the evildoer who can hold that avenger at bay, cannot escape the slower torture of incessantly doing the evil deed again and doing it more efficiently. In the defensive declarations and pretended confessions of murderers, the pursuing shadow of this torture may be traced through every lie they tell. If I had done it as alleged, is it conceivable that I would have made this and this mistake? If I had done it as alleged, should I have left that unguarded place which that false and wicked witness against me so infamously deposed to? The state of that wretch who continually finds the weak spots in his own crime, and strives to strengthen them when it is unchangeable, is a state that aggravates the offence by doing the deed a thousand times instead of once; but it is a state, too, that tauntingly visits the offence upon a sullen unrepentant nature with its heaviest punishment every time.

Bradley toiled on, chained heavily to the idea of his hatred and his vengeance, and thinking how he might have satiated both in many better ways than the way he had taken. The instrument might have been better, the spot and the hour might have been better chosen. To batter a man down from behind in the dark, on the brink of a river, was well enough, but he ought to have been instantly disabled, whereas he had turned and seized his assailant; and so, to end it before chancehelp came, and to be rid of him, he had been hurriedly thrown backward into the river before the life was fully beaten out of him. Now if it could be done again, it must not be so done. Supposing his head had been held down under water for a while. Supposing the first blow had been truer. Supposing he had been shot. Supposing he had been strangled. Suppose this way, that way, the other way. Suppose anything but getting unchained from the one idea, for that was inexorably impossible.

The school reopened next day. The scholars saw little or no change in their master's face, for it always wore its slowly labouring expression. But, as he heard his classes, he was always doing the deed and doing it better. As he paused with his piece of chalk at the black board before writing on it, he was thinking of the spot, and whether the water was not deeper and the fall straighter, a little higher up, or a little lower down. He had half a mind to draw

a line or two upon the board, and show himself what he meant. He was doing it again and improving on the manner, at prayers, in his mental arithmetic, all through his questioning, all through the day.

Charley Hexam was a master now, in another school, under another head. It was evening, and Bradley was walking in his garden observed from behind a blind by gentle little Miss Peecher, who contemplated offering him a loan of her smelling salts for headache, when Mary Anne, in faithful attendance, held up her arm.

'Yes, Mary Anne?'

'Young Mr Hexam, if you please, ma'am, coming to see Mr Headstone.'

'Very good, Mary Anne.'

Again Mary Anne held up her arm.

'You may speak, Mary Anne?'

'Mr Headstone has beckoned young Mr Hexam into his house, ma'am, and he has gone in himself without waiting for young Mr Hexam to come up, and now HE has gone in too, ma'am, and has shut the door.'

'With all my heart, Mary Anne.'

Again Mary Anne's telegraphic arm worked.

'What more, Mary Anne?'

'They must find it rather dull and dark, Miss Peecher, for the parlour blind's down, and neither of them pulls it up.'

'There is no accounting,' said good Miss Peecher with a little sad sigh which she repressed by laying her hand on her neat methodical boddice, 'there is no accounting for tastes, Mary Anne.'

Charley, entering the dark room, stopped short when he saw his old friend in its yellow shade.

'Come in, Hexam, come in.'

Charley advanced to take the hand that was held out to him; but stopped again, short of it. The heavy, bloodshot eyes of the schoolmaster, rising to his face with an effort, met his look of scrutiny.

'Mr Headstone, what's the matter?'

'Matter? Where?'

'Mr Headstone, have you heard the news? This news about the fellow, Mr Eugene Wrayburn? That he is killed?'

'He is dead, then!' exclaimed Bradley.

Young Hexam standing looking at him, he moistened his lips with his tongue, looked about the room, glanced at his former pupil, and looked down. 'I heard of the outrage,' said Bradley, trying to constrain his working mouth, 'but I had not heard the end of it.'

'Where were you,' said the boy, advancing a step as he lowered his voice, 'when it was done? Stop! I don't ask that. Don't tell me. If you force your confidence upon me, Mr Headstone, I'll give up every word of it. Mind! Take notice. I'll give up it, and I'll give up you. I will!'

The wretched creature seemed to suffer acutely under this renunciation. A desolate air of utter and complete loneliness fell upon him, like a visible shade.

'It's for me to speak, not you,' said the boy. 'If you do, you'll do it at your peril. I am going to put your selfishness before you, Mr Headstoneyour passionate, violent, and ungovernable selfishnessto show you why I can, and why I will, have nothing more to do with you.'

He looked at young Hexam as if he were waiting for a scholar to go on with a lesson that he knew by heart and was deadly tired of. But he had said his last word to him.

'If you had any partI don't say whatin this attack,' pursued the boy; 'or if you know anything about itI don't say how muchor if you know who did itI go no closeryou did an injury to me that's never to be forgiven. You know that I took you with me to his chambers in the Temple when I told him my opinion of him, and made myself responsible for my opinion of you. You know that I took you with me when I was watching him with a view to recovering my sister and bringing her to her senses; you know that I have allowed myself to be mixed up with you, all through this business, in favouring your desire to marry my sister. And how do you know that, pursuing the ends of your own violent temper, you have not laid me open to suspicion? Is that your gratitude to me, Mr Headstone?'

Bradley sat looking steadily before him at the vacant air. As often as young Hexam stopped, he turned his eyes towards him, as if he were waiting for him to go on with the lesson, and get it done. As often as the boy resumed, Bradley

resumed his fixed face.

'I am going to be plain with you, Mr Headstone,' said young Hexam, shaking his head in a halfthreatening manner, 'because this is no time for affecting not to know things that I do knowexcept certain things at which it might not be very safe for you, to hint again. What I mean is this: if you were a good master, I was a good pupil. I have done you plenty of credit, and in improving my own reputation I have improved yours quite as much. Very well then. Starting on equal terms, I want to put before you how you have shown your gratitude to me, for doing all I could to further your wishes with reference to my sister. You have compromised me by being seen about with me, endeavouring to counteract this Mr Eugene Wrayburn. That's the first thing you have done. If my character, and my now dropping you, help me out of that, Mr Headstone, the deliverance is to be attributed to me, and not to you. No thanks to you for it!'

The boy stopping again, he moved his eyes again.

'I am going on, Mr Headstone, don't you be afraid. I am going on to the end, and I have told you beforehand what the end is. Now, you know my story. You are as well aware as I am, that I have had many disadvantages to leave behind me in life. You have heard me mention my father, and you are sufficiently acquainted with the fact that the home from which I, as I may say, escaped, might have been a more creditable one than it was. My father died, and then it might have been supposed that my way to respectability was pretty clear. No. For then my sister begins.'

He spoke as confidently, and with as entire an absence of any telltale colour in his cheek, as if there were no softening old time behind him. Not wonderful, for there WAS none in his hollow empty heart. What is there but self, for selfishness to see behind it?

'When I speak of my sister, I devoutly wish that you had never seen her, Mr Headstone. However, you did see her, and that's useless now. I confided in you about her. I explained her character to you, and how she interposed some ridiculous fanciful notions in the way of our being as respectable as I tried for. You fell in love with her, and I favoured you with all my might. She could not be induced to favour you, and so we came into collision with this Mr Eugene Wrayburn. Now, what have you done? Why, you have justified my sister in being firmly set against you from first to last, and you have put me in the wrong again! And why have you done it? Because, Mr Headstone, you are in all your passions so selfish, and so concentrated upon yourself that you have not bestowed one proper thought on me.'

The cool conviction with which the boy took up and held his position, could have been derived from no other vice in human nature.

'It is,' he went on, actually with tears, 'an extraordinary circumstance attendant on my life, that every effort I make towards perfect respectability, is impeded by somebody else through no fault of mine! Not content with doing what I have put before you, you will drag my name into notoriety through dragging my sister'swhich you are pretty sure to do, if my suspicions have any foundation at alland the worse you prove to be, the harder it will be for me to detach myself from being associated with you in people's minds.'

When he had dried his eyes and heaved a sob over his injuries, he began moving towards the door.

'However, I have made up my mind that I will become respectable in the scale of society, and that I will not be dragged down by others. I have done with my sister as well as with you. Since she cares so little for me as to care nothing for undermining my respectability, she shall go her way and I will go mine. My prospects are very good, and I mean to follow them alone. Mr Headstone, I don't say what you have got upon your conscience, for I don't know. Whatever lies upon it, I hope you will see the justice of keeping wide and clear of me, and will find a consolation in completely exonerating all but yourself. I hope, before many years are out, to succeed the master in my present school, and the mistress being a single woman, though some years older than I am, I might even marry her. If it is any comfort to you to know what plans I may work out by keeping myself strictly respectable in the scale of society, these are the plans at present occurring to me. In conclusion, if you feel a sense of having injured me, and a desire to make some small reparation, I hope you will think how respectable you might have been yourself and will contemplate your blighted existence.'

Was it strange that the wretched man should take this heavily to heart? Perhaps he had taken the boy to heart, first, through some long laborious years; perhaps through the same years he had found his drudgery lightened by communication with a brighter and more apprehensive spirit than his own; perhaps a family resemblance of face and voice between the boy and his sister, smote him hard in the gloom of his fallen state. For whichsoever reason, or for all, he drooped his devoted head when the boy was gone, and shrank together on the floor, and grovelled there, with the palms of his hands tightclasping his hot temples, in unutterable misery, and unrelieved by a single tear.

Rogue Riderhood had been busy with the river that day. He had fished with assiduity on the previous evening, but the light was short, and he had fished unsuccessfully. He had fished again that day with better luck, and had carried

his fish home to Plashwater Weir Mill Lockhouse, in a bundle.

Chapter 8

A FEW GRAINS OF PEPPER

The dolls' dressmaker went no more to the businesspremises of Pubsey and Co. in St Mary Axe, after chance had disclosed to her (as she supposed) the flinty and hypocritical character of Mr Riah. She often moralized over her work on the tricks and the manners of that venerable cheat, but made her little purchases elsewhere, and lived a secluded life. After much consultation with herself, she decided not to put Lizzie Hexam on her guard against the old man, arguing that the disappointment of finding him out would come upon her quite soon enough. Therefore, in her communication with her friend by letter, she was silent on this theme, and principally dilated on the backslidings of her bad child, who every day grew worse and worse.

'You wicked old boy,' Miss Wren would say to him, with a menacing forefinger, 'you'll force me to run away from you, after all, you will; and then you'll shake to bits, and there'll be nobody to pick up the pieces!'

At this foreshadowing of a desolate decease, the wicked old boy would whine and whimper, and would sit shaking himself into the lowest of low spirits, until such time as he could shake himself out of the house and shake another threepennyworth into himself. But dead drunk or dead sober (he had come to such a pass that he was least alive in the latter state), it was always on the conscience of the paralytic scarecrow that he had betrayed his sharp parent for sixty threepennyworths of rum, which were all gone, and that her sharpness would infallibly detect his having done it, sooner or later. All things considered therefore, and addition made of the state of his body to the state of his mind, the bed on which Mr Dolls reposed was a bed of roses from which the flowers and leaves had entirely faded, leaving him to lie upon the thorns and stalks.

On a certain day, Miss Wren was alone at her work, with the housedoor set open for coolness, and was trolling in a small sweet voice a mournful little song which might have been the song of the doll she was dressing, bemoaning the brittleness and meltability of wax, when whom should she descry standing on the pavement, looking in at her, but Mr Fledgeby.

'I thought it was you?' said Fledgeby, coming up the two steps.

'Did you?' Miss Wren retorted. 'And I thought it was you, young man. Quite a coincidence. You're not mistaken, and I'm not mistaken. How clever we are!'

'Well, and how are you?' said Fledgeby.

'I am pretty much as usual, sir,' replied Miss Wren. 'A very unfortunate parent, worried out of my life and senses by a very bad child.'

Fledgeby's small eyes opened so wide that they might have passed for ordinarysized eyes, as he stared about him for the very young person whom he supposed to be in question.

'But you're not a parent,' said Miss Wren, 'and consequently it's of no use talking to you upon a family subject.To what am I to attribute the honour and favour?'

'To a wish to improve your acquaintance,' Mr Fledgeby replied.

Miss Wren, stopping to bite her thread, looked at him very knowingly.

'We never meet now,' said Fledgeby; 'do we?'

'No,' said Miss Wren, chopping off the word.

'So I had a mind,' pursued Fledgeby, 'to come and have a talk with you about our dodging friend, the child of Israel.'

'So HE gave you my address; did he?' asked Miss Wren.

'I got it out of him,' said Fledgeby, with a stammer.

'You seem to see a good deal of him,' remarked Miss Wren, with shrewd distrust. 'A good deal of him you seem to see, considering.'

'Yes, I do,' said Fledgeby. 'Considering.'

'Haven't you,' inquired the dressmaker, bending over the doll on which her art was being exercised, 'done interceding with him yet?'

'No,' said Fledgeby, shaking his head.

'La! Been interceding with him all this time, and sticking to him still?' said Miss Wren, busy with her work.

'Sticking to him is the word,' said Fledgeby.

Miss Wren pursued her occupation with a concentrated air, and asked, after an interval of silent industry:

'Are you in the army?'

'Not exactly,' said Fledgeby, rather flattered by the question.

'Navy?' asked Miss Wren.

'Nno,' said Fledgeby. He qualified these two negatives, as if he were not absolutely in either service, but was almost in both.

'What are you then?' demanded Miss Wren.

'I am a gentleman, I am,' said Fledgeby.

'Oh!' assented Jenny, screwing up her mouth with an appearance of conviction. 'Yes, to be sure! That accounts for your having so much time to give to interceding. But only to think how kind and friendly a gentleman you must be!'

Mr Fledgeby found that he was skating round a board marked Dangerous, and had better cut out a fresh track. 'Let's get back to the dodgerest of the dodgers,' said he. 'What's he up to in the case of your friend the handsome gal? He must have some object. What's his object?'

'Cannot undertake to say, sir, I am sure!' returned Miss Wren, composedly.

'He won't acknowledge where she's gone,' said Fledgeby; 'and I have a fancy that I should like to have another look at her. Now I know he knows where she is gone.'

'Cannot undertake to say, sir, I am sure!' Miss Wren again rejoined.

'And you know where she is gone,' hazarded Fledgeby.

'Cannot undertake to say, sir, really,' replied Miss Wren.

The quaint little chin met Mr Fledgeby's gaze with such a baffling hitch, that that agreeable gentleman was for some time at a loss how to resume his fascinating part in the dialogue. At length he said:

'Miss Jenny!That's your name, if I don't mistake?'

'Probably you don't mistake, sir,' was Miss Wren's cool answer; 'because you had it on the best authority. Mine, you know.'

'Miss Jenny! Instead of coming up and being dead, let's come out and look alive. It'll pay better, I assure you,' said Fledgeby, bestowing an inveigling twinkle or two upon the dressmaker. 'You'll find it pay better.'

'Perhaps,' said Miss Jenny, holding out her doll at arm's length, and critically contemplating the effect of her art with her scissors on her lips and her head thrown back, as if her interest lay there, and not in the conversation; 'perhaps you'll explain your meaning, young man, which is Greek to me.You must have another touch of blue in your trimming, my dear.' Having addressed the last remark to her fair client, Miss Wren proceeded to snip at some blue fragments that lay before her, among fragments of all colours, and to thread a needle from a skein of blue silk.

'Look here,' said Fledgeby.'Are you attending?'

'I am attending, sir,' replied Miss Wren, without the slightest appearance of so doing. 'Another touch of blue in your trimming, my dear.'

'Well, look here,' said Fledgeby, rather discouraged by the circumstances under which he found himself pursuing the conversation. 'If you're attending'

('Light blue, my sweet young lady,' remarked Miss Wren, in a sprightly tone, 'being best suited to your fair complexion and your flaxen curls.')

'I say, if you're attending,' proceeded Fledgeby, 'it'll pay better in this way. It'll lead in a roundabout manner to your buying damage and waste of Pubsey and Co. at a nominal price, or even getting it for nothing.'

'Aha!' thought the dressmaker. 'But you are not so roundabout, Little Eyes, that I don't notice your answering for Pubsey and Co. after all! Little Eyes, Little Eyes, you're too cunning by half.'

'And I take it for granted,' pursued Fledgeby, 'that to get the most of your materials for nothing would be well worth your while, Miss Jenny?'

'You may take it for granted,' returned the dressmaker with many knowing nods, 'that it's always well worth my while to make money.'

'Now,' said Fledgeby approvingly, 'you're answering to a sensible purpose. Now, you're coming out and looking alive! So I make so free, Miss Jenny, as to offer the remark, that you and Judah were too thick together to last. You can't come to be intimate with such a deep file as Judah without beginning to see a little way into him, you know,' said Fledgeby with a wink.

'I must own,' returned the dressmaker, with her eyes upon her work, 'that we are not good friends at present.'

'I know you're not good friends at present,' said Fledgeby. 'I know all about it. I should like to pay off Judah, by not letting him have his own deep way in everything. In most things he'll get it by hook or by crook, buthang it all!don't

let him have his own deep way in everything. That's too much.' Mr Fledgeby said this with some display of indignant warmth, as if he was counsel in the cause for Virtue.

'How can I prevent his having his own way?' began the dressmaker.

'Deep way, I called it,' said Fledgeby.

'His own deep way, in anything?'

'I'll tell you,' said Fledgeby. 'I like to hear you ask it, because it's looking alive. It's what I should expect to find in one of your sagacious understanding. Now, candidly.'

'Eh?' cried Miss Jenny.

'I said, now candidly,' Mr Fledgeby explained, a little put out.

'Ohh!'

'I should be glad to countermine him, respecting the handsome gal, your friend. He means something there. You may depend upon it, Judah means something there. He has a motive, and of course his motive is a dark motive. Now, whatever his motive is, it's necessary to his motive'Mr Fledgeby's constructive powers were not equal to the avoidance of some tautology here'that it should be kept from me, what he has done with her. So I put it to you, who know: What HAS he done with her? I ask no more. And is that asking much, when you understand that it will pay?'

Miss Jenny Wren, who had cast her eyes upon the bench again after her last interruption, sat looking at it, needle in hand but not working, for some moments. She then briskly resumed her work, and said with a sidelong glance of her eyes and chin at Mr Fledgeby:

'Where d'ye live?'

'Albany, Piccadilly,' replied Fledgeby.

'When are you at home?'

'When you like.'

'Breakfasttime?' said Jenny, in her abruptest and shortest manner.

'No better time in the day,' said Fledgeby.

'I'll look in upon you tomorrow, young man. Those two ladies,' pointing to dolls, 'have an appointment in Bond Street at ten precisely. When I've dropped

'em there, I'll drive round to you.' With a weird little laugh, Miss Jenny pointed to her crutchstick as her equipage.

'This is looking alive indeed!' cried Fledgeby, rising.

'Mark you! I promise you nothing,' said the dolls' dressmaker, dabbing two dabs at him with her needle, as if she put out both his eyes.

'No no. I understand,' returned Fledgeby. 'The damage and waste question shall be settled first. It shall be made to pay; don't you be afraid. Goodday, Miss Jenny.'

'Goodday, young man.'

Mr Fledgeby's prepossessing form withdrew itself; and the little dressmaker, clipping and snipping and stitching, and stitching and snipping and clipping, fell to work at a great rate; musing and muttering all the time.

'Misty, misty, misty. Can't make it out. Little Eyes and the wolf in a conspiracy? Or Little Eyes and the wolf against one another? Can't make it out. My poor Lizzie, have they both designs against you, either way? Can't make it out. Is Little Eyes Pubsey, and the wolf Co? Can't make it out. Pubsey true to Co, and Co to Pubsey? Pubsey false to Co, and Co to Pubsey? Can't make it out. What said Little Eyes? "Now, candidly?" Ah! However the cat jumps, HE'S a liar. That's all I can make out at present; but you may go to bed in the Albany, Piccadilly, with THAT for your pillow, young man!' Thereupon, the little dressmaker again dabbed out his eyes separately, and making a loop in the air of her thread and deftly catching it into a knot with her needle, seemed to bowstring him into the bargain.

For the terrors undergone by Mr Dolls that evening when his little parent sat profoundly meditating over her work, and when he imagined himself found out, as often as she changed her attitude, or turned her eyes towards him, there is no adequate name. Moreover it was her habit to shake her head at that wretched old boy whenever she caught his eye as he shivered and shook. What are popularly called 'the trembles' being in full force upon him that evening, and likewise what are popularly called 'the horrors,' he had a very bad time of it; which was not made better by his being so remorseful as frequently to moan 'Sixty threepennorths.' This imperfect sentence not being at all intelligible as a confession, but sounding like a Gargantuan order for a dram, brought him into new difficulties by occasioning his parent to pounce at him in a more than usually snappish manner, and to overwhelm him with bitter reproaches.

What was a bad time for Mr Dolls, could not fail to be a bad time for the dolls' dressmaker. However, she was on the alert next morning, and drove to Bond

Street, and set down the two ladies punctually, and then directed her equipage to conduct her to the Albany. Arrived at the doorway of the house in which Mr Fledgeby's chambers were, she found a lady standing there in a travelling dress, holding in her handof all things in the worlda gentleman's hat.

'You want some one?' said the lady in a stern manner.

'I am going up stairs to Mr Fledgeby's.'

'You cannot do that at this moment. There is a gentleman with him. I am waiting for the gentleman. His business with Mr Fledgeby will very soon be transacted, and then you can go up. Until the gentleman comes down, you must wait here.'

While speaking, and afterwards, the lady kept watchfully between her and the staircase, as if prepared to oppose her going up, by force. The lady being of a stature to stop her with a hand, and looking mightily determined, the dressmaker stood still.

'Well? Why do you listen?' asked the lady.

'I am not listening,' said the dressmaker.

'What do you hear?' asked the lady, altering her phrase.

'Is it a kind of a spluttering somewhere?' said the dressmaker, with an inquiring look.

'Mr Fledgeby in his showerbath, perhaps,' remarked the lady, smiling.

'And somebody's beating a carpet, I think?'

'Mr Fledgeby's carpet, I dare say,' replied the smiling lady.

Miss Wren had a reasonably good eye for smiles, being well accustomed to them on the part of her young friends, though their smiles mostly ran smaller than in nature. But she had never seen so singular a smile as that upon this lady's face. It twitched her nostrils open in a remarkable manner, and contracted her lips and eyebrows. It was a smile of enjoyment too, though of such a fierce kind that Miss Wren thought she would rather not enjoy herself than do it in that way.

'Well!' said the lady, watching her. 'What now?'

'I hope there's nothing the matter!' said the dressmaker.

'Where?' inquired the lady.

'I don't know where,' said Miss Wren, staring about her. 'But I never heard such odd noises. Don't you think I had better call somebody?'

'I think you had better not,' returned the lady with a significant frown, and drawing closer.

On this hint, the dressmaker relinquished the idea, and stood looking at the lady as hard as the lady looked at her. Meanwhile the dressmaker listened with amazement to the odd noises which still continued, and the lady listened too, but with a coolness in which there was no trace of amazement.

Soon afterwards, came a slamming and banging of doors; and then came running down stairs, a gentleman with whiskers, and out of breath, who seemed to be redhot.

'Is your business done, Alfred?' inquired the lady.

'Very thoroughly done,' replied the gentleman, as he took his hat from her.

'You can go up to Mr Fledgeby as soon as you like,' said the lady, moving haughtily away.

'Oh! And you can take these three pieces of stick with you,' added the gentleman politely, 'and say, if you please, that they come from Mr Alfred Lammle, with his compliments on leaving England. Mr Alfred Lammle. Be so good as not to forget the name.'

The three pieces of stick were three broken and frayed fragments of a stout lithe cane. Miss Jenny taking them wonderingly, and the gentleman repeating with a grin, 'Mr Alfred Lammle, if you'll be so good. Compliments, on leaving England,' the lady and gentleman walked away quite deliberately, and Miss Jenny and her crutchstick went up stairs. 'Lammle, Lammle, Lammle?' Miss Jenny repeated as she panted from stair to stair, 'where have I heard that name? Lammle, Lammle? I know! Saint Mary Axe!'

With a gleam of new intelligence in her sharp face, the dolls' dressmaker pulled at Fledgeby's bell. No one answered; but, from within the chambers, there proceeded a continuous spluttering sound of a highly singular and unintelligible nature.

'Good gracious! Is Little Eyes choking?' cried Miss Jenny.

Pulling at the bell again and getting no reply, she pushed the outer door, and found it standing ajar. No one being visible on her opening it wider, and the spluttering continuing, she took the liberty of opening an inner door, and then beheld the extraordinary spectacle of Mr Fledgeby in a shirt, a pair of Turkish

trousers, and a Turkish cap, rolling over and over on his own carpet, and spluttering wonderfully.

'Oh Lord!' gasped Mr Fledgeby. 'Oh my eye! Stop thief! I am strangling. Fire! Oh my eye! A glass of water. Give me a glass of water. Shut the door. Murder! Oh Lord!' And then rolled and spluttered more than ever.

Hurrying into another room, Miss Jenny got a glass of water, and brought it for Fledgeby's relief: who, gasping, spluttering, and rattling in his throat betweenwhiles, drank some water, and laid his head faintly on her arm.

'Oh my eye!' cried Fledgeby, struggling anew. 'It's salt and snuff. It's up my nose, and down my throat, and in my windpipe. Ugh! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ahhhh!' And here, crowing fearfully, with his eyes starting out of his head, appeared to be contending with every mortal disease incidental to poultry.

'And Oh my Eye, I'm so sore!' cried Fledgeby, starting, over on his back, in a spasmodic way that caused the dressmaker to retreat to the wall. 'Oh I smart so! Do put something to my back and arms, and legs and shoulders. Ugh! It's down my throat again and can't come up. Ow! Ow! Ow! Ahhhh! Oh I smart so!' Here Mr Fledgeby bounded up, and bounded down, and went rolling over and over again.

The dolls' dressmaker looked on until he rolled himself into a corner with his Turkish slippers uppermost, and then, resolving in the first place to address her ministration to the salt and snuff, gave him more water and slapped his back. But, the latter application was by no means a success, causing Mr Fledgeby to scream, and to cry out, 'Oh my eye! don't slap me! I'm covered with weales and I smart so!'

However, he gradually ceased to choke and crow, saving at intervals, and Miss Jenny got him into an easychair: where, with his eyes red and watery, with his features swollen, and with some halfdozen livid bars across his face, he presented a most rueful sight.

'What ever possessed you to take salt and snuff, young man?' inquired Miss Jenny.

'I didn't take it,' the dismal youth replied. 'It was crammed into my mouth.'

'Who crammed it?' asked Miss Jenny.

'He did,' answered Fledgeby. 'The assassin. Lammle. He rubbed it into my mouth and up my nose and down my throatOw! Ow! Ow! Ahhhh! Ugh!to prevent my crying out, and then cruelly assaulted me.'

'With this?' asked Miss Jenny, showing the pieces of cane.

'That's the weapon,' said Fledgeby, eyeing it with the air of an acquaintance. 'He broke it over me. Oh I smart so! How did you come by it?'

'When he ran down stairs and joined the lady he had left in the hall with his hat'Miss Jenny began.

'Oh!' groaned Mr Fledgeby, writhing, 'she was holding his hat, was she? I might have known she was in it.'

'When he came down stairs and joined the lady who wouldn't let me come up, he gave me the pieces for you, and I was to say, "'With Mr Alfred Lammle's compliments on his leaving England.'" Miss Jenny said it with such spiteful satisfaction, and such a hitch of her chin and eyes as might have added to Mr Fledgeby's miseries, if he could have noticed either, in his bodily pain with his hand to his head.

'Shall I go for the police?' inquired Miss Jenny, with a nimble start towards the door.

'Stop! No, don't!' cried Fledgeby. 'Don't, please. We had better keep it quiet. Will you be so good as shut the door? Oh I do smart so!'

In testimony of the extent to which he smarted, Mr Fledgeby came wallowing out of the easychair, and took another roll on the carpet.

'Now the door's shut,' said Mr Fledgeby, sitting up in anguish, with his Turkish cap half on and half off, and the bars on his face getting bluer, 'do me the kindness to look at my back and shoulders. They must be in an awful state, for I hadn't got my dressinggown on, when the brute came rushing in. Cut my shirt away from the collar; there's a pair of scissors on that table. Oh!' groaned Mr Fledgeby, with his hand to his head again. 'How I do smart, to be sure!'

'There?' inquired Miss Jenny, alluding to the back and shoulders.

'Oh Lord, yes!' moaned Fledgeby, rocking himself. 'And all over! Everywhere!'

The busy little dressmaker quickly snipped the shirt away, and laid bare the results of as furious and sound a thrashing as even Mr Fledgeby merited. 'You may well smart, young man!' exclaimed Miss Jenny. And stealthily rubbed her little hands behind him, and poked a few exultant pokes with her two forefingers over the crown of his head.

'What do you think of vinegar and brown paper?' inquired the suffering

Fledgeby, still rocking and moaning. 'Does it look as if vinegar and brown paper was the sort of application?'

'Yes,' said Miss Jenny, with a silent chuckle. 'It looks as if it ought to be Pickled.'

Mr Fledgeby collapsed under the word 'Pickled,' and groaned again. 'My kitchen is on this floor,' he said; 'you'll find brown paper in a dresserdrawer there, and a bottle of vinegar on a shelf. Would you have the kindness to make a few plasters and put 'em on? It can't be kept too quiet.'

'One, twohumfive, six. You'll want six,' said the dressmaker.

'There's smart enough,' whimpered Mr Fledgeby, groaning and writhing again, 'for sixty.'

Miss Jenny repaired to the kitchen, scissors in hand, found the brown paper and found the vinegar, and skilfully cut out and steeped six large plasters. When they were all lying ready on the dresser, an idea occurred to her as she was about to gather them up.

'I think,' said Miss Jenny with a silent laugh, 'he ought to have a little pepper? Just a few grains? I think the young man's tricks and manners make a claim upon his friends for a little pepper?'

Mr Fledgeby's evil star showing her the pepperbox on the chimneypiece, she climbed upon a chair, and got it down, and sprinkled all the plasters with a judicious hand. She then went back to Mr Fledgeby, and stuck them all on him: Mr Fledgeby uttering a sharp howl as each was put in its place.

'There, young man!' said the dolls' dressmaker. 'Now I hope you feel pretty comfortable?'

Apparently, Mr Fledgeby did not, for he cried by way of answer, 'Ohh how I do smart!'

Miss Jenny got his Persian gown upon him, extinguished his eyes crookedly with his Persian cap, and helped him to his bed: upon which he climbed groaning. 'Business between you and me being out of the question today, young man, and my time being precious,' said Miss Jenny then, 'I'll make myself scarce. Are you comfortable now?'

'Oh my eye!' cried Mr Fledgeby. 'No, I ain't. Ohhh! how I do smart!'

The last thing Miss Jenny saw, as she looked back before closing the room door, was Mr Fledgeby in the act of plunging and gambolling all over his bed,

like a porpoise or dolphin in its native element. She then shut the bedroom door, and all the other doors, and going down stairs and emerging from the Albany into the busy streets, took omnibus for Saint Mary Axe: pressing on the road all the gailydressed ladies whom she could see from the window, and making them unconscious layfigures for dolls, while she mentally cut them out and basted them.

Chapter 9

TWO PLACES VACATED

Set down by the omnibus at the corner of Saint Mary Axe, and trusting to her feet and her crutchstick within its precincts, the dolls' dressmaker proceeded to the place of business of Pubsey and Co. All there was sunny and quiet externally, and shady and quiet internally. Hiding herself in the entry outside the glass door, she could see from that post of observation the old man in his spectacles sitting writing at his desk.

'Boh!' cried the dressmaker, popping in her head at the glassdoor. 'Mr Wolf at home?'

The old man took his glasses off, and mildly laid them down beside him. 'Ah Jenny, is it you? I thought you had given me up.'

'And so I had given up the treacherous wolf of the forest,' she replied; 'but, godmother, it strikes me you have come back. I am not quite sure, because the wolf and you change forms. I want to ask you a question or two, to find out whether you are really godmother or really wolf. May I?'

'Yes, Jenny, yes.' But Riah glanced towards the door, as if he thought his principal might appear there, unseasonably.

'If you're afraid of the fox,' said Miss Jenny, 'you may dismiss all present expectations of seeing that animal. HE won't show himself abroad, for many a day.'

'What do you mean, my child?'

'I mean, godmother,' replied Miss Wren, sitting down beside the Jew, 'that the fox has caught a famous flogging, and that if his skin and bones are not tingling, aching, and smarting at this present instant, no fox did ever tingle, ache, and smart.' Therewith Miss Jenny related what had come to pass in the

Albany, omitting the few grains of pepper.

'Now, godmother,' she went on, 'I particularly wish to ask you what has taken place here, since I left the wolf here? Because I have an idea about the size of a marble, rolling about in my little noddle. First and foremost, are you Pubsey and Co., or are you either? Upon your solemn word and honour.'

The old man shook his head.

'Secondly, isn't Fledgeby both Pubsey and Co.?'

The old man answered with a reluctant nod.

'My idea,' exclaimed Miss Wren, 'is now about the size of an orange. But before it gets any bigger, welcome back, dear godmother!'

The little creature folded her arms about the old man's neck with great earnestness, and kissed him. 'I humbly beg your forgiveness, godmother. I am truly sorry. I ought to have had more faith in you. But what could I suppose when you said nothing for yourself, you know? I don't mean to offer that as a justification, but what could I suppose, when you were a silent party to all he said? It did look bad; now didn't it?'

'It looked so bad, Jenny,' responded the old man, with gravity, 'that I will straightway tell you what an impression it wrought upon me. I was hateful in mine own eyes. I was hateful to myself, in being so hateful to the debtor and to you. But more than that, and worse than that, and to pass out far and broad beyond myselfI reflected that evening, sitting alone in my garden on the housetop, that I was doing dishonour to my ancient faith and race. I reflectedclearly reflected for the first timethat in bending my neck to the yoke I was willing to wear, I bent the unwilling necks of the whole Jewish people. For it is not, in Christian countries, with the Jews as with other peoples. Men say, 'This is a bad Greek, but there are good Greeks. This is a bad Turk, but there are good Turks.' Not so with the Jews. Men find the bad among us easily enoughamong what peoples are the bad not easily found?but they take the worst of us as samples of the best; they take the lowest of us as presentations of the highest; and they say "All Jews are alike." If, doing what I was content to do here, because I was grateful for the past and have small need of money now, I had been a Christian, I could have done it, compromising no one but my individual self. But doing it as a Jew, I could not choose but compromise the Jews of all conditions and all countries. It is a little hard upon us, but it is the truth. I would that all our people remembered it! Though I have little right to say so, seeing that it came home so late to me.'

The dolls' dressmaker sat holding the old man by the hand, and looking

thoughtfully in his face.

'Thus I reflected, I say, sitting that evening in my garden on the housetop. And passing the painful scene of that day in review before me many times, I always saw that the poor gentleman believed the story readily, because I was one of the Jewsthat you believed the story readily, my child, because I was one of the Jewsthat the story itself first came into the invention of the originator thereof, because I was one of the Jews. This was the result of my having had you three before me, face to face, and seeing the thing visibly presented as upon a theatre. Wherefore I perceived that the obligation was upon me to leave this service. But Jenny, my dear,' said Riah, breaking off, 'I promised that you should pursue your questions, and I obstruct them.'

'On the contrary, godmother; my idea is as large now as a pumpkinand YOU know what a pumpkin is, don't you? So you gave notice that you were going? Does that come next?' asked Miss Jenny with a look of close attention.

'I indited a letter to my master. Yes. To that effect.'

'And what said TinglingTossingAchingScreamingScratchingSmarter?' asked Miss Wren with an unspeakable enjoyment in the utterance of those honourable titles and in the recollection of the pepper.

'He held me to certain months of servitude, which were his lawful term of notice. They expire tomorrow. Upon their expirationnot beforeI had meant to set myself right with my Cinderella.'

'My idea is getting so immense now,' cried Miss Wren, clasping her temples, 'that my head won't hold it! Listen, godmother; I am going to expound. Little Eyes (that's ScreamingScratchingSmarter) owes you a heavy grudge for going. Little Eyes casts about how best to pay you off. Little Eyes thinks of Lizzie. Little Eyes says to himself, 'I'll find out where he has placed that girl, and I'll betray his secret because it's dear to him.' Perhaps Little Eyes thinks, "I'll make love to her myself too;" but that I can't swearall the rest I can. So, Little Eyes comes to me, and I go to Little Eyes. That's the way of it. And now the murder's all out, I'm sorry,' added the dolls' dressmaker, rigid from head to foot with energy as she shook her little fist before her eyes, 'that I didn't give him Cayenne pepper and chopped pickled Capsicum!'

This expression of regret being but partially intelligible to Mr Riah, the old man reverted to the injuries Fledgeby had received, and hinted at the necessity of his at once going to tend that beaten cur.

'Godmother, godmother, godmother!' cried Miss Wren irritably, 'I really lose all patience with you. One would think you believed in the Good Samaritan.

How can you be so inconsistent?'

'Jenny dear,' began the old man gently, 'it is the custom of our people to help'

'Oh! Bother your people!' interposed Miss Wren, with a toss of her head. 'If your people don't know better than to go and help Little Eyes, it's a pity they ever got out of Egypt. Over and above that,' she added, 'he wouldn't take your help if you offered it. Too much ashamed. Wants to keep it close and quiet, and to keep you out of the way.'

They were still debating this point when a shadow darkened the entry, and the glass door was opened by a messenger who brought a letter unceremoniously addressed, 'Riah.' To which he said there was an answer wanted.

The letter, which was scrawled in pencil uphill and downhill and round crooked corners, ran thus:

'OLD RIAH,

Your accounts being all squared, go. Shut up the place, turn out directly, and send me the key by bearer. Go. You are an unthankful dog of a Jew. Get out.

F.'

The dolls' dressmaker found it delicious to trace the screaming and smarting of Little Eyes in the distorted writing of this epistle. She laughed over it and jeered at it in a convenient corner (to the great astonishment of the messenger) while the old man got his few goods together in a black bag. That done, the shutters of the upper windows closed, and the office blind pulled down, they issued forth upon the steps with the attendant messenger. There, while Miss Jenny held the bag, the old man locked the house door, and handed over the key to him; who at once retired with the same.

'Well, godmother,' said Miss Wren, as they remained upon the steps together, looking at one another. 'And so you're thrown upon the world!'

'It would appear so, Jenny, and somewhat suddenly.'

'Where are you going to seek your fortune?' asked Miss Wren.

The old man smiled, but looked about him with a look of having lost his way in life, which did not escape the dolls' dressmaker.

'Verily, Jenny,' said he, 'the question is to the purpose, and more easily asked than answered. But as I have experience of the ready goodwill and good help of those who have given occupation to Lizzie, I think I will seek them out for myself.'

'On foot?' asked Miss Wren, with a chop.

'Ay!' said the old man. 'Have I not my staff?'

It was exactly because he had his staff, and presented so quaint an aspect, that she mistrusted his making the journey.

'The best thing you can do,' said Jenny, 'for the time being, at all events, is to come home with me, godmother. Nobody's there but my bad child, and Lizzie's lodging stands empty.' The old man when satisfied that no inconvenience could be entailed on any one by his compliance, readily complied; and the singularlyassorted couple once more went through the streets together.

Now, the bad child having been strictly charged by his parent to remain at home in her absence, of course went out; and, being in the very last stage of mental decrepitude, went out with two objects; firstly, to establish a claim he conceived himself to have upon any licensed victualler living, to be supplied with threepennyworth of rum for nothing; and secondly, to bestow some maudlin remorse on Mr Eugene Wrayburn, and see what profit came of it. Stumblingly pursuing these two designsthey both meant rum, the only meaning of which he was capablethe degraded creature staggered into Covent Garden Market and there bivouacked, to have an attack of the trembles succeeded by an attack of the horrors, in a doorway.

This market of Covent Garden was quite out of the creature's line of road, but it had the attraction for him which it has for the worst of the solitary members of the drunken tribe. It may be the companionship of the nightly stir, or it may be the companionship of the gin and beer that slop about among carters and hucksters, or it may be the companionship of the trodden vegetable refuse which is so like their own dress that perhaps they take the Market for a great wardrobe; but be it what it may, you shall see no such individual drunkards on doorsteps anywhere, as there. Of dozing womendrunkards especially, you shall come upon such specimens there, in the morning sunlight, as you might seek out of doors in vain through London. Such stale vapid rejected cabbageleaf and cabbagestalk dress, such damagedorange countenance, such squashed pulp of humanity, are open to the day nowhere else. So, the attraction of the Market drew Mr Dolls to it, and he had out his two fits of trembles and horrors in a doorway on which a woman had had out her sodden nap a few hours before.

There is a swarm of young savages always flitting about this same place, creeping off with fragments of orangechests, and mouldy litterHeaven knows into what holes they can convey them, having no home!whose bare feet fall with a blunt dull softness on the pavement as the policeman hunts them, and

who are (perhaps for that reason) little heard by the Powers that be, whereas in topboots they would make a deafening clatter. These, delighting in the trembles and the horrors of Mr Dolls, as in a gratuitous drama, flocked about him in his doorway, butted at him, leaped at him, and pelted him. Hence, when he came out of his invalid retirement and shook off that ragged train, he was much bespattered, and in worse case than ever. But, not yet at his worst; for, going into a publichouse, and being supplied in stress of business with his rum, and seeking to vanish without payment, he was collared, searched, found penniless, and admonished not to try that again, by having a pail of dirty water cast over him. This application superinduced another fit of the trembles; after which Mr Dolls, as finding himself in good cue for making a call on a professional friend, addressed himself to the Temple.

There was nobody at the chambers but Young Blight. That discreet youth, sensible of a certain incongruity in the association of such a client with the business that might be coming some day, with the best intentions temporized with Dolls, and offered a shilling for coachhire home. Mr Dolls, accepting the shilling, promptly laid it out in two threepennyworths of conspiracy against his life, and two threepennyworths of raging repentance. Returning to the Chambers with which burden, he was descried coming round into the court, by the wary young Blight watching from the window: who instantly closed the outer door, and left the miserable object to expend his fury on the panels.

The more the door resisted him, the more dangerous and imminent became that bloody conspiracy against his life. Force of police arriving, he recognized in them the conspirators, and laid about him hoarsely, fiercely, staringly, convulsively, foamingly. A humble machine, familiar to the conspirators and called by the expressive name of Stretcher, being unavoidably sent for, he was rendered a harmless bundle of torn rags by being strapped down upon it, with voice and consciousness gone out of him, and life fast going. As this machine was borne out at the Temple gate by four men, the poor little dolls' dressmaker and her Jewish friend were coming up the street.

'Let us see what it is,' cried the dressmaker. 'Let us make haste and look, godmother.'

The brisk little crutchstick was but too brisk. 'O gentlemen, gentlemen, he belongs to me!'

'Belongs to you?' said the head of the party, stopping it.

'O yes, dear gentlemen, he's my child, out without leave. My poor bad, bad boy! and he don't know me, he don't know me! O what shall I do,' cried the little creature, wildly beating her hands together, 'when my own child don't

know me!'

The head of the party looked (as well he might) to the old man for explanation. He whispered, as the dolls' dressmaker bent over the exhausted form and vainly tried to extract some sign of recognition from it: 'It's her drunken father.'

As the load was put down in the street, Riah drew the head of the party aside, and whispered that he thought the man was dying. 'No, surely not?' returned the other. But he became less confident, on looking, and directed the bearers to 'bring him to the nearest doctor's shop.'

Thither he was brought; the window becoming from within, a wall of faces, deformed into all kinds of shapes through the agency of globular red bottles, green bottles, blue bottles, and other coloured bottles. A ghastly light shining upon him that he didn't need, the beast so furious but a few minutes gone, was quiet enough now, with a strange mysterious writing on his face, reflected from one of the great bottles, as if Death had marked him: 'Mine.'

The medical testimony was more precise and more to the purpose than it sometimes is in a Court of Justice. 'You had better send for something to cover it. All's over.'

Therefore, the police sent for something to cover it, and it was covered and borne through the streets, the people falling away. After it, went the dolls' dressmaker, hiding her face in the Jewish skirts, and clinging to them with one hand, while with the other she plied her stick. It was carried home, and, by reason that the staircase was very narrow, it was put down in the parlourthe little workingbench being set aside to make room for itand there, in the midst of the dolls with no speculation in their eyes, lay Mr Dolls with no speculation in his.

Many flaunting dolls had to be gaily dressed, before the money was in the dressmaker's pocket to get mourning for Mr Dolls. As the old man, Riah, sat by, helping her in such small ways as he could, he found it difficult to make out whether she really did realize that the deceased had been her father.

'If my poor boy,' she would say, 'had been brought up better, he might have done better. Not that I reproach myself. I hope I have no cause for that.'

'None indeed, Jenny, I am very certain.'

'Thank you, godmother. It cheers me to hear you say so. But you see it is so hard to bring up a child well, when you work, work, work, all day. When he was out of employment, I couldn't always keep him near me. He got fractious

and nervous, and I was obliged to let him go into the streets. And he never did well in the streets, he never did well out of sight. How often it happens with children!'

'Too often, even in this sad sense!' thought the old man.

'How can I say what I might have turned out myself, but for my back having been so bad and my legs so queer, when I was young!' the dressmaker would go on. 'I had nothing to do but work, and so I worked. I couldn't play. But my poor unfortunate child could play, and it turned out the worse for him.'

'And not for him alone, Jenny.'

'Well! I don't know, godmother. He suffered heavily, did my unfortunate boy. He was very, very ill sometimes. And I called him a quantity of names;' shaking her head over her work, and dropping tears. 'I don't know that his going wrong was much the worse for me. If it ever was, let us forget it.'

'You are a good girl, you are a patient girl.'

'As for patience,' she would reply with a shrug, 'not much of that, godmother. If I had been patient, I should never have called him names. But I hope I did it for his good. And besides, I felt my responsibility as a mother, so much. I tried reasoning, and reasoning failed. I tried coaxing, and coaxing failed. I tried scolding and scolding failed. But I was bound to try everything, you know, with such a charge upon my hands. Where would have been my duty to my poor lost boy, if I had not tried everything!'

With such talk, mostly in a cheerful tone on the part of the industrious little creature, the daywork and the nightwork were beguiled until enough of smart dolls had gone forth to bring into the kitchen, where the workingbench now stood, the sombre stuff that the occasion required, and to bring into the house the other sombre preparations. 'And now,' said Miss Jenny, 'having knocked off my rosycheeked young friends, I'll knock off my whitecheeked self.' This referred to her making her own dress, which at last was done. 'The disadvantage of making for yourself,' said Miss Jenny, as she stood upon a chair to look at the result in the glass, 'is, that you can't charge anybody else for the job, and the advantage is, that you haven't to go out to try on. Humph! Very fair indeed! If He could see me now (whoever he is) I hope he wouldn't repent of his bargain!'

The simple arrangements were of her own making, and were stated to Riah thus:

'I mean to go alone, godmother, in my usual carriage, and you'll be so kind as keep house while I am gone. It's not far off. And when I return, we'll have a cup of tea, and a chat over future arrangements. It's a very plain last house that I have been able to give my poor unfortunate boy; but he'll accept the will for the deed if he knows anything about it; and if he doesn't know anything about it,' with a sob, and wiping her eyes, 'why, it won't matter to him. I see the service in the Prayerbook says, that we brought nothing into this world and it is certain we can take nothing out. It comforts me for not being able to hire a lot of stupid undertaker's things for my poor child, and seeming as if I was trying to smuggle 'em out of this world with him, when of course I must break down in the attempt, and bring 'em all back again. As it is, there'll be nothing to bring back but me, and that's quite consistent, for I shan't be brought back, some day!'

After that previous carrying of him in the streets, the wretched old fellow seemed to be twice buried. He was taken on the shoulders of half a dozen blossomfaced men, who shuffled with him to the churchyard, and who were preceded by another blossomfaced man, affecting a stately stalk, as if he were a Policeman of the D(eath) Division, and ceremoniously pretending not to know his intimate acquaintances, as he led the pageant. Yet, the spectacle of only one little mourner hobbling after, caused many people to turn their heads with a look of interest.

At last the troublesome deceased was got into the ground, to be buried no more, and the stately stalker stalked back before the solitary dressmaker, as if she were bound in honour to have no notion of the way home. Those Furies, the conventionalities, being thus appeased, he left her.

'I must have a very short cry, godmother, before I cheer up for good,' said the little creature, coming in. 'Because after all a child is a child, you know.'

It was a longer cry than might have been expected. Howbeit, it wore itself out in a shadowy corner, and then the dressmaker came forth, and washed her face, and made the tea. 'You wouldn't mind my cutting out something while we are at tea, would you?' she asked her Jewish friend, with a coaxing air.

'Cinderella, dear child,' the old man expostulated, 'will you never rest?'

'Oh! It's not work, cutting out a pattern isn't,' said Miss Jenny, with her busy little scissors already snipping at some paper. 'The truth is, godmother, I want to fix it while I have it correct in my mind.'

'Have you seen it today then?' asked Riah.

'Yes, godmother. Saw it just now. It's a surplice, that's what it is. Thing our

clergymen wear, you know,' explained Miss Jenny, in consideration of his professing another faith.

'And what have you to do with that, Jenny?'

'Why, godmother,' replied the dressmaker, 'you must know that we Professors who live upon our taste and invention, are obliged to keep our eyes always open. And you know already that I have many extra expenses to meet just now. So, it came into my head while I was weeping at my poor boy's grave, that something in my way might be done with a clergyman.'

'What can be done?' asked the old man.

'Not a funeral, never fear!' returned Miss Jenny, anticipating his objection with a nod. 'The public don't like to be made melancholy, I know very well. I am seldom called upon to put my young friends into mourning; not into real mourning, that is; Court mourning they are rather proud of. But a doll clergyman, my dear,glossy black curls and whiskersuniting two of my young friends in matrimony,' said Miss Jenny, shaking her forefinger, 'is quite another affair. If you don't see those three at the altar in Bond Street, in a jiffy, my name's Jack Robinson!'

With her expert little ways in sharp action, she had got a doll into whiteybrown paper orders, before the meal was over, and was displaying it for the edification of the Jewish mind, when a knock was heard at the streetdoor. Riah went to open it, and presently came back, ushering in, with the grave and courteous air that sat so well upon him, a gentleman.

The gentleman was a stranger to the dressmaker; but even in the moment of his casting his eyes upon her, there was something in his manner which brought to her remembrance Mr Eugene Wrayburn.

'Pardon me,' said the gentleman. 'You are the dolls' dressmaker?'

'I am the dolls' dressmaker, sir.'

'Lizzie Hexam's friend?'

'Yes, sir,' replied Miss Jenny, instantly on the defensive. 'And Lizzie Hexam's friend.'

'Here is a note from her, entreating you to accede to the request of Mr Mortimer Lightwood, the bearer. Mr Riah chances to know that I am Mr Mortimer Lightwood, and will tell you so.'

Riah bent his head in corroboration.

'Will you read the note?'

'It's very short,' said Jenny, with a look of wonder, when she had read it.

'There was no time to make it longer. Time was so very precious. My dear friend Mr Eugene Wrayburn is dying.'

The dressmaker clasped her hands, and uttered a little piteous cry.

'Is dying,' repeated Lightwood, with emotion, 'at some distance from here. He is sinking under injuries received at the hands of a villain who attacked him in the dark. I come straight from his bedside. He is almost always insensible. In a short restless interval of sensibility, or partial sensibility, I made out that he asked for you to be brought to sit by him. Hardly relying on my own interpretation of the indistinct sounds he made, I caused Lizzie to hear them. We were both sure that he asked for you.'

The dressmaker, with her hands still clasped, looked affrightedly from the one to the other of her two companions.

'If you delay, he may die with his request ungratified, with his last wishintrusted to mewe have long been much more than brothersunfulfilled. I shall break down, if I try to say more.'

In a few moments the black bonnet and the crutchstick were on duty, the good Jew was left in possession of the house, and the dolls' dressmaker, side by side in a chaise with Mortimer Lightwood, was posting out of town.

Chapter 10

THE DOLLS' DRESSMAKER DISCOVERS A WORD

A darkened and hushed room; the river outside the windows flowing on to the vast ocean; a figure on the bed, swathed and bandaged and bound, lying helpless on its back, with its two useless arms in splints at its sides. Only two days of usage so familiarized the little dressmaker with this scene, that it held the place occupied two days ago by the recollections of years.

He had scarcely moved since her arrival. Sometimes his eyes were open, sometimes closed. When they were open, there was no meaning in their unwinking stare at one spot straight before them, unless for a moment the

brow knitted into a faint expression of anger, or surprise. Then, Mortimer Lightwood would speak to him, and on occasions he would be so far roused as to make an attempt to pronounce his friend's name. But, in an instant consciousness was gone again, and no spirit of Eugene was in Eugene's crushed outer form.

They provided Jenny with materials for plying her work, and she had a little table placed at the foot of his bed. Sitting there, with her rich shower of hair falling over the chairback, they hoped she might attract his notice. With the same object, she would sing, just above her breath, when he opened his eyes, or she saw his brow knit into that faint expression, so evanescent that it was like a shape made in water. But as yet he had not heeded. The 'they' here mentioned were the medical attendant; Lizzie, who was there in all her intervals of rest; and Lightwood, who never left him.

The two days became three, and the three days became four. At length, quite unexpectedly, he said something in a whisper.

'What was it, my dear Eugene?'

'Will you, Mortimer'

'Will I?

'Send for her?'

'My dear fellow, she is here.'

Quite unconscious of the long blank, he supposed that they were still speaking together.

The little dressmaker stood up at the foot of the bed, humming her song, and nodded to him brightly. 'I can't shake hands, Jenny,' said Eugene, with something of his old look; 'but I am very glad to see you.'

Mortimer repeated this to her, for it could only be made out by bending over him and closely watching his attempts to say it. In a little while, he added:

'Ask her if she has seen the children.'

Mortimer could not understand this, neither could Jenny herself, until he added:

'Ask her if she has smelt the flowers.'

'Oh! I know!' cried Jenny. 'I understand him now!' Then, Lightwood yielded his place to her quick approach, and she said, bending over the bed, with that

better look: 'You mean my long bright slanting rows of children, who used to bring me ease and rest? You mean the children who used to take me up, and make me light?'

Eugene smiled, 'Yes.'

'I have not seen them since I saw you. I never see them now, but I am hardly ever in pain now.'

'It was a pretty fancy,' said Eugene.

'But I have heard my birds sing,' cried the little creature, 'and I have smelt my flowers. Yes, indeed I have! And both were most beautiful and most Divine!'

'Stay and help to nurse me,' said Eugene, quietly. 'I should like you to have the fancy here, before I die.'

She touched his lips with her hand, and shaded her eyes with that same hand as she went back to her work and her little low song. He heard the song with evident pleasure, until she allowed it gradually to sink away into silence.

'Mortimer.'

'My dear Eugene.'

'If you can give me anything to keep me here for only a few minutes'

'To keep you here, Eugene?'

'To prevent my wandering away I don't know wherefor I begin to be sensible that I have just come back, and that I shall lose myself againdo so, dear boy!'

Mortimer gave him such stimulants as could be given him with safety (they were always at hand, ready), and bending over him once more, was about to caution him, when he said:

'Don't tell me not to speak, for I must speak. If you knew the harassing anxiety that gnaws and wears me when I am wandering in those placeswhere are those endless places, Mortimer? They must be at an immense distance!'

He saw in his friend's face that he was losing himself; for he added after a moment: 'Don't be afraidI am not gone yet. What was it?'

'You wanted to tell me something, Eugene. My poor dear fellow, you wanted to say something to your old friendto the friend who has always loved you, admired you, imitated you, founded himself upon you, been nothing without you, and who, God knows, would be here in your place if he could!'

'Tut, tut!' said Eugene with a tender glance as the other put his hand before his face. 'I am not worth it. I acknowledge that I like it, dear boy, but I am not worth it. This attack, my dear Mortimer; this murder'

His friend leaned over him with renewed attention, saying: 'You and I suspect some one.'

'More than suspect. But, Mortimer, while I lie here, and when I lie here no longer, I trust to you that the perpetrator is never brought to justice.'

'Eugene?'

'Her innocent reputation would be ruined, my friend. She would be punished, not he. I have wronged her enough in fact; I have wronged her still more in intention. You recollect what pavement is said to be made of good intentions. It is made of bad intentions too. Mortimer, I am lying on it, and I know!'

'Be comforted, my dear Eugene.'

'I will, when you have promised me. Dear Mortimer, the man must never be pursued. If he should be accused, you must keep him silent and save him. Don't think of avenging me; think only of hushing the story and protecting her. You can confuse the case, and turn aside the circumstances. Listen to what I say to you. It was not the schoolmaster, Bradley Headstone. Do you hear me? Twice; it was not the schoolmaster, Bradley Headstone. Do you hear me? Three times; it was not the schoolmaster, Bradley Headstone.'

He stopped, exhausted. His speech had been whispered, broken, and indistinct; but by a great effort he had made it plain enough to be unmistakeable.

'Dear fellow, I am wandering away. Stay me for another moment, if you can.'

Lightwood lifted his head at the neck, and put a wineglass to his lips. He rallied.

'I don't know how long ago it was done, whether weeks, days, or hours. No matter. There is inquiry on foot, and pursuit. Say! Is there not?'

'Yes.'

'Check it; divert it! Don't let her be brought in question. Shield her. The guilty man, brought to justice, would poison her name. Let the guilty man go unpunished. Lizzie and my reparation before all! Promise me!'

'Eugene, I do. I promise you!'

In the act of turning his eyes gratefully towards his friend, he wandered away. His eyes stood still, and settled into that former intent unmeaning stare.

Hours and hours, days and nights, he remained in this same condition. There were times when he would calmly speak to his friend after a long period of unconsciousness, and would say he was better, and would ask for something. Before it could be given him, he would be gone again.

The dolls' dressmaker, all softened compassion now, watched him with an earnestness that never relaxed. She would regularly change the ice, or the cooling spirit, on his head, and would keep her ear at the pillow betweenwhiles, listening for any faint words that fell from him in his wanderings. It was amazing through how many hours at a time she would remain beside him, in a crouching attitude, attentive to his slightest moan. As he could not move a hand, he could make no sign of distress; but, through this close watching (if through no secret sympathy or power) the little creature attained an understanding of him that Lightwood did not possess. Mortimer would often turn to her, as if she were an interpreter between this sentient world and the insensible man; and she would change the dressing of a wound, or ease a ligature, or turn his face, or alter the pressure of the bedclothes on him, with an absolute certainty of doing right. The natural lightness and delicacy of touch which had become very refined by practice in her miniature work, no doubt was involved in this; but her perception was at least as fine.

The one word, Lizzie, he muttered millions of times. In a certain phase of his distressful state, which was the worst to those who tended him, he would roll his head upon the pillow, incessantly repeating the name in a hurried and impatient manner, with the misery of a disturbed mind, and the monotony of a machine. Equally, when he lay still and staring, he would repeat it for hours without cessation, but then, always in a tone of subdued warning and horror. Her presence and her touch upon his breast or face would often stop this, and then they learned to expect that he would for some time remain still, with his eyes closed, and that he would be conscious on opening them. But, the heavy disappointment of their hoperevived by the welcome silence of the roomwas, that his spirit would glide away again and be lost, in the moment of their joy that it was there.

This frequent rising of a drowning man from the deep, to sink again, was dreadful to the beholders. But, gradually the change stole upon him that it became dreadful to himself. His desire to impart something that was on his mind, his unspeakable yearning to have speech with his friend and make a communication to him, so troubled him when he recovered consciousness, that its term was thereby shortened. As the man rising from the deep would disappear the sooner for fighting with the water, so he in his desperate struggle

went down again.

One afternoon when he had been lying still, and Lizzie, unrecognized, had just stolen out of the room to pursue her occupation, he uttered Lightwood's name.

'My dear Eugene, I am here.'

'How long is this to last, Mortimer?'

Lightwood shook his head. 'Still, Eugene, you are no worse than you were.'

'But I know there's no hope. Yet I pray it may last long enough for you to do me one last service, and for me to do one last action. Keep me here a few moments, Mortimer. Try, try!'

His friend gave him what aid he could, and encouraged him to believe that he was more composed, though even then his eyes were losing the expression they so rarely recovered.

'Hold me here, dear fellow, if you can. Stop my wandering away. I am going!'

'Not yet, not yet. Tell me, dear Eugene, what is it I shall do?'

'Keep me here for only a single minute. I am going away again. Don't let me go. Hear me speak first. Stop mestop me!'

'My poor Eugene, try to be calm.'

'I do try. I try so hard. If you only knew how hard! Don't let me wander till I have spoken. Give me a little more wine.'

Lightwood complied. Eugene, with a most pathetic struggle against the unconsciousness that was coming over him, and with a look of appeal that affected his friend profoundly, said:

'You can leave me with Jenny, while you speak to her and tell her what I beseech of her. You can leave me with Jenny, while you are gone. There's not much for you to do. You won't be long away.'

'No, no, no. But tell me what it is that I shall do, Eugene!'

'I am going! You can't hold me.'

'Tell me in a word, Eugene!'

His eyes were fixed again, and the only word that came from his lips was the word millions of times repeated. Lizzie, Lizzie, Lizzie.

But, the watchful little dressmaker had been vigilant as ever in her watch, and she now came up and touched Lightwood's arm as he looked down at his friend, despairingly.

'Hush!' she said, with her finger on her lips. 'His eyes are closing. He'll be conscious when he next opens them. Shall I give you a leading word to say to him?'

'O Jenny, if you could only give me the right word!'

'I can. Stoop down.'

He stooped, and she whispered in his ear. She whispered in his ear one short word of a single syllable. Lightwood started, and looked at her.

'Try it,' said the little creature, with an excited and exultant face. She then bent over the unconscious man, and, for the first time, kissed him on the cheek, and kissed the poor maimed hand that was nearest to her. Then, she withdrew to the foot of the bed.

Some two hours afterwards, Mortimer Lightwood saw his consciousness come back, and instantly, but very tranquilly, bent over him.

'Don't speak, Eugene. Do no more than look at me, and listen to me. You follow what I say.'

He moved his head in assent.

'I am going on from the point where we broke off. Is the word we should soon have come tois itWife?'

'O God bless you, Mortimer!'

'Hush! Don't be agitated. Don't speak. Hear me, dear Eugene. Your mind will be more at peace, lying here, if you make Lizzie your wife. You wish me to speak to her, and tell her so, and entreat her to be your wife. You ask her to kneel at this bedside and be married to you, that your reparation may be complete. Is that so?'

'Yes. God bless you! Yes.'

'It shall be done, Eugene. Trust it to me. I shall have to go away for some few hours, to give effect to your wishes. You see this is unavoidable?'

'Dear friend, I said so.'

'True. But I had not the clue then. How do you think I got it?'

Glancing wistfully around, Eugene saw Miss Jenny at the foot of the bed, looking at him with her elbows on the bed, and her head upon her hands. There was a trace of his whimsical air upon him, as he tried to smile at her.

'Yes indeed,' said Lightwood, 'the discovery was hers. Observe my dear Eugene; while I am away you will know that I have discharged my trust with Lizzie, by finding her here, in my present place at your bedside, to leave you no more. A final word before I go. This is the right course of a true man, Eugene. And I solemnly believe, with all my soul, that if Providence should mercifully restore you to us, you will be blessed with a noble wife in the preserver of your life, whom you will dearly love.'

'Amen. I am sure of that. But I shall not come through it, Mortimer.'

'You will not be the less hopeful or less strong, for this, Eugene.'

'No. Touch my face with yours, in case I should not hold out till you come back. I love you, Mortimer. Don't be uneasy for me while you are gone. If my dear brave girl will take me, I feel persuaded that I shall live long enough to be married, dear fellow.'

Miss Jenny gave up altogether on this parting taking place between the friends, and sitting with her back towards the bed in the bower made by her bright hair, wept heartily, though noiselessly. Mortimer Lightwood was soon gone. As the evening light lengthened the heavy reflections of the trees in the river, another figure came with a soft step into the sick room.

'Is he conscious?' asked the little dressmaker, as the figure took its station by the pillow. For, Jenny had given place to it immediately, and could not see the sufferer's face, in the dark room, from her new and removed position.

'He is conscious, Jenny,' murmured Eugene for himself. 'He knows his wife.'

Chapter 11

EFFECT IS GIVEN TO THE DOLLS' DRESSMAKER'S DISCOVERY

Mrs John Rokesmith sat at needlework in her neat little room, beside a basket of neat little articles of clothing, which presented so much of the appearance of being in the dolls' dressmaker's way of business, that one might have supposed she was going to set up in opposition to Miss Wren. Whether the Complete British Family Housewife had imparted sage counsel anent them, did not

appear, but probably not, as that cloudy oracle was nowhere visible. For certain, however, Mrs John Rokesmith stitched at them with so dexterous a hand, that she must have taken lessons of somebody. Love is in all things a most wonderful teacher, and perhaps love (from a pictorial point of view, with nothing on but a thimble), had been teaching this branch of needlework to Mrs John Rokesmith.

It was near John's time for coming home, but as Mrs John was desirous to finish a special triumph of her skill before dinner, she did not go out to meet him. Placidly, though rather consequentially smiling, she sat stitching away with a regular sound, like a sort of dimpled little charming Dresdenchina clock by the very best maker.

A knock at the door, and a ring at the bell. Not John; or Bella would have flown out to meet him. Then who, if not John? Bella was asking herself the question, when that fluttering little fool of a servant fluttered in, saying, 'Mr Lightwood!'

Oh good gracious!

Bella had but time to throw a handkerchief over the basket, when Mr Lightwood made his bow. There was something amiss with Mr Lightwood, for he was strangely grave and looked ill.

With a brief reference to the happy time when it had been his privilege to know Mrs Rokesmith as Miss Wilfer, Mr Lightwood explained what was amiss with him and why he came. He came bearing Lizzie Hexam's earnest hope that Mrs John Rokesmith would see her married.

Bella was so fluttered by the request, and by the short narrative he had feelingly given her, that there never was a more timely smellingbottle than John's knock. 'My husband,' said Bella; 'I'll bring him in.'

But, that turned out to be more easily said than done; for, the instant she mentioned Mr Lightwood's name, John stopped, with his hand upon the lock of the room door.

'Come up stairs, my darling.'

Bella was amazed by the flush in his face, and by his sudden turning away. 'What can it mean?' she thought, as she accompanied him up stairs.

'Now, my life,' said John, taking her on his knee, 'tell me all about it.'

All very well to say, 'Tell me all about it;' but John was very much confused. His attention evidently trailed off, now and then, even while Bella told him all

about it. Yet she knew that he took a great interest in Lizzie and her fortunes. What could it mean?

'You will come to this marriage with me, John dear?'

'Nno, my love; I can't do that.'

'You can't do that, John?'

'No, my dear, it's quite out of the question. Not to be thought of.'

'Am I to go alone, John?'

'No, my dear, you will go with Mr Lightwood.'

'Don't you think it's time we went down to Mr Lightwood, John dear?' Bella insinuated.

'My darling, it's almost time you went, but I must ask you to excuse me to him altogether.'

'You never mean, John dear, that you are not going to see him? Why, he knows you have come home. I told him so.'

'That's a little unfortunate, but it can't be helped. Unfortunate or fortunate, I positively cannot see him, my love.'

Bella cast about in her mind what could be his reason for this unaccountable behaviour; as she sat on his knee looking at him in astonishment and pouting a little. A weak reason presented itself.

'John dear, you never can be jealous of Mr Lightwood?'

'Why, my precious child,' returned her husband, laughing outright: 'how could I be jealous of him? Why should I be jealous of him?'

'Because, you know, John,' pursued Bella, pouting a little more, 'though he did rather admire me once, it was not my fault.'

'It was your fault that I admired you,' returned her husband, with a look of pride in her, 'and why not your fault that he admired you? But, I jealous on that account? Why, I must go distracted for life, if I turned jealous of every one who used to find my wife beautiful and winning!'

'I am half angry with you, John dear,' said Bella, laughing a little, 'and half pleased with you; because you are such a stupid old fellow, and yet you say nice things, as if you meant them. Don't be mysterious, sir. What harm do you know of Mr Lightwood?'

'None, my love.'

'What has he ever done to you, John?'

'He has never done anything to me, my dear. I know no more against him than I know against Mr Wrayburn; he has never done anything to me; neither has Mr Wrayburn. And yet I have exactly the same objection to both of them.'

'Oh, John!' retorted Bella, as if she were giving him up for a bad job, as she used to give up herself. 'You are nothing better than a sphinx! And a married sphinx isn't aisn't a nice confidential husband,' said Bella, in a tone of injury.

'Bella, my life,' said John Rokesmith, touching her cheek, with a grave smile, as she cast down her eyes and pouted again; 'look at me. I want to speak to you.'

'In earnest, Blue Beard of the secret chamber?' asked Bella, clearing her pretty face.

'In earnest. And I confess to the secret chamber. Don't you remember that you asked me not to declare what I thought of your higher qualities until you had been tried?'

'Yes, John dear. And I fully meant it, and I fully mean it.'

'The time will come, my darlingI am no prophet, but I say so,when you WILL be tried. The time will come, I think, when you will undergo a trial through which you will never pass quite triumphantly for me, unless you can put perfect faith in me.'

'Then you may be sure of me, John dear, for I can put perfect faith in you, and I do, and I always, always will. Don't judge me by a little thing like this, John. In little things, I am a little thing myselfI always was. But in great things, I hope not; I don't mean to boast, John dear, but I hope not!'

He was even better convinced of the truth of what she said than she was, as he felt her loving arms about him. If the Golden Dustman's riches had been his to stake, he would have staked them to the last farthing on the fidelity through good and evil of her affectionate and trusting heart.

'Now, I'll go down to, and go away with, Mr Lightwood,' said Bella, springing up. 'You are the most creasing and tumbling ClumsyBoots of a packer, John, that ever was; but if you're quite good, and will promise never to do so any more (though I don't know what you have done!) you may pack me a little bag for a night, while I get my bonnet on.'

He gaily complied, and she tied her dimpled chin up, and shook her head into her bonnet, and pulled out the bows of her bonnetstrings, and got her gloves on, finger by finger, and finally got them on her little plump hands, and bade him goodbye and went down. Mr Lightwood's impatience was much relieved when he found her dressed for departure.

'Mr Rokesmith goes with us?' he said, hesitating, with a look towards the door.

'Oh, I forgot!' replied Bella. 'His best compliments. His face is swollen to the size of two faces, and he is to go to bed directly, poor fellow, to wait for the doctor, who is coming to lance him.'

'It is curious,' observed Lightwood, 'that I have never yet seen Mr Rokesmith, though we have been engaged in the same affairs.'

'Really?' said the unblushing Bella.

'I begin to think,' observed Lightwood, 'that I never shall see him.'

'These things happen so oddly sometimes,' said Bella with a steady countenance, 'that there seems a kind of fatality in them. But I am quite ready, Mr Lightwood.'

They started directly, in a little carriage that Lightwood had brought with him from nevertobeforgotten Greenwich; and from Greenwich they started directly for London; and in London they waited at a railway station until such time as the Reverend Frank Milvey, and Margaretta his wife, with whom Mortimer Lightwood had been already in conference, should come and join them.

That worthy couple were delayed by a portentous old parishioner of the female gender, who was one of the plagues of their lives, and with whom they bore with most exemplary sweetness and goodhumour, notwithstanding her having an infection of absurdity about her, that communicated itself to everything with which, and everybody with whom, she came in contact. She was a member of the Reverend Frank's congregation, and made a point of distinguishing herself in that body, by conspicuously weeping at everything, however cheering, said by the Reverend Frank in his public ministration; also by applying to herself the various lamentations of David, and complaining in a personally injured manner (much in arrear of the clerk and the rest of the respondents) that her enemies were digging pitfalls about her, and breaking her with rods of iron. Indeed, this old widow discharged herself of that portion of the Morning and Evening Service as if she were lodging a complaint on oath and applying for a warrant before a magistrate. But this was not her most inconvenient characteristic, for that took the form of an impression, usually recurring in inclement weather and at about daybreak, that she had something

on her mind and stood in immediate need of the Reverend Frank to come and take it off. Many a time had that kind creature got up, and gone out to Mrs Sprodgkin (such was the disciple's name), suppressing a strong sense of her comicality by his strong sense of duty, and perfectly knowing that nothing but a cold would come of it. However, beyond themselves, the Reverend Frank Milvey and Mrs Milvey seldom hinted that Mrs Sprodgkin was hardly worth the trouble she gave; but both made the best of her, as they did of all their troubles.

This very exacting member of the fold appeared to be endowed with a sixth sense, in regard of knowing when the Reverend Frank Milvey least desired her company, and with promptitude appearing in his little hall. Consequently, when the Reverend Frank had willingly engaged that he and his wife would accompany Lightwood back, he said, as a matter of course: 'We must make haste to get out, Margaretta, my dear, or we shall be descended on by Mrs Sprodgkin.' To which Mrs Milvey replied, in her pleasantly emphatic way, 'Oh YES, for she IS such a marplot, Frank, and DOES worry so!' Words that were scarcely uttered when their theme was announced as in faithful attendance below, desiring counsel on a spiritual matter. The points on which Mrs Sprodgkin sought elucidation being seldom of a pressing nature (as Who begat Whom, or some information concerning the Amorites), Mrs Milvey on this special occasion resorted to the device of buying her off with a present of tea and sugar, and a loaf and butter. These gifts Mrs Sprodgkin accepted, but still insisted on dutifully remaining in the hall, to curtsey to the Reverend Frank as he came forth. Who, incautiously saying in his genial manner, 'Well, Sally, there you are!' involved himself in a discursive address from Mrs Sprodgkin, revolving around the result that she regarded tea and sugar in the light of myrrh and frankincense, and considered bread and butter identical with locusts and wild honey. Having communicated this edifying piece of information, Mrs Sprodgkin was left still unadjourned in the hall, and Mr and Mrs Milvey hurried in a heated condition to the railway station. All of which is here recorded to the honour of that good Christian pair, representatives of hundreds of other good Christian pairs as conscientious and as useful, who merge the smallness of their work in its greatness, and feel in no danger of losing dignity when they adapt themselves to incomprehensible humbugs.

'Detained at the last moment by one who had a claim upon me,' was the Reverend Frank's apology to Lightwood, taking no thought of himself. To which Mrs Milvey added, taking thought for him, like the championing little wife she was; 'Oh yes, detained at the last moment. But AS to the claim, Frank, I MUST say that I DO think you are OVERconsiderate sometimes, and allow THAT to be a LITTLE abused.'

Bella felt conscious, in spite of her late pledge for herself, that her husband's absence would give disagreeable occasion for surprise to the Milveys. Nor could she appear quite at her ease when Mrs Milvey asked:

'HOW is Mr Rokesmith, and IS he gone before us, or DOES he follow us?'

It becoming necessary, upon this, to send him to bed again and hold him in waiting to be lanced again, Bella did it. But not half as well on the second occasion as on the first; for, a twicetold white one seems almost to become a black one, when you are not used to it.

'Oh DEAR!' said Mrs Milvey, 'I am SO sorry! Mr Rokesmith took SUCH an interest in Lizzie Hexam, when we were there before. And if we had ONLY known of his face, we COULD have given him something that would have kept it down long enough for so SHORT a purpose.'

By way of making the white one whiter, Bella hastened to stipulate that he was not in pain. Mrs Milvey was SO glad of it.

'I don't know HOW it is,' said Mrs Milvey, 'and I am SURE you don't, Frank, but the clergy and their wives seem to CAUSE swelled faces. Whenever I take notice of a child in the school, it seems to me as if its face swelled INSTANTLY. Frank NEVER makes acquaintance with a new old woman, but she gets the faceache. And another thing is, we DO make the poor children sniff so. I don't know HOW we do it, and I should be so glad not to; but the MORE we take notice of them, the MORE they sniff. Just as they do when the text is given out.Frank, that's a schoolmaster. I have seen him somewhere.'

The reference was to a young man of reserved appearance, in a coat and waistcoat of black, and pantaloons of pepper and salt. He had come into the office of the station, from its interior, in an unsettled way, immediately after Lightwood had gone out to the train; and he had been hurriedly reading the printed hills and notices on the wall. He had had a wandering interest in what was said among the people waiting there and passing to and fro. He had drawn nearer, at about the time when Mrs Milvey mentioned Lizzie Hexam, and had remained near, since: though always glancing towards the door by which Lightwood had gone out. He stood with his back towards them, and his gloved hands clasped behind him. There was now so evident a faltering upon him, expressive of indecision whether or no he should express his having heard himself referred to, that Mr Milvey spoke to him.

'I cannot recall your name,' he said, 'but I remember to have seen you in your school.'

'My name is Bradley Headstone, sir,' he replied, backing into a more retired

place.

'I ought to have remembered it,' said Mr Milvey, giving him his hand. 'I hope you are well? A little overworked, I am afraid?'

'Yes, I am overworked just at present, sir.'

'Had no play in your last holiday time?'

'No, sir.'

'All work and no play, Mr Headstone, will not make dulness, in your case, I dare say; but it will make dyspepsia, if you don't take care.'

'I will endeavour to take care, sir. Might I beg leave to speak to you, outside, a moment?'

'By all means.'

It was evening, and the office was well lighted. The schoolmaster, who had never remitted his watch on Lightwood's door, now moved by another door to a corner without, where there was more shadow than light; and said, plucking at his gloves:

'One of your ladies, sir, mentioned within my hearing a name that I am acquainted with; I may say, well acquainted with. The name of the sister of an old pupil of mine. He was my pupil for a long time, and has got on and gone upward rapidly. The name of Hexam. The name of Lizzie Hexam.' He seemed to be a shy man, struggling against nervousness, and spoke in a very constrained way. The break he set between his last two sentences was quite embarrassing to his hearer.

'Yes,' replied Mr Milvey. 'We are going down to see her.'

'I gathered as much, sir. I hope there is nothing amiss with the sister of my old pupil? I hope no bereavement has befallen her. I hope she is in no affliction? Has lost norelation?'

Mr Milvey thought this a man with a very odd manner, and a dark downward look; but he answered in his usual open way.

'I am glad to tell you, Mr Headstone, that the sister of your old pupil has not sustained any such loss. You thought I might be going down to bury some one?'

'That may have been the connexion of ideas, sir, with your clerical character, but I was not conscious of it.Then you are not, sir?'

A man with a very odd manner indeed, and with a lurking look that was quite oppressive.

'No. In fact,' said Mr Milvey, 'since you are so interested in the sister of your old pupil, I may as well tell you that I am going down to marry her.'

The schoolmaster started back.

'Not to marry her, myself,' said Mr Milvey, with a smile, 'because I have a wife already. To perform the marriage service at her wedding.'

Bradley Headstone caught hold of a pillar behind him. If Mr Milvey knew an ashy face when he saw it, he saw it then.

'You are quite ill, Mr Headstone!'

'It is not much, sir. It will pass over very soon. I am accustomed to be seized with giddiness. Don't let me detain you, sir; I stand in need of no assistance, I thank you. Much obliged by your sparing me these minutes of your time.'

As Mr Milvey, who had no more minutes to spare, made a suitable reply and turned back into the office, he observed the schoolmaster to lean against the pillar with his hat in his hand, and to pull at his neckcloth as if he were trying to tear it off. The Reverend Frank accordingly directed the notice of one of the attendants to him, by saying: 'There is a person outside who seems to be really ill, and to require some help, though he says he does not.'

Lightwood had by this time secured their places, and the departurebell was about to be rung. They took their seats, and were beginning to move out of the station, when the same attendant came running along the platform, looking into all the carriages.

'Oh! You are here, sir!' he said, springing on the step, and holding the windowframe by his elbow, as the carriage moved. 'That person you pointed out to me is in a fit.'

'I infer from what he told me that he is subject to such attacks. He will come to, in the air, in a little while.'

He was took very bad to be sure, and was biting and knocking about him (the man said) furiously. Would the gentleman give him his card, as he had seen him first? The gentleman did so, with the explanation that he knew no more of the man attacked than that he was a man of a very respectable occupation, who had said he was out of health, as his appearance would of itself have indicated. The attendant received the card, watched his opportunity for sliding down, slid down, and so it ended.

Then, the train rattled among the housetops, and among the ragged sides of houses torn down to make way for it, and over the swarming streets, and under the fruitful earth, until it shot across the river: bursting over the quiet surface like a bombshell, and gone again as if it had exploded in the rush of smoke and steam and glare. A little more, and again it roared across the river, a great rocket: spurning the watery turnings and doublings with ineffable contempt, and going straight to its end, as Father Time goes to his. To whom it is no matter what living waters run high or low, reflect the heavenly lights and darknesses, produce their little growth of weeds and flowers, turn here, turn there, are noisy or still, are troubled or at rest, for their course has one sure termination, though their sources and devices are many.

Then, a carriage ride succeeded, near the solemn river, stealing away by night, as all things steal away, by night and by day, so quietly yielding to the attraction of the loadstone rock of Eternity; and the nearer they drew to the chamber where Eugene lay, the more they feared that they might find his wanderings done. At last they saw its dim light shining out, and it gave them hope: though Lightwood faltered as he thought: 'If he were gone, she would still be sitting by him.'

But he lay quiet, half in stupor, half in sleep. Bella, entering with a raised admonitory finger, kissed Lizzie softly, but said not a word. Neither did any of them speak, but all sat down at the foot of the bed, silently waiting. And now, in this nightwatch, mingling with the flow of the river and with the rush of the train, came the questions into Bella's mind again: What could be in the depths of that mystery of John's? Why was it that he had never been seen by Mr Lightwood, whom he still avoided? When would that trial come, through which her faith in, and her duty to, her dear husband, was to carry her, rendering him triumphant? For, that had been his term. Her passing through the trial was to make the man she loved with all her heart, triumphant. Term not to sink out of sight in Bella's breast.

Far on in the night, Eugene opened his eyes. He was sensible, and said at once: 'How does the time go? Has our Mortimer come back?'

Lightwood was there immediately, to answer for himself. 'Yes, Eugene, and all is ready.'

'Dear boy!' returned Eugene with a smile, 'we both thank you heartily. Lizzie, tell them how welcome they are, and that I would be eloquent if I could.'

'There is no need,' said Mr Milvey. 'We know it. Are you better, Mr Wrayburn?'

'I am much happier,' said Eugene.

'Much better too, I hope?'

Eugene turned his eyes towards Lizzie, as if to spare her, and answered nothing.

Then, they all stood around the bed, and Mr Milvey, opening his book, began the service; so rarely associated with the shadow of death; so inseparable in the mind from a flush of life and gaiety and hope and health and joy. Bella thought how different from her own sunny little wedding, and wept. Mrs Milvey overflowed with pity, and wept too. The dolls' dressmaker, with her hands before her face, wept in her golden bower. Reading in a low clear voice, and bending over Eugene, who kept his eyes upon him, Mr Milvey did his office with suitable simplicity. As the bridegroom could not move his hand, they touched his fingers with the ring, and so put it on the bride. When the two plighted their troth, she laid her hand on his and kept it there. When the ceremony was done, and all the rest departed from the room, she drew her arm under his head, and laid her own head down upon the pillow by his side.

'Undraw the curtains, my dear girl,' said Eugene, after a while, 'and let us see our weddingday.'

The sun was rising, and his first rays struck into the room, as she came back, and put her lips to his. 'I bless the day!' said Eugene. 'I bless the day!' said Lizzie.

'You have made a poor marriage of it, my sweet wife,' said Eugene. 'A shattered graceless fellow, stretched at his length here, and next to nothing for you when you are a young widow.'

'I have made the marriage that I would have given all the world to dare to hope for,' she replied.

'You have thrown yourself away,' said Eugene, shaking his head. 'But you have followed the treasure of your heart. My justification is, that you had thrown that away first, dear girl!'

'No. I had given it to you.'

'The same thing, my poor Lizzie!'

'Hush! hush! A very different thing.'

There were tears in his eyes, and she besought him to close them. 'No,' said Eugene, again shaking his head; 'let me look at you, Lizzie, while I can. You brave devoted girl! You heroine!'

Her own eyes filled under his praises. And when he mustered strength to move his wounded head a very little way, and lay it on her bosom, the tears of both fell.

'Lizzie,' said Eugene, after a silence: 'when you see me wandering away from this refuge that I have so ill deserved, speak to me by my name, and I think I shall come back.'

'Yes, dear Eugene.'

'There!' he exclaimed, smiling. 'I should have gone then, but for that!'

A little while afterwards, when he appeared to be sinking into insensibility, she said, in a calm loving voice: 'Eugene, my dear husband!' He immediately answered: 'There again! You see how you can recall me!' And afterwards, when he could not speak, he still answered by a slight movement of his head upon her bosom.

The sun was high in the sky, when she gently disengaged herself to give him the stimulants and nourishment he required. The utter helplessness of the wreck of him that lay cast ashore there, now alarmed her, but he himself appeared a little more hopeful.

'Ah, my beloved Lizzie!' he said, faintly. 'How shall I ever pay all I owe you, if I recover!'

'Don't be ashamed of me,' she replied, 'and you will have more than paid all.'

'It would require a life, Lizzie, to pay all; more than a life.'

'Live for that, then; live for me, Eugene; live to see how hard I will try to improve myself, and never to discredit you.'

'My darling girl,' he replied, rallying more of his old manner than he had ever yet got together. 'On the contrary, I have been thinking whether it is not the best thing I can do, to die.'

'The best thing you can do, to leave me with a broken heart?'

'I don't mean that, my dear girl. I was not thinking of that. What I was thinking of was this. Out of your compassion for me, in this maimed and broken state, you make so much of meyou think so well of meyou love me so dearly.'

'Heaven knows I love you dearly!'

'And Heaven knows I prize it! Well. If I live, you'll find me out.'

'I shall find out that my husband has a mine of purpose and energy, and will turn it to the best account?'

'I hope so, dearest Lizzie,' said Eugene, wistfully, and yet somewhat whimsically. 'I hope so. But I can't summon the vanity to think so. How can I think so, looking back on such a trifling wasted youth as mine! I humbly hope it; but I daren't believe it. There is a sharp misgiving in my conscience that if I were to live, I should disappoint your good opinion and my ownand that I ought to die, my dear!'

Chapter 12

THE PASSING SHADOW

The winds and tides rose and fell a certain number of times, the earth moved round the sun a certain number of times, the ship upon the ocean made her voyage safely, and brought a babyBella home. Then who so blest and happy as Mrs John Rokesmith, saving and excepting Mr John Rokesmith!

'Would you not like to be rich NOW, my darling?'

'How can you ask me such a question, John dear? Am I not rich?'

These were among the first words spoken near the baby Bella as she lay asleep. She soon proved to be a baby of wonderful intelligence, evincing the strongest objection to her grandmother's society, and being invariably seized with a painful acidity of the stomach when that dignified lady honoured her with any attention.

It was charming to see Bella contemplating this baby, and finding out her own dimples in that tiny reflection, as if she were looking in the glass without personal vanity. Her cherubic father justly remarked to her husband that the baby seemed to make her younger than before, reminding him of the days when she had a pet doll and used to talk to it as she carried it about. The world might have been challenged to produce another baby who had such a store of pleasant nonsense said and sung to it, as Bella said and sung to this baby; or who was dressed and undressed as often in fourandtwenty hours as Bella dressed and undressed this baby; or who was held behind doors and poked out to stop its father's way when he came home, as this baby was; or, in a word, who did half the number of baby things, through the lively invention of a gay and proud young mother, that this inexhaustible baby did.

The inexhaustible baby was two or three months old, when Bella began to notice a cloud upon her husband's brow. Watching it, she saw a gathering and deepening anxiety there, which caused her great disquiet. More than once, she awoke him muttering in his sleep; and, though he muttered nothing worse than her own name, it was plain to her that his restlessness originated in some load of care. Therefore, Bella at length put in her claim to divide this load, and hear her half of it.

'You know, John dear,' she said, cheerily reverting to their former conversation, 'that I hope I may safely be trusted in great things. And it surely cannot be a little thing that causes you so much uneasiness. It's very considerate of you to try to hide from me that you are uncomfortable about something, but it's quite impossible to be done, John love.'

'I admit that I am rather uneasy, my own.'

'Then please to tell me what about, sir.'

But no, he evaded that. 'Never mind!' thought Bella, resolutely. 'John requires me to put perfect faith in him, and he shall not be disappointed.'

She went up to London one day, to meet him, in order that they might make some purchases. She found him waiting for her at her journey's end, and they walked away together through the streets. He was in gay spirits, though still harping on that notion of their being rich; and he said, now let them make believe that yonder fine carriage was theirs, and that it was waiting to take them home to a fine house they had; what would Bella, in that case, best like to find in the house? Well! Bella didn't know: already having everything she wanted, she couldn't say. But, by degrees she was led on to confess that she would like to have for the inexhaustible baby such a nursery as never was seen. It was to be 'a very rainbow for colours', as she was quite sure baby noticed colours; and the staircase was to be adorned with the most exquisite flowers, as she was absolutely certain baby noticed flowers; and there was to be an aviary somewhere, of the loveliest little birds, as there was not the smallest doubt in the world that baby noticed birds. Was there nothing else? No, John dear. The predilections of the inexhaustible baby being provided for, Bella could think of nothing else.

They were chatting on in this way, and John had suggested, 'No jewels for your own wear, for instance?' and Bella had replied laughing. O! if he came to that, yes, there might be a beautiful ivory case of jewels on her dressingtable; when these pictures were in a moment darkened and blotted out.

They turned a corner, and met Mr Lightwood.

He stopped as if he were petrified by the sight of Bella's husband, who in the same moment had changed colour.

'Mr Lightwood and I have met before,' he said.

'Met before, John?' Bella repeated in a tone of wonder. 'Mr Lightwood told me he had never seen you.'

'I did not then know that I had,' said Lightwood, discomposed on her account. 'I believed that I had only heard ofMr Rokesmith.' With an emphasis on the name.

'When Mr Lightwood saw me, my love,' observed her husband, not avoiding his eye, but looking at him, 'my name was Julius Handford.'

Julius Handford! The name that Bella had so often seen in old newspapers, when she was an inmate of Mr Boffin's house! Julius Handford, who had been publicly entreated to appear, and for intelligence of whom a reward had been publicly offered!

'I would have avoided mentioning it in your presence,' said Lightwood to Bella, delicately; 'but since your husband mentions it himself, I must confirm his strange admission. I saw him as Mr Julius Handford, and I afterwards (unquestionably to his knowledge) took great pains to trace him out.'

'Quite true. But it was not my object or my interest,' said Rokesmith, quietly, 'to be traced out.'

Bella looked from the one to the other, in amazement.

'Mr Lightwood,' pursued her husband, 'as chance has brought us face to face at lastwhich is not to be wondered at, for the wonder is, that, in spite of all my pains to the contrary, chance has not confronted us together soonerI have only to remind you that you have been at my house, and to add that I have not changed my residence.'

'Sir' returned Lightwood, with a meaning glance towards Bella, 'my position is a truly painful one. I hope that no complicity in a very dark transaction may attach to you, but you cannot fail to know that your own extraordinary conduct has laid you under suspicion.'

'I know it has,' was all the reply.

'My professional duty,' said Lightwood hesitating, with another glance towards Bella, 'is greatly at variance with my personal inclination; but I doubt, Mr Handford, or Mr Rokesmith, whether I am justified in taking leave of you

here, with your whole course unexplained.'

Bella caught her husband by the hand.

'Don't be alarmed, my darling. Mr Lightwood will find that he is quite justified in taking leave of me here. At all events,' added Rokesmith, 'he will find that I mean to take leave of him here.'

'I think, sir,' said Lightwood, 'you can scarcely deny that when I came to your house on the occasion to which you have referred, you avoided me of a set purpose.'

'Mr Lightwood, I assure you I have no disposition to deny it, or intention to deny it. I should have continued to avoid you, in pursuance of the same set purpose, for a short time longer, if we had not met now. I am going straight home, and shall remain at home tomorrow until noon. Hereafter, I hope we may be better acquainted. Goodday.'

Lightwood stood irresolute, but Bella's husband passed him in the steadiest manner, with Bella on his arm; and they went home without encountering any further remonstrance or molestation from any one.

When they had dined and were alone, John Rokesmith said to his wife, who had preserved her cheerfulness: 'And you don't ask me, my dear, why I bore that name?'

'No, John love. I should dearly like to know, of course;' (which her anxious face confirmed;) 'but I wait until you can tell me of your own free will. You asked me if I could have perfect faith in you, and I said yes, and I meant it.'

It did not escape Bella's notice that he began to look triumphant. She wanted no strengthening in her firmness; but if she had had need of any, she would have derived it from his kindling face.

'You cannot have been prepared, my dearest, for such a discovery as that this mysterious Mr Handford was identical with your husband?'

'No, John dear, of course not. But you told me to prepare to be tried, and I prepared myself.'

He drew her to nestle closer to him, and told her it would soon be over, and the truth would soon appear. 'And now,' he went on, 'lay stress, my dear, on these words that I am going to add. I stand in no kind of peril, and I can by possibility be hurt at no one's hand.'

'You are quite, quite sure of that, John dear?'

'Not a hair of my head! Moreover, I have done no wrong, and have injured no man. Shall I swear it?'

'No, John!' cried Bella, laying her hand upon his lips, with a proud look. 'Never to me!'

'But circumstances,' he went on 'I can, and I will, disperse them in a momenthave surrounded me with one of the strangest suspicions ever known. You heard Mr Lightwood speak of a dark transaction?'

'Yes, John.'

'You are prepared to hear explicitly what he meant?'

'Yes, John.'

'My life, he meant the murder of John Harmon, your allotted husband.'

With a fast palpitating heart, Bella grasped him by the arm. 'You cannot be suspected, John?'

'Dear love, I can befor I am!'

There was silence between them, as she sat looking in his face, with the colour quite gone from her own face and lips. 'How dare they!' she cried at length, in a burst of generous indignation. 'My beloved husband, how dare they!'

He caught her in his arms as she opened hers, and held her to his heart. 'Even knowing this, you can trust me, Bella?'

'I can trust you, John dear, with all my soul. If I could not trust you, I should fall dead at your feet.'

The kindling triumph in his face was bright indeed, as he looked up and rapturously exclaimed, what had he done to deserve the blessing of this dear confiding creature's heart! Again she put her hand upon his lips, saying, 'Hush!' and then told him, in her own little natural pathetic way, that if all the world were against him, she would be for him; that if all the world repudiated him, she would believe him; that if he were infamous in other eyes, he would be honoured in hers; and that, under the worst unmerited suspicion, she could devote her life to consoling him, and imparting her own faith in him to their little child.

A twilight calm of happiness then succeeding to their radiant noon, they remained at peace, until a strange voice in the room startled them both. The room being by that time dark, the voice said, 'Don't let the lady be alarmed by my striking a light,' and immediately a match rattled, and glimmered in a

hand. The hand and the match and the voice were then seen by John Rokesmith to belong to Mr Inspector, once meditatively active in this chronicle.

'I take the liberty,' said Mr Inspector, in a businesslike manner, 'to bring myself to the recollection of Mr Julius Handford, who gave me his name and address down at our place a considerable time ago. Would the lady object to my lighting the pair of candles on the chimneypiece, to throw a further light upon the subject? No? Thank you, ma'am. Now, we look cheerful.'

Mr Inspector, in a darkblue buttonedup frock coat and pantaloons, presented a serviceable, halfpay, Royal Arms kind of appearance, as he applied his pocket handkerchief to his nose and bowed to the lady.

'You favoured me, Mr Handford,' said Mr Inspector, 'by writing down your name and address, and I produce the piece of paper on which you wrote it. Comparing the same with the writing on the flyleaf of this book on the tableand a sweet pretty volume it isI find the writing of the entry, "Mrs John Rokesmith. From her husband on her birthday"and very gratifying to the feelings such memorials areto correspond exactly. Can I have a word with you?'

'Certainly. Here, if you please,' was the reply.

'Why,' retorted Mr Inspector, again using his pocket handkerchief, 'though there's nothing for the lady to be at all alarmed at, still, ladies are apt to take alarm at matters of businessbeing of that fragile sex that they're not accustomed to them when not of a strictly domestic characterand I do generally make it a rule to propose retirement from the presence of ladies, before entering upon business topics. Or perhaps,' Mr Inspector hinted, 'if the lady was to step upstairs, and take a look at baby now!'

'Mrs Rokesmith,'her husband was beginning; when Mr Inspector, regarding the words as an introduction, said, 'Happy I am sure, to have the honour.' And bowed, with gallantry.

'Mrs Rokesmith,' resumed her husband, 'is satisfied that she can have no reason for being alarmed, whatever the business is.'

'Really? Is that so?' said Mr Inspector. 'But it's a sex to live and learn from, and there's nothing a lady can't accomplish when she once fully gives her mind to it. It's the case with my own wife. Well, ma'am, this good gentleman of yours has given rise to a rather large amount of trouble which might have been avoided if he had come forward and explained himself. Well you see! He DIDN'T come forward and explain himself. Consequently, now that we meet,

him and me, you'll sayand say rightthat there's nothing to be alarmed at, in my proposing to him TO come forwardor, putting the same meaning in another form, to come along with meand explain himself.'

When Mr Inspector put it in that other form, 'to come along with me,' there was a relishing roll in his voice, and his eye beamed with an official lustre.

'Do you propose to take me into custody?' inquired John Rokesmith, very coolly.

'Why argue?' returned Mr Inspector in a comfortable sort of remonstrance; 'ain't it enough that I propose that you shall come along with me?'

'For what reason?'

'Lord bless my soul and body!' returned Mr Inspector, 'I wonder at it in a man of your education. Why argue?'

'What do you charge against me?'

'I wonder at you before a lady,' said Mr Inspector, shaking his head reproachfully: 'I wonder, brought up as you have been, you haven't a more delicate mind! I charge you, then, with being some way concerned in the Harmon Murder. I don't say whether before, or in, or after, the fact. I don't say whether with having some knowledge of it that hasn't come out.'

'You don't surprise me. I foresaw your visit this afternoon.'

'Don't!' said Mr Inspector. 'Why, why argue? It's my duty to inform you that whatever you say, will be used against you.'

'I don't think it will.'

'But I tell you it will,' said Mr Inspector. 'Now, having received the caution, do you still say that you foresaw my visit this afternoon?'

'Yes. And I will say something more, if you will step with me into the next room.'

With a reassuring kiss on the lips of the frightened Bella, her husband (to whom Mr Inspector obligingly offered his arm), took up a candle, and withdrew with that gentleman. They were a full halfhour in conference. When they returned, Mr Inspector looked considerably astonished.

'I have invited this worthy officer, my dear,' said John, 'to make a short excursion with me in which you shall be a sharer. He will take something to eat and drink, I dare say, on your invitation, while you are getting your bonnet

on.'

Mr Inspector declined eating, but assented to the proposal of a glass of brandy and water. Mixing this cold, and pensively consuming it, he broke at intervals into such soliloquies as that he never did know such a move, that he never had been so gravelled, and that what a game was this to try the sort of stuff a man's opinion of himself was made of! Concurrently with these comments, he more than once burst out a laughing, with the halfenjoying and halfpiqued air of a man, who had given up a good conundrum, after much guessing, and been told the answer. Bella was so timid of him, that she noted these things in a halfshrinking, halfperceptive way, and similarly noted that there was a great change in his manner towards John. That comingalongwithhim deportment was now lost in long musing looks at John and at herself and sometimes in slow heavy rubs of his hand across his forehead, as if he were ironing cut the creases which his deep pondering made there. He had had some coughing and whistling satellites secretly gravitating towards him about the premises, but they were now dismissed, and he eyed John as if he had meant to do him a public service, but had unfortunately been anticipated. Whether Bella might have noted anything more, if she had been less afraid of him, she could not determine; but it was all inexplicable to her, and not the faintest flash of the real state of the case broke in upon her mind. Mr Inspector's increased notice of herself and knowing way of raising his eyebrows when their eyes by any chance met, as if he put the question 'Don't you see?' augmented her timidity, and, consequently, her perplexity. For all these reasons, when he and she and John, at towards nine o'clock of a winter evening went to London, and began driving from London Bridge, among lowlying waterside wharves and docks and strange places, Bella was in the state of a dreamer; perfectly unable to account for her being there, perfectly unable to forecast what would happen next, or whither she was going, or why; certain of nothing in the immediate present, but that she confided in John, and that John seemed somehow to be getting more triumphant. But what a certainty was that!

They alighted at last at the corner of a court, where there was a building with a bright lamp and wicket gate. Its orderly appearance was very unlike that of the surrounding neighbourhood, and was explained by the inscription POLICE STATION.

'We are not going in here, John?' said Bella, clinging to him.

'Yes, my dear; but of our own accord. We shall come out again as easily, never fear.'

The whitewashed room was pure white as of old, the methodical bookkeeping was in peaceful progress as of old, and some distant howler was banging

against a cell door as of old. The sanctuary was not a permanent abidingplace, but a kind of criminal Pickford's. The lower passions and vices were regularly ticked off in the books, warehoused in the cells, carted away as per accompanying invoice, and left little mark upon it.

Mr Inspector placed two chairs for his visitors, before the fire, and communed in a low voice with a brother of his order (also of a halfpay, and Royal Arms aspect), who, judged only by his occupation at the moment, might have been a writingmaster, setting copies. Their conference done, Mr Inspector returned to the fireplace, and, having observed that he would step round to the Fellowships and see how matters stood, went out. He soon came back again, saying, 'Nothing could be better, for they're at supper with Miss Abbey in the bar;' and then they all three went out together.

Still, as in a dream, Bella found herself entering a snug oldfashioned publichouse, and found herself smuggled into a little threecornered room nearly opposite the bar of that establishment. Mr Inspector achieved the smuggling of herself and John into this queer room, called Cosy in an inscription on the door, by entering in the narrow passage first in order, and suddenly turning round upon them with extended arms, as if they had been two sheep. The room was lighted for their reception.

'Now,' said Mr Inspector to John, turning the gas lower; 'I'll mix with 'em in a casual way, and when I say Identification, perhaps you'll show yourself.'

John nodded, and Mr Inspector went alone to the halfdoor of the bar. From the dim doorway of Cosy, within which Bella and her husband stood, they could see a comfortable little party of three persons sitting at supper in the bar, and could hear everything that was said.

The three persons were Miss Abbey and two male guests. To whom collectively, Mr Inspector remarked that the weather was getting sharp for the time of year.

'It need be sharp to suit your wits, sir,' said Miss Abbey. 'What have you got in hand now?'

'Thanking you for your compliment: not much, Miss Abbey,' was Mr Inspector's rejoinder.

'Who have you got in Cosy?' asked Miss Abbey.

'Only a gentleman and his wife, Miss.'

'And who are they? If one may ask it without detriment to your deep plans in the interests of the honest public?' said Miss Abbey, proud of Mr Inspector as

an administrative genius.

'They are strangers in this part of the town, Miss Abbey. They are waiting till I shall want the gentleman to show himself somewhere, for half a moment.'

'While they're waiting,' said Miss Abbey, 'couldn't you join us?'

Mr Inspector immediately slipped into the bar, and sat down at the side of the halfdoor, with his back towards the passage, and directly facing the two guests. 'I don't take my supper till later in the night,' said he, 'and therefore I won't disturb the compactness of the table. But I'll take a glass of flip, if that's flip in the jug in the fender.'

'That's flip,' replied Miss Abbey, 'and it's my making, and if even you can find out better, I shall be glad to know where.' Filling him, with hospitable hands, a steaming tumbler, Miss Abbey replaced the jug by the fire; the company not having yet arrived at the flipstage of their supper, but being as yet skirmishing with strong ale.

'Ahh!' cried Mr Inspector. 'That's the smack! There's not a Detective in the Force, Miss Abbey, that could find out better stuff than that.'

'Glad to hear you say so,' rejoined Miss Abbey. 'You ought to know, if anybody does.'

'Mr Job Potterson,' Mr Inspector continued, 'I drink your health. Mr Jacob Kibble, I drink yours. Hope you have made a prosperous voyage home, gentlemen both.'

Mr Kibble, an unctuous broad man of few words and many mouthfuls, said, more briefly than pointedly, raising his ale to his lips: 'Same to you.' Mr Job Potterson, a semiseafaring man of obliging demeanour, said, 'Thank you, sir.'

'Lord bless my soul and body!' cried Mr Inspector. 'Talk of trades, Miss Abbey, and the way they set their marks on men' (a subject which nobody had approached); 'who wouldn't know your brother to be a Steward! There's a bright and ready twinkle in his eye, there's a neatness in his action, there's a smartness in his figure, there's an air of reliability about him in case you wanted a basin, which points out the steward! And Mr Kibble; ain't he Passenger, all over? While there's that mercantile cut upon him which would make you happy to give him credit for five hundred pound, don't you see the salt sea shining on him too?'

'YOU do, I dare say,' returned Miss Abbey, 'but I don't. And as for stewarding, I think it's time my brother gave that up, and took his House in hand on his sister's retiring. The House will go to pieces if he don't. I wouldn't sell it for

any money that could be told out, to a person that I couldn't depend upon to be a Law to the Porters, as I have been.'

'There you're right, Miss,' said Mr Inspector. 'A better kept house is not known to our men. What do I say? Half so well a kept house is not known to our men. Show the Force the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters, and the Forceto a constablewill show you a piece of perfection, Mr Kibble.'

That gentleman, with a very serious shake of his head, subscribed the article.

'And talk of Time slipping by you, as if it was an animal at rustic sports with its tail soaped,' said Mr Inspector (again, a subject which nobody had approached); 'why, well you may. Well you may. How has it slipped by us, since the time when Mr Job Potterson here present, Mr Jacob Kibble here present, and an Officer of the Force here present, first came together on a matter of Identification!'

Bella's husband stepped softly to the halfdoor of the bar, and stood there.

'How has Time slipped by us,' Mr Inspector went on slowly, with his eyes narrowly observant of the two guests, 'since we three very men, at an Inquest in this very houseMr Kibble? Taken ill, sir?'

Mr Kibble had staggered up, with his lower jaw dropped, catching Potterson by the shoulder, and pointing to the halfdoor. He now cried out: 'Potterson! Look! Look there!' Potterson started up, started back, and exclaimed: 'Heaven defend us, what's that!' Bella's husband stepped back to Bella, took her in his arms (for she was terrified by the unintelligible terror of the two men), and shut the door of the little room. A hurry of voices succeeded, in which Mr Inspector's voice was busiest; it gradually slackened and sank; and Mr Inspector reappeared. 'Sharp's the word, sir!' he said, looking in with a knowing wink. 'We'll get your lady out at once.' Immediately, Bella and her husband were under the stars, making their way back, alone, to the vehicle they had kept in waiting.

All this was most extraordinary, and Bella could make nothing of it but that John was in the right. How in the right, and how suspected of being in the wrong, she could not divine. Some vague idea that he had never really assumed the name of Handford, and that there was a remarkable likeness between him and that mysterious person, was her nearest approach to any definite explanation. But John was triumphant; that much was made apparent; and she could wait for the rest.

When John came home to dinner next day, he said, sitting down on the sofa by Bella and babyBella: 'My dear, I have a piece of news to tell you. I have left

the China House.'

As he seemed to like having left it, Bella took it for granted that there was no misfortune in the case.

'In a word, my love,' said John, 'the China House is broken up and abolished. There is no such thing any more.'

'Then, are you already in another House, John?'

'Yes, my darling. I am in another way of business. And I am rather better off.'

The inexhaustible baby was instantly made to congratulate him, and to say, with appropriate action on the part of a very limp arm and a speckled fist: 'Three cheers, ladies and gemplemorums. Hooray!'

'I am afraid, my life,' said John, 'that you have become very much attached to this cottage?'

'Afraid I have, John? Of course I have.'

'The reason why I said afraid,' returned John, 'is, because we must move.'

'O John!'

'Yes, my dear, we must move. We must have our headquarters in London now. In short, there's a dwellinghouse rentfree, attached to my new position, and we must occupy it.'

'That's a gain, John.'

'Yes, my dear, it is undoubtedly a gain.'

He gave her a very blithe look, and a very sly look. Which occasioned the inexhaustible baby to square at him with the speckled fists, and demand in a threatening manner what he meant?

'My love, you said it was a gain, and I said it was a gain. A very innocent remark, surely.'

'I won't,' said the inexhaustible baby, 'allowyoutomakegameofmyvenerableMa.' At each division administering a soft facer with one of the speckled fists.

John having stooped down to receive these punishing visitations, Bella asked him, would it be necessary to move soon? Why yes, indeed (said John), he did propose that they should move very soon. Taking the furniture with them, of course? (said Bella). Why, no (said John), the fact was, that the house wasin a

sort of a kind of a wayfurnished already.

The inexhaustible baby, hearing this, resumed the offensive, and said: 'But there's no nursery for me, sir. What do you mean, marblehearted parent?' To which the marblehearted parent rejoined that there was asort of a kind of anursery, and it might be 'made to do'. 'Made to do?' returned the Inexhaustible, administering more punishment, 'what do you take me for?' And was then turned over on its back in Bella's lap, and smothered with kisses.

'But really, John dear,' said Bella, flushed in quite a lovely manner by these exercises, 'will the new house, just as it stands, do for baby? That's the question.'

'I felt that to be the question,' he returned, 'and therefore I arranged that you should come with me and look at it, tomorrow morning.' Appointment made, accordingly, for Bella to go up with him tomorrow morning; John kissed; and Bella delighted.

When they reached London in pursuance of their little plan, they took coach and drove westward. Not only drove westward, but drove into that particular westward division, which Bella had seen last when she turned her face from Mr Boffin's door. Not only drove into that particular division, but drove at last into that very street. Not only drove into that very street, but stopped at last at that very house.

'John dear!' cried Bella, looking out of window in a flutter. 'Do you see where we are?'

'Yes, my love. The coachman's quite right.'

The housedoor was opened without any knocking or ringing, and John promptly helped her out. The servant who stood holding the door, asked no question of John, neither did he go before them or follow them as they went straight upstairs. It was only her husband's encircling arm, urging her on, that prevented Bella from stopping at the foot of the staircase. As they ascended, it was seen to be tastefully ornamented with most beautiful flowers.

'O John!' said Bella, faintly. 'What does this mean?'

'Nothing, my darling, nothing. Let us go on.'

Going on a little higher, they came to a charming aviary, in which a number of tropical birds, more gorgeous in colour than the flowers, were flying about; and among those birds were gold and silver fish, and mosses, and waterlilies, and a fountain, and all manner of wonders.

'O my dear John!' said Bella. 'What does this mean?'

'Nothing, my darling, nothing. Let us go on.'

They went on, until they came to a door. As John put out his hand to open it, Bella caught his hand.

'I don't know what it means, but it's too much for me. Hold me, John, love.'

John caught her up in his arm, and lightly dashed into the room with her.

Behold Mr and Mrs Boffin, beaming! Behold Mrs Boffin clapping her hands in an ecstacy, running to Bella with tears of joy pouring down her comely face, and folding her to her breast, with the words: 'My deary deary, deary girl, that Noddy and me saw married and couldn't wish joy to, or so much as speak to! My deary, deary, deary, wife of John and mother of his little child! My loving loving, bright bright, Pretty Pretty! Welcome to your house and home, my deary!'

Chapter 13

SHOWING HOW THE GOLDEN DUSTMAN HELPED TO SCATTER DUST

In all the first bewilderment of her wonder, the most bewilderingly wonderful thing to Bella was the shining countenance of Mr Boffin. That his wife should be joyous, openhearted, and genial, or that her face should express every quality that was large and trusting, and no quality that was little or mean, was accordant with Bella's experience. But, that he, with a perfectly beneficent air and a plump rosy face, should be standing there, looking at her and John, like some jovial good spirit, was marvellous. For, how had he looked when she last saw him in that very room (it was the room in which she had given him that piece of her mind at parting), and what had become of all those crooked lines of suspicion, avarice, and distrust, that twisted his visage then?

Mrs Boffin seated Bella on the large ottoman, and seated herself beside her, and John her husband seated himself on the other side of her, and Mr Boffin stood beaming at every one and everything he could see, with surpassing jollity and enjoyment. Mrs Boffin was then taken with a laughing fit of clapping her hands, and clapping her knees, and rocking herself to and fro, and then with another laughing fit of embracing Bella, and rocking her to and

froboth fits, of considerable duration.

'Old lady, old lady,' said Mr Boffin, at length; 'if you don't begin somebody else must.'

'I'm a going to begin, Noddy, my dear,' returned Mrs Boffin. 'Only it isn't easy for a person to know where to begin, when a person is in this state of delight and happiness. Bella, my dear. Tell me, who's this?'

'Who is this?' repeated Bella. 'My husband.'

'Ah! But tell me his name, deary!' cried Mrs Boffin.

'Rokesmith.'

'No, it ain't!' cried Mrs Boffin, clapping her hands, and shaking her head. 'Not a bit of it.'

'Handford then,' suggested Bella.

'No, it ain't!' cried Mrs Boffin, again clapping her hands and shaking her head. 'Not a bit of it.'

'At least, his name is John, I suppose?' said Bella.

'Ah! I should think so, deary!' cried Mrs Boffin. 'I should hope so! Many and many is the time I have called him by his name of John. But what's his other name, his true other name? Give a guess, my pretty!'

'I can't guess,' said Bella, turning her pale face from one to another.

'I could,' cried Mrs Boffin, 'and what's more, I did! I found him out, all in a flash as I may say, one night. Didn't I, Noddy?'

'Ay! That the old lady did!' said Mr Boffin, with stout pride in the circumstance.

'Harkee to me, deary,' pursued Mrs Boffin, taking Bella's hands between her own, and gently beating on them from time to time. 'It was after a particular night when John had been disappointedas he thoughtin his affections. It was after a night when John had made an offer to a certain young lady, and the certain young lady had refused it. It was after a particular night, when he felt himself castawaylike, and had made up his mind to go seek his fortune. It was the very next night. My Noddy wanted a paper out of his Secretary's room, and I says to Noddy, "I am going by the door, and I'll ask him for it." I tapped at his door, and he didn't hear me. I looked in, and saw him a sitting lonely by his fire, brooding over it. He chanced to look up with a pleased kind of smile

in my company when he saw me, and then in a single moment every grain of the gunpowder that had been lying sprinkled thick about him ever since I first set eyes upon him as a man at the Bower, took fire! Too many a time had I seen him sitting lonely, when he was a poor child, to be pitied, heart and hand! Too many a time had I seen him in need of being brightened up with a comforting word! Too many and too many a time to be mistaken, when that glimpse of him come at last! No, no! I just makes out to cry, "I know you now! You're John!" And he catches me as I drops.So what,' says Mrs Boffin, breaking off in the rush of her speech to smile most radiantly, 'might you think by this time that your husband's name was, dear?'

'Not,' returned Bella, with quivering lips; 'not Harmon? That's not possible?'

'Don't tremble. Why not possible, deary, when so many things are possible?' demanded Mrs Boffin, in a soothing tone.

'He was killed,' gasped Bella.

'Thought to be,' said Mrs Boffin. 'But if ever John Harmon drew the breath of life on earth, that is certainly John Harmon's arm round your waist now, my pretty. If ever John Harmon had a wife on earth, that wife is certainly you. If ever John Harmon and his wife had a child on earth, that child is certainly this.'

By a masterstroke of secret arrangement, the inexhaustible baby here appeared at the door, suspended in midair by invisible agency. Mrs Boffin, plunging at it, brought it to Bella's lap, where both Mrs and Mr Boffin (as the saying is) 'took it out of' the Inexhaustible in a shower of caresses. It was only this timely appearance that kept Bella from swooning. This, and her husband's earnestness in explaining further to her how it had come to pass that he had been supposed to be slain, and had even been suspected of his own murder; also, how he had put a pious fraud upon her which had preyed upon his mind, as the time for its disclosure approached, lest she might not make full allowance for the object with which it had originated, and in which it had fully developed.

'But bless ye, my beauty!' cried Mrs Boffin, taking him up short at this point, with another hearty clap of her hands. 'It wasn't John only that was in it. We was all of us in it.'

'I don't,' said Bella, looking vacantly from one to another, 'yet understand'

'Of course you don't, my deary,' exclaimed Mrs Boffin. 'How can you till you're told! So now I am a going to tell you. So you put your two hands between my two hands again,' cried the comfortable creature, embracing her,

'with that blessed little picter lying on your lap, and you shall be told all the story. Now, I'm a going to tell the story. Once, twice, three times, and the horses is off. Here they go! When I cries out that night, "I know you now, you're John! "which was my exact words; wasn't they, John?'

'Your exact words,' said John, laying his hand on hers.

'That's a very good arrangement,' cried Mrs Boffin. 'Keep it there, John. And as we was all of us in it, Noddy you come and lay yours a top of his, and we won't break the pile till the story's done.'

Mr Boffin hitched up a chair, and added his broad brown right hand to the heap.

'That's capital!' said Mrs Boffin, giving it a kiss. 'Seems quite a family building; don't it? But the horses is off. Well! When I cries out that night, "I know you now! you're John!" John catches of me, it is true; but I ain't a light weight, bless ye, and he's forced to let me down. Noddy, he hears a noise, and in he trots, and as soon as I anyways comes to myself I calls to him, "Noddy, well I might say as I did say, that night at the Bower, for the Lord be thankful this is John!" On which he gives a heave, and down he goes likewise, with his head under the writingtable. This brings me round comfortable, and that brings him round comfortable, and then John and him and me we all fall a crying for joy.'

'Yes! They cry for joy, my darling,' her husband struck in. 'You understand? These two, whom I come to life to disappoint and dispossess, cry for joy!'

Bella looked at him confusedly, and looked again at Mrs Boffin's radiant face.

'That's right, my dear, don't you mind him,' said Mrs Boffin, 'stick to me. Well! Then we sits down, gradually gets cool, and holds a confabulation. John, he tells us how he is despairing in his mind on accounts of a certain fair young person, and how, if I hadn't found him out, he was going away to seek his fortune far and wide, and had fully meant never to come to life, but to leave the property as our wrongful inheritance for ever and a day. At which you never see a man so frightened as my Noddy was. For to think that he should have come into the property wrongful, however innocent, andmore than thatmight have gone on keeping it to his dying day, turned him whiter than chalk.'

'And you too,' said Mr Boffin.

'Don't you mind him, neither, my deary,' resumed Mrs Boffin; 'stick to me. This brings up a confabulation regarding the certain fair young person; when

Noddy he gives it as his opinion that she is a deary creetur. "She may be a leetle spoilt, and nat'rally spoilt," he says, "by circumstances, but that's only the surface, and I lay my life," he says, "that she's the true golden gold at heart."

'So did you,' said Mr Boffin.

'Don't you mind him a single morsel, my dear,' proceeded Mrs Boffin, 'but stick to me. Then says John, O, if he could but prove so! Then we both of us ups and says, that minute, "Prove so!"'

With a start, Bella directed a hurried glance towards Mr Boffin. But, he was sitting thoughtfully smiling at that broad brown hand of his, and either didn't see it, or would take no notice of it.

'"Prove it, John!" we says,' repeated Mrs Boffin. '"Prove it and overcome your doubts with triumph, and be happy for the first time in your life, and for the rest of your life." This puts John in a state, to be sure. Then we says, "What will content you? If she was to stand up for you when you was slighted, if she was to show herself of a generous mind when you was oppressed, if she was to be truest to you when you was poorest and friendliest, and all this against her own seeming interest, how would that do?" "Do?" says John, "it would raise me to the skies." "Then," says my Noddy, "make your preparations for the ascent, John, it being my firm belief that up you go!"'

Bella caught Mr Boffin's twinkling eye for half an instant; but he got it away from her, and restored it to his broad brown hand.

'From the first, you was always a special favourite of Noddy's,' said Mrs Boffin, shaking her head. 'O you were! And if I had been inclined to be jealous, I don't know what I mightn't have done to you. But as I wasn'twhy, my beauty,' with a hearty laugh and an embrace, 'I made you a special favourite of my own too. But the horses is coming round the corner. Well! Then says my Noddy, shaking his sides till he was fit to make 'em ache again: "Look out for being slighted and oppressed, John, for if ever a man had a hard master, you shall find me from this present time to be such to you." And then he began!' cried Mrs Boffin, in an ecstacy of admiration. 'Lord bless you, then he began! And how he DID begin; didn't he!'

Bella looked half frightened, and yet half laughed.

'But, bless you,' pursued Mrs Boffin, 'if you could have seen him of a night, at that time of it! The way he'd sit and chuckle over himself! The way he'd say "I've been a regular brown bear today," and take himself in his arms and hug himself at the thoughts of the brute he had pretended. But every night he says

to me: "Better and better, old lady. What did we say of her? She'll come through it, the true golden gold. This'll be the happiest piece of work we ever done." And then he'd say, "I'll be a grislier old growler tomorrow!" and laugh, he would, till John and me was often forced to slap his back, and bring it out of his windpipes with a little water.'

Mr Boffin, with his face bent over his heavy hand, made no sound, but rolled his shoulders when thus referred to, as if he were vastly enjoying himself.

'And so, my good and pretty,' pursued Mrs Boffin, 'you was married, and there was we hid up in the churchorgan by this husband of yours; for he wouldn't let us out with it then, as was first meant. "No," he says, "she's so unselfish and contented, that I can't afford to be rich yet. I must wait a little longer." Then, when baby was expected, he says, "She is such a cheerful, glorious housewife that I can't afford to be rich yet. I must wait a little longer." Then when baby was born, he says, "She is so much better than she ever was, that I can't afford to be rich yet. I must wait a little longer." And so he goes on and on, till I says outright, "Now, John, if you don't fix a time for setting her up in her own house and home, and letting us walk out of it, I'll turn Informer." Then he says he'll only wait to triumph beyond what we ever thought possible, and to show her to us better than even we ever supposed; and he says, "She shall see me under suspicion of having murdered myself, and YOU shall see how trusting and how true she'll be." Well! Noddy and me agreed to that, and he was right, and here you are, and the horses is in, and the story is done, and God bless you my Beauty, and God bless us all!'

The pile of hands dispersed, and Bella and Mrs Boffin took a good long hug of one another: to the apparent peril of the inexhaustible baby, lying staring in Bella's lap.

'But IS the story done?' said Bella, pondering. 'Is there no more of it?'

'What more of it should there be, deary?' returned Mrs Boffin, full of glee.

'Are you sure you have left nothing out of it?' asked Bella.

'I don't think I have,' said Mrs Boffin, archly.

'John dear,' said Bella, 'you're a good nurse; will you please hold baby?' Having deposited the Inexhaustible in his arms with those words, Bella looked hard at Mr Boffin, who had moved to a table where he was leaning his head upon his hand with his face turned away, and, quietly settling herself on her knees at his side, and drawing one arm over his shoulder, said: 'Please I beg your pardon, and I made a small mistake of a word when I took leave of you last. Please I think you are better (not worse) than Hopkins, better (not worse)

than Dancer, better (not worse) than Blackberry Jones, better (not worse) than any of them! Please something more!' cried Bella, with an exultant ringing laugh as she struggled with him and forced him to turn his delighted face to hers. 'Please I have found out something not yet mentioned. Please I don't believe you are a hardhearted miser at all, and please I don't believe you ever for one single minute were!'

At this, Mrs Boffin fairly screamed with rapture, and sat beating her feet upon the floor, clapping her hands, and bobbing herself backwards and forwards, like a demented member of some Mandarin's family.

'O, I understand you now, sir!' cried Bella. 'I want neither you nor any one else to tell me the rest of the story. I can tell it to YOU, now, if you would like to hear it.'

'Can you, my dear?' said Mr Boffin. 'Tell it then.'

'What?' cried Bella, holding him prisoner by the coat with both hands. 'When you saw what a greedy little wretch you were the patron of, you determined to show her how much misused and misprized riches could do, and often had done, to spoil people; did you? Not caring what she thought of you (and Goodness knows THAT was of no consequence!) you showed her, in yourself, the most detestable sides of wealth, saying in your own mind, "This shallow creature would never work the truth out of her own weak soul, if she had a hundred years to do it in; but a glaring instance kept before her may open even her eyes and set her thinking." That was what you said to yourself, was it, sir?'

'I never said anything of the sort,' Mr Boffin declared in a state of the highest enjoyment.

'Then you ought to have said it, sir,' returned Bella, giving him two pulls and one kiss, 'for you must have thought and meant it. You saw that good fortune was turning my stupid head and hardening my silly heartwas making me grasping, calculating, insolent, insufferableand you took the pains to be the dearest and kindest fingerpost that ever was set up anywhere, pointing out the road that I was taking and the end it led to. Confess instantly!'

'John,' said Mr Boffin, one broad piece of sunshine from head to foot, 'I wish you'd help me out of this.'

'You can't be heard by counsel, sir,' returned Bella. 'You must speak for yourself. Confess instantly!'

'Well, my dear,' said Mr Boffin, 'the truth is, that when we did go in for the little scheme that my old lady has pinted out, I did put it to John, what did he

think of going in for some such general scheme as YOU have pinted out? But I didn't in any way so word it, because I didn't in any way so mean it. I only said to John, wouldn't it be more consistent, me going in for being a reg'lar brown bear respecting him, to go in as a reg'lar brown bear all round?'

'Confess this minute, sir,' said Bella, 'that you did it to correct and amend me!'

'Certainly, my dear child,' said Mr Boffin, 'I didn't do it to harm you; you may be sure of that. And I did hope it might just hint a caution. Still, it ought to be mentioned that no sooner had my old lady found out John, than John made known to her and me that he had had his eye upon a thankless person by the name of Silas Wegg. Partly for the punishment of which Wegg, by leading him on in a very unhandsome and underhanded game that he was playing, them books that you and me bought so many of together (and, bytheby, my dear, he wasn't Blackberry Jones, but Blewberry) was read aloud to me by that person of the name of Silas Wegg aforesaid.'

Bella, who was still on her knees at Mr Boffin's feet, gradually sank down into a sitting posture on the ground, as she meditated more and more thoughtfully, with her eyes upon his beaming face.

'Still,' said Bella, after this meditative pause, 'there remain two things that I cannot understand. Mrs Boffin never supposed any part of the change in Mr Boffin to be real; did she?You never did; did you?' asked Bella, turning to her.

'No!' returned Mrs Boffin, with a most rotund and glowing negative.

'And yet you took it very much to heart,' said Bella. 'I remember its making you very uneasy, indeed.'

'Ecod, you see Mrs John has a sharp eye, John!' cried Mr Boffin, shaking his head with an admiring air. 'You're right, my dear. The old lady nearly blowed us into shivers and smithers, many times.'

'Why?' asked Bella. 'How did that happen, when she was in your secret?'

'Why, it was a weakness in the old lady,' said Mr Boffin; 'and yet, to tell you the whole truth and nothing but the truth, I'm rather proud of it. My dear, the old lady thinks so high of me that she couldn't abear to see and hear me coming out as a reg'lar brown one. Couldn't abear to makebelieve as I meant it! In consequence of which, we was everlastingly in danger with her.'

Mrs Boffin laughed heartily at herself; but a certain glistening in her honest eyes revealed that she was by no means cured of that dangerous propensity.

'I assure you, my dear,' said Mr Boffin, 'that on the celebrated day when I

made what has since been agreed upon to be my grandest demonstrationI allude to Mew says the cat, Quack quack says the duck, and Bowwowwow says the dogI assure you, my dear, that on that celebrated day, them flinty and unbelieving words hit my old lady so hard on my account, that I had to hold her, to prevent her running out after you, and defending me by saying I was playing a part.'

Mrs Boffin laughed heartily again, and her eyes glistened again, and it then appeared, not only that in that burst of sarcastic eloquence Mr Boffin was considered by his two fellowconspirators to have outdone himself, but that in his own opinion it was a remarkable achievement. 'Never thought of it afore the moment, my dear!' he observed to Bella. 'When John said, if he had been so happy as to win your affections and possess your heart, it come into my head to turn round upon him with "Win her affections and possess her heart! Mew says the cat, Quack quack says the duck, and Bowwowwow says the dog." I couldn't tell you how it come into my head or where from, but it had so much the sound of a rasper that I own to you it astonished myself. I was awful nigh bursting out a laughing though, when it made John stare!'

'You said, my pretty,' Mrs Boffin reminded Bella, 'that there was one other thing you couldn't understand.'

'O yes!' cried Bella, covering her face with her hands; 'but that I never shall be able to understand as long as I live. It is, how John could love me so when I so little deserved it, and how you, Mr and Mrs Boffin, could be so forgetful of yourselves, and take such pains and trouble, to make me a little better, and after all to help him to so unworthy a wife. But I am very very grateful.'

It was John Harmon's turn thenJohn Harmon now for good, and John Rokesmith for nevermoreto plead with her (quite unnecessarily) in behalf of his deception, and to tell her, over and over again, that it had been prolonged by her own winning graces in her supposed station of life. This led on to many interchanges of endearment and enjoyment on all sides, in the midst of which the Inexhaustible being observed staring, in a most imbecile manner, on Mrs Boffin's breast, was pronounced to be supernaturally intelligent as to the whole transaction, and was made to declare to the ladies and gemplemorums, with a wave of the speckled fist (with difficulty detached from an exceedingly short waist), 'I have already informed my venerable Ma that I know all about it!'

Then, said John Harmon, would Mrs John Harmon come and see her house? And a dainty house it was, and a tastefully beautiful; and they went through it in procession; the Inexhaustible on Mrs Boffin's bosom (still staring) occupying the middle station, and Mr Boffin bringing up the rear. And on Bella's exquisite toilette table was an ivory casket, and in the casket were

jewels the like of which she had never dreamed of, and aloft on an upper floor was a nursery garnished as with rainbows; 'though we were hard put to it,' said John Harmon, 'to get it done in so short a time.'

The house inspected, emissaries removed the Inexhaustible, who was shortly afterwards heard screaming among the rainbows; whereupon Bella withdrew herself from the presence and knowledge of gemplemorums, and the screaming ceased, and smiling Peace associated herself with that young olive branch.

'Come and look in, Noddy!' said Mrs Boffin to Mr Boffin.

Mr Boffin, submitting to be led on tiptoe to the nursery door, looked in with immense satisfaction, although there was nothing to see but Bella in a musing state of happiness, seated in a little low chair upon the hearth, with her child in her fair young arms, and her soft eyelashes shading her eyes from the fire.

'It looks as if the old man's spirit had found rest at last; don't it?' said Mrs Boffin.

'Yes, old lady.'

'And as if his money had turned bright again, after a long long rust in the dark, and was at last a beginning to sparkle in the sunlight?'

'Yes, old lady.'

'And it makes a pretty and a promising picter; don't it?'

'Yes, old lady.'

But, aware at the instant of a fine opening for a point, Mr Boffin quenched that observation in thisdelivered in the grisliest growling of the regular brown bear. 'A pretty and a hopeful picter? Mew, Quack quack, Bowwow!' And then trotted silently downstairs, with his shoulders in a state of the liveliest commotion.

Chapter 14

CHECKMATE TO THE FRIENDLY MOVE

Mr and Mrs John Harmon had so timed their taking possession of their rightful name and their London house, that the event befel on the very day when the

last waggonload of the last Mound was driven out at the gates of Boffin's Bower. As it jolted away, Mr Wegg felt that the last load was correspondingly removed from his mind, and hailed the auspicious season when that black sheep, Boffin, was to be closely sheared.

Over the whole slow process of levelling the Mounds, Silas had kept watch with rapacious eyes. But, eyes no less rapacious had watched the growth of the Mounds in years bygone, and had vigilantly sifted the dust of which they were composed. No valuables turned up. How should there be any, seeing that the old hard jailer of Harmony Jail had coined every waif and stray into money, long before?

Though disappointed by this bare result, Mr Wegg felt too sensibly relieved by the close of the labour, to grumble to any great extent. A foremanrepresentative of the dust contractors, purchasers of the Mounds, had worn Mr Wegg down to skin and bone. This supervisor of the proceedings, asserting his employers' rights to cart off by daylight, nightlight, torchlight, when they would, must have been the death of Silas if the work had lasted much longer. Seeming never to need sleep himself, he would reappear, with a tiedup broken head, in fantail hat and velveteen smalls, like an accursed goblin, at the most unholy and untimely hours. Tired out by keeping close ward over a long day's work in fog and rain, Silas would have just crawled to bed and be dozing, when a horrid shake and rumble under his pillow would announce an approaching train of carts, escorted by this Demon of Unrest, to fall to work again. At another time, he would be rumbled up out of his soundest sleep, in the dead of the night; at another, would be kept at his post eightandforty hours on end. The more his persecutor besought him not to trouble himself to turn out, the more suspicious was the crafty Wegg that indications had been observed of something hidden somewhere, and that attempts were on foot to circumvent him. So continually broken was his rest through these means, that he led the life of having wagered to keep ten thousand dogwatches in ten thousand hours, and looked piteously upon himself as always getting up and yet never going to bed. So gaunt and haggard had he grown at last, that his wooden leg showed disproportionate, and presented a thriving appearance in contrast with the rest of his plagued body, which might almost have been termed chubby.

However, Wegg's comfort was, that all his disagreeables were now over, and that he was immediately coming into his property. Of late, the grindstone did undoubtedly appear to have been whirling at his own nose rather than Boffin's, but Boffin's nose was now to be sharpened fine. Thus far, Mr Wegg had let his dusty friend off lightly, having been baulked in that amiable design of frequently dining with him, by the machinations of the sleepless dustman. He

had been constrained to depute Mr Venus to keep their dusty friend, Boffin, under inspection, while he himself turned lank and lean at the Bower.

To Mr Venus's museum Mr Wegg repaired when at length the Mounds were down and gone. It being evening, he found that gentleman, as he expected, seated over his fire; but did not find him, as he expected, floating his powerful mind in tea.

'Why, you smell rather comfortable here!' said Wegg, seeming to take it ill, and stopping and sniffing as he entered.

'I AM rather comfortable, sir,' said Venus.

'You don't use lemon in your business, do you?' asked Wegg, sniffing again.

'No, Mr Wegg,' said Venus. 'When I use it at all, I mostly use it in cobblers' punch.'

'What do you call cobblers' punch?' demanded Wegg, in a worse humour than before.

'It's difficult to impart the receipt for it, sir,' returned Venus, 'because, however particular you may be in allotting your materials, so much will still depend upon the individual gifts, and there being a feeling thrown into it. But the groundwork is gin.'

'In a Dutch bottle?' said Wegg gloomily, as he sat himself down.

'Very good, sir, very good!' cried Venus. 'Will you partake, sir?'

'Will I partake?' returned Wegg very surlily. 'Why, of course I will! WILL a man partake, as has been tormented out of his five senses by an everlasting dustman with his head tied up! WILL he, too! As if he wouldn't!'

'Don't let it put you out, Mr Wegg. You don't seem in your usual spirits.'

'If you come to that, you don't seem in your usual spirits,' growled Wegg. 'You seem to be setting up for lively.'

This circumstance appeared, in his then state of mind, to give Mr Wegg uncommon offence.

'And you've been having your hair cut!' said Wegg, missing the usual dusty shock.

'Yes, Mr Wegg. But don't let that put you out, either.'

'And I am blest if you ain't getting fat!' said Wegg, with culminating

discontent. 'What are you going to do next?'

'Well, Mr Wegg,' said Venus, smiling in a sprightly manner, 'I suspect you could hardly guess what I am going to do next.'

'I don't want to guess,' retorted Wegg. 'All I've got to say is, that it's well for you that the diwision of labour has been what it has been. It's well for you to have had so light a part in this business, when mine has been so heavy. You haven't had YOUR rest broke, I'll be bound.'

'Not at all, sir,' said Venus. 'Never rested so well in all my life, I thank you.'

'Ah!' grumbled Wegg, 'you should have been me. If you had been me, and had been fretted out of your bed, and your sleep, and your meals, and your mind, for a stretch of months together, you'd have been out of condition and out of sorts.'

'Certainly, it has trained you down, Mr Wegg,' said Venus, contemplating his figure with an artist's eye. 'Trained you down very low, it has! So weazen and yellow is the kivering upon your bones, that one might almost fancy you had come to give a lookin upon the French gentleman in the corner, instead of me.'

Mr Wegg, glancing in great dudgeon towards the French gentleman's corner, seemed to notice something new there, which induced him to glance at the opposite corner, and then to put on his glasses and stare at all the nooks and corners of the dim shop in succession.

'Why, you've been having the place cleaned up!' he exclaimed.

'Yes, Mr Wegg. By the hand of adorable woman.'

'Then what you're going to do next, I suppose, is to get married?'

'That's it, sir.'

Silas took off his glasses againfinding himself too intensely disgusted by the sprightly appearance of his friend and partner to bear a magnified view of him and made the inquiry:

'To the old party?'

'Mr Wegg!' said Venus, with a sudden flush of wrath. 'The lady in question is not a old party.'

'I meant,' exclaimed Wegg, testily, 'to the party as formerly objected?'

'Mr Wegg,' said Venus, 'in a case of so much delicacy, I must trouble you to

say what you mean. There are strings that must not be played upon. No sir! Not sounded, unless in the most respectful and tuneful manner. Of such melodious strings is Miss Pleasant Riderhood formed.'

'Then it IS the lady as formerly objected?' said Wegg.

'Sir,' returned Venus with dignity, 'I accept the altered phrase. It is the lady as formerly objected.'

'When is it to come off?' asked Silas.

'Mr Wegg,' said Venus, with another flush. 'I cannot permit it to be put in the form of a Fight. I must temperately but firmly call upon you, sir, to amend that question.'

'When is the lady,' Wegg reluctantly demanded, constraining his ill temper in remembrance of the partnership and its stock in trade, 'a going to give her 'and where she has already given her 'art?'

'Sir,' returned Venus, 'I again accept the altered phrase, and with pleasure. The lady is a going to give her 'and where she has already given her 'art, next Monday.'

'Then the lady's objection has been met?' said Silas.

'Mr Wegg,' said Venus, 'as I did name to you, I think, on a former occasion, if not on former occasions'

'On former occasions,' interrupted Wegg.

'What,' pursued Venus, 'what the nature of the lady's objection was, I may impart, without violating any of the tender confidences since sprung up between the lady and myself, how it has been met, through the kind interference of two good friends of mine: one, previously acquainted with the lady: and one, not. The pint was thrown out, sir, by those two friends when they did me the great service of waiting on the lady to try if a union betwixt the lady and me could not be brought to bearthe pint, I say, was thrown out by them, sir, whether if, after marriage, I confined myself to the articulation of men, children, and the lower animals, it might not relieve the lady's mind of her feeling respecting being as a ladyregarded in a bony light. It was a happy thought, sir, and it took root.'

'It would seem, Mr Venus,' observed Wegg, with a touch of distrust, 'that you are flush of friends?'

'Pretty well, sir,' that gentleman answered, in a tone of placid mystery. 'Soso,

sir. Pretty well.'

'However,' said Wegg, after eyeing him with another touch of distrust, 'I wish you joy. One man spends his fortune in one way, and another in another. You are going to try matrimony. I mean to try travelling.'

'Indeed, Mr Wegg?'

'Change of air, seascenery, and my natural rest, I hope may bring me round after the persecutions I have undergone from the dustman with his head tied up, which I just now mentioned. The tough job being ended and the Mounds laid low, the hour is come for Boffin to stump up. Would ten tomorrow morning suit you, partner, for finally bringing Boffin's nose to the grindstone?'

Ten tomorrow morning would quite suit Mr Venus for that excellent purpose.

'You have had him well under inspection, I hope?' said Silas.

Mr Venus had had him under inspection pretty well every day.

'Suppose you was just to step round tonight then, and give him orders from meI say from me, because he knows I won't be played withto be ready with his papers, his accounts, and his cash, at that time in the morning?' said Wegg. 'And as a matter of form, which will be agreeable to your own feelings, before we go out (for I'll walk with you part of the way, though my leg gives under me with weariness), let's have a look at the stock in trade.'

Mr Venus produced it, and it was perfectly correct; Mr Venus undertook to produce it again in the morning, and to keep tryst with Mr Wegg on Boffin's doorstep as the clock struck ten. At a certain point of the road between Clerkenwell and Boffin's house (Mr Wegg expressly insisted that there should be no prefix to the Golden Dustman's name) the partners separated for the night.

It was a very bad night; to which succeeded a very bad morning. The streets were so unusually slushy, muddy, and miserable, in the morning, that Wegg rode to the scene of action; arguing that a man who was, as it were, going to the Bank to draw out a handsome property, could well afford that trifling expense.

Venus was punctual, and Wegg undertook to knock at the door, and conduct the conference. Door knocked at. Door opened.

'Boffin at home?'

The servant replied that MR Boffin was at home.

'He'll do,' said Wegg, 'though it ain't what I call him.'

The servant inquired if they had any appointment?

'Now, I tell you what, young fellow,' said Wegg, 'I won't have it. This won't do for me. I don't want menials. I want Boffin.'

They were shown into a waitingroom, where the allpowerful Wegg wore his hat, and whistled, and with his forefinger stirred up a clock that stood upon the chimneypiece, until he made it strike. In a few minutes they were shown upstairs into what used to be Boffin's room; which, besides the door of entrance, had foldingdoors in it, to make it one of a suite of rooms when occasion required. Here, Boffin was seated at a librarytable, and here Mr Wegg, having imperiously motioned the servant to withdraw, drew up a chair and seated himself, in his hat, close beside him. Here, also, Mr Wegg instantly underwent the remarkable experience of having his hat twitched off his head and thrown out of a window, which was opened and shut for the purpose.

'Be careful what insolent liberties you take in that gentleman's presence,' said the owner of the hand which had done this, 'or I will throw you after it.'

Wegg involuntarily clapped his hand to his bare head, and stared at the Secretary. For, it was he addressed him with a severe countenance, and who had come in quietly by the foldingdoors.

'Oh!' said Wegg, as soon as he recovered his suspended power of speech. 'Very good! I gave directions for YOU to be dismissed. And you ain't gone, ain't you? Oh! We'll look into this presently. Very good!'

'No, nor I ain't gone,' said another voice.

Somebody else had come in quietly by the foldingdoors. Turning his head, Wegg beheld his persecutor, the everwakeful dustman, accoutred with fantail hat and velveteen smalls complete. Who, untying his tiedup broken head, revealed a head that was whole, and a face that was Sloppy's.

'Ha, ha, ha, gentlemen!' roared Sloppy in a peal of laughter, and with immeasureable relish. 'He never thought as I could sleep standing, and often done it when I turned for Mrs Higden! He never thought as I used to give Mrs Higden the Policenews in different voices! But I did lead him a life all through it, gentlemen, I hope I really and truly DID!' Here, Mr Sloppy opening his mouth to a quite alarming extent, and throwing back his head to peal again, revealed incalculable buttons.

'Oh!' said Wegg, slightly discomfited, but not much as yet: 'one and one is two not dismissed, is it? Boffin! Just let me ask a question. Who set this chap on,

in this dress, when the carting began? Who employed this fellow?'

'I say!' remonstrated Sloppy, jerking his head forward. 'No fellows, or I'll throw you out of winder!'

Mr Boffin appeased him with a wave of his hand, and said: 'I employed him, Wegg.'

'Oh! You employed him, Boffin? Very good. Mr Venus, we raise our terms, and we can't do better than proceed to business. Boffin! I want the room cleared of these two scum.'

'That's not going to be done, Wegg,' replied Mr Boffin, sitting composedly on the librarytable, at one end, while the Secretary sat composedly on it at the other.

'Boffin! Not going to be done?' repeated Wegg. 'Not at your peril?'

'No, Wegg,' said Mr Boffin, shaking his head goodhumouredly. 'Not at my peril, and not on any other terms.'

Wegg reflected a moment, and then said: 'Mr Venus, will you be so good as hand me over that same dockyment?'

'Certainly, sir,' replied Venus, handing it to him with much politeness. 'There it is. Having now, sir, parted with it, I wish to make a small observation: not so much because it is anyways necessary, or expresses any new doctrine or discovery, as because it is a comfort to my mind. Silas Wegg, you are a precious old rascal.'

Mr Wegg, who, as if anticipating a compliment, had been beating time with the paper to the other's politeness until this unexpected conclusion came upon him, stopped rather abruptly.

'Silas Wegg,' said Venus, 'know that I took the liberty of taking Mr Boffin into our concern as a sleeping partner, at a very early period of our firm's existence.'

'Quite true,' added Mr Boffin; 'and I tested Venus by making him a pretended proposal or two; and I found him on the whole a very honest man, Wegg.'

'So Mr Boffin, in his indulgence, is pleased to say,' Venus remarked: 'though in the beginning of this dirt, my hands were not, for a few hours, quite as clean as I could wish. But I hope I made early and full amends.'

'Venus, you did,' said Mr Boffin. 'Certainly, certainly, certainly.'

Venus inclined his head with respect and gratitude. 'Thank you, sir. I am much obliged to you, sir, for all. For your good opinion now, for your way of receiving and encouraging me when I first put myself in communication with you, and for the influence since so kindly brought to bear upon a certain lady, both by yourself and by Mr John Harmon.' To whom, when thus making mention of him, he also bowed.

Wegg followed the name with sharp ears, and the action with sharp eyes, and a certain cringing air was infusing itself into his bullying air, when his attention was reclaimed by Venus.

'Everything else between you and me, Mr Wegg,' said Venus, 'now explains itself, and you can now make out, sir, without further words from me. But totally to prevent any unpleasantness or mistake that might arise on what I consider an important point, to be made quite clear at the close of our acquaintance, I beg the leave of Mr Boffin and Mr John Harmon to repeat an observation which I have already had the pleasure of bringing under your notice. You are a precious old rascal!'

'You are a fool,' said Wegg, with a snap of his fingers, 'and I'd have got rid of you before now, if I could have struck out any way of doing it. I have thought it over, I can tell you. You may go, and welcome. You leave the more for me. Because, you know,' said Wegg, dividing his next observation between Mr Boffin and Mr Harmon, 'I am worth my price, and I mean to have it. This getting off is all very well in its way, and it tells with such an anatomical Pump as this one,' pointing out Mr Venus, 'but it won't do with a Man. I am here to be bought off, and I have named my figure. Now, buy me, or leave me.'

'I'll leave you, Wegg,' said Mr Boffin, laughing, 'as far as I am concerned.'

'Boffin!' replied Wegg, turning upon him with a severe air, 'I understand YOUR newborn boldness. I see the brass underneath YOUR silver plating. YOU have got YOUR nose out of joint. Knowing that you've nothing at stake, you can afford to come the independent game. Why, you're just so much smeary glass to see through, you know! But Mr Harmon is in another sitiwation. What Mr Harmon risks, is quite another pair of shoes. Now, I've heerd something lately about this being Mr HarmonI make out now, some hints that I've met on that subject in the newspaperand I drop you, Boffin, as beneath my notice. I ask Mr Harmon whether he has any idea of the contents of this present paper?'

'It is a will of my late father's, of more recent date than the will proved by Mr Boffin (address whom again, as you have addressed him already, and I'll knock you down), leaving the whole of his property to the Crown,' said John

Harmon, with as much indifference as was compatible with extreme sternness.

'Bight you are!' cried Wegg. 'Then,' screwing the weight of his body upon his wooden leg, and screwing his wooden head very much on one side, and screwing up one eye: 'then, I put the question to you, what's this paper worth?'

'Nothing,' said John Harmon.

Wegg had repeated the word with a sneer, and was entering on some sarcastic retort, when, to his boundless amazement, he found himself gripped by the cravat; shaken until his teeth chattered; shoved back, staggering, into a corner of the room; and pinned there.

'You scoundrel!' said John Harmon, whose seafaring hold was like that of a vice.

'You're knocking my head against the wall,' urged Silas faintly.

'I mean to knock your head against the wall,' returned John Harmon, suiting his action to his words, with the heartiest good will; 'and I'd give a thousand pounds for leave to knock your brains out. Listen, you scoundrel, and look at that Dutch bottle.'

Sloppy held it up, for his edification.

'That Dutch bottle, scoundrel, contained the latest will of the many wills made by my unhappy selftormenting father. That will gives everything absolutely to my noble benefactor and yours, Mr Boffin, excluding and reviling me, and my sister (then already dead of a broken heart), by name. That Dutch bottle was found by my noble benefactor and yours, after he entered on possession of the estate. That Dutch bottle distressed him beyond measure, because, though I and my sister were both no more, it cast a slur upon our memory which he knew we had done nothing in our miserable youth, to deserve. That Dutch bottle, therefore, he buried in the Mound belonging to him, and there it lay while you, you thankless wretch, were prodding and pokingoften very near it, I dare say. His intention was, that it should never see the light; but he was afraid to destroy it, lest to destroy such a document, even with his great generous motive, might be an offence at law. After the discovery was made here who I was, Mr Boffin, still restless on the subject, told me, upon certain conditions impossible for such a hound as you to appreciate, the secret of that Dutch bottle. I urged upon him the necessity of its being dug up, and the paper being legally produced and established. The first thing you saw him do, and the second thing has been done without your knowledge. Consequently, the paper now rattling in your hand as I shake youand I should like to shake the life out of youis worth less than the rotten cork of the Dutch bottle, do you

understand?'

Judging from the fallen countenance of Silas as his head wagged backwards and forwards in a most uncomfortable manner, he did understand.

'Now, scoundrel,' said John Harmon, taking another sailorlike turn on his cravat and holding him in his corner at arms' length, 'I shall make two more short speeches to you, because I hope they will torment you. Your discovery was a genuine discovery (such as it was), for nobody had thought of looking into that place. Neither did we know you had made it, until Venus spoke to Mr Boffin, though I kept you under good observation from my first appearance here, and though Sloppy has long made it the chief occupation and delight of his life, to attend you like your shadow. I tell you this, that you may know we knew enough of you to persuade Mr Boffin to let us lead you on, deluded, to the last possible moment, in order that your disappointment might be the heaviest possible disappointment. That's the first short speech, do you understand?'

Here, John Harmon assisted his comprehension with another shake.

'Now, scoundrel,' he pursued, 'I am going to finish. You supposed me just now, to be the possessor of my father's property.So I am. But through any act of my father's, or by any right I have? No. Through the munificence of Mr Boffin. The conditions that he made with me, before parting with the secret of the Dutch bottle, were, that I should take the fortune, and that he should take his Mound and no more. I owe everything I possess, solely to the disinterestedness, uprightness, tenderness, goodness (there are no words to satisfy me) of Mr and Mrs Boffin. And when, knowing what I knew, I saw such a mudworm as you presume to rise in this house against this noble soul, the wonder is,' added John Harmon through his clenched teeth, and with a very ugly turn indeed on Wegg's cravat, 'that I didn't try to twist your head off, and fling THAT out of window! So. That's the last short speech, do you understand?'

Silas, released, put his hand to his throat, cleared it, and looked as if he had a rather large fishbone in that region. Simultaneously with this action on his part in his corner, a singular, and on the surface an incomprehensible, movement was made by Mr Sloppy: who began backing towards Mr Wegg along the wall, in the manner of a porter or heaver who is about to lift a sack of flour or coals.

'I am sorry, Wegg,' said Mr Boffin, in his clemency, 'that my old lady and I can't have a better opinion of you than the bad one we are forced to entertain. But I shouldn't like to leave you, after all said and done, worse off in life than I

found you. Therefore say in a word, before we part, what it'll cost to set you up in another stall.'

'And in another place,' John Harmon struck in. 'You don't come outside these windows.'

'Mr Boffin,' returned Wegg in avaricious humiliation: 'when I first had the honour of making your acquaintance, I had got together a collection of ballads which was, I may say, above price.'

'Then they can't be paid for,' said John Harmon, 'and you had better not try, my dear sir.'

'Pardon me, Mr Boffin,' resumed Wegg, with a malignant glance in the last speaker's direction, 'I was putting the case to you, who, if my senses did not deceive me, put the case to me. I had a very choice collection of ballads, and there was a new stock of gingerbread in the tin box. I say no more, but would rather leave it to you.'

'But it's difficult to name what's right,' said Mr Boffin uneasily, with his hand in his pocket, 'and I don't want to go beyond what's right, because you really have turned out such a very bad fellow. So artful, and so ungrateful you have been, Wegg; for when did I ever injure you?'

'There was also,' Mr Wegg went on, in a meditative manner, 'a errand connection, in which I was much respected. But I would not wish to be deemed covetous, and I would rather leave it to you, Mr Boffin.'

'Upon my word, I don't know what to put it at,' the Golden Dustman muttered.

'There was likewise,' resumed Wegg, 'a pair of trestles, for which alone a Irish person, who was deemed a judge of trestles, offered five and sixa sum I would not hear of, for I should have lost by itand there was a stool, a umbrella, a clotheshorse, and a tray. But I leave it to you, Mr Boffin.'

The Golden Dustman seeming to be engaged in some abstruse calculation, Mr Wegg assisted him with the following additional items.

'There was, further, Miss Elizabeth, Master George, Aunt Jane, and Uncle Parker. Ah! When a man thinks of the loss of such patronage as that; when a man finds so fair a garden rooted up by pigs; he finds it hard indeed, without going high, to work it into money. But I leave it wholly to you, sir.'

Mr Sloppy still continued his singular, and on the surface his incomprehensible, movement.

'Leading on has been mentioned,' said Wegg with a melancholy air, 'and it's not easy to say how far the tone of my mind may have been lowered by unwholesome reading on the subject of Misers, when you was leading me and others on to think you one yourself, sir. All I can say is, that I felt my tone of mind a lowering at the time. And how can a man put a price upon his mind! There was likewise a hat just now. But I leave the ole to you, Mr Boffin.'

'Come!' said Mr Boffin. 'Here's a couple of pound.'

'In justice to myself, I couldn't take it, sir.'

The words were but out of his mouth when John Harmon lifted his finger, and Sloppy, who was now close to Wegg, backed to Wegg's back, stooped, grasped his coat collar behind with both hands, and deftly swung him up like the sack of flour or coals before mentioned. A countenance of special discontent and amazement Mr Wegg exhibited in this position, with his buttons almost as prominently on view as Sloppy's own, and with his wooden leg in a highly unaccommodating state. But, not for many seconds was his countenance visible in the room; for, Sloppy lightly trotted out with him and trotted down the staircase, Mr Venus attending to open the street door. Mr Sloppy's instructions had been to deposit his burden in the road; but, a scavenger's cart happening to stand unattended at the corner, with its little ladder planted against the wheel, Mr S. found it impossible to resist the temptation of shooting Mr Silas Wegg into the cart's contents. A somewhat difficult feat, achieved with great dexterity, and with a prodigious splash.

Chapter 15

WHAT WAS CAUGHT IN THE TRAPS THAT WERE SET

How Bradley Headstone had been racked and riven in his mind since the quiet evening when by the riverside he had risen, as it were, out of the ashes of the Bargeman, none but he could have told. Not even he could have told, for such misery can only be felt.

First, he had to bear the combined weight of the knowledge of what he had done, of that haunting reproach that he might have done it so much better, and of the dread of discovery. This was load enough to crush him, and he laboured under it day and night. It was as heavy on him in his scanty sleep, as in his redeyed waking hours. It bore him down with a dread unchanging monotony, in which there was not a moment's variety. The overweighted beast of burden,

or the overweighted slave, can for certain instants shift the physical load, and find some slight respite even in enforcing additional pain upon such a set of muscles or such a limb. Not even that poor mockery of relief could the wretched man obtain, under the steady pressure of the infernal atmosphere into which he had entered.

Time went by, and no visible suspicion dogged him; time went by, and in such public accounts of the attack as were renewed at intervals, he began to see Mr Lightwood (who acted as lawyer for the injured man) straying further from the fact, going wider of the issue, and evidently slackening in his zeal. By degrees, a glimmering of the cause of this began to break on Bradley's sight. Then came the chance meeting with Mr Milvey at the railway station (where he often lingered in his leisure hours, as a place where any fresh news of his deed would be circulated, or any placard referring to it would be posted), and then he saw in the light what he had brought about.

For, then he saw that through his desperate attempt to separate those two for ever, he had been made the means of uniting them. That he had dipped his hands in blood, to mark himself a miserable fool and tool. That Eugene Wrayburn, for his wife's sake, set him aside and left him to crawl along his blasted course. He thought of Fate, or Providence, or be the directing Power what it might, as having put a fraud upon himoverreached himand in his impotent mad rage bit, and tore, and had his fit.

New assurance of the truth came upon him in the next few following days, when it was put forth how the wounded man had been married on his bed, and to whom, and how, though always in a dangerous condition, he was a shade better. Bradley would far rather have been seized for his murder, than he would have read that passage, knowing himself spared, and knowing why.

But, not to be still further defrauded and overreachedwhich he would be, if implicated by Riderhood, and punished by the law for his abject failure, as though it had been a successhe kept close in his school during the day, ventured out warily at night, and went no more to the railway station. He examined the advertisements in the newspapers for any sign that Riderhood acted on his hinted threat of so summoning him to renew their acquaintance, but found none. Having paid him handsomely for the support and accommodation he had had at the Lock House, and knowing him to be a very ignorant man who could not write, he began to doubt whether he was to be feared at all, or whether they need ever meet again.

All this time, his mind was never off the rack, and his raging sense of having been made to fling himself across the chasm which divided those two, and bridge it over for their coming together, never cooled down. This horrible

condition brought on other fits. He could not have said how many, or when; but he saw in the faces of his pupils that they had seen him in that state, and that they were possessed by a dread of his relapsing.

One winter day when a slight fall of snow was feathering the sills and frames of the schoolroom windows, he stood at his black board, crayon in hand, about to commence with a class; when, reading in the countenances of those boys that there was something wrong, and that they seemed in alarm for him, he turned his eyes to the door towards which they faced. He then saw a slouching man of forbidding appearance standing in the midst of the school, with a bundle under his arm; and saw that it was Riderhood.

He sat down on a stool which one of his boys put for him, and he had a passing knowledge that he was in danger of falling, and that his face was becoming distorted. But, the fit went off for that time, and he wiped his mouth, and stood up again.

'Beg your pardon, governor! By your leave!' said Riderhood, knuckling his forehead, with a chuckle and a leer. 'What place may this be?'

'This is a school.'

'Where young folks learns wot's right?' said Riderhood, gravely nodding. 'Beg your pardon, governor! By your leave! But who teaches this school?'

'I do.'

'You're the master, are you, learned governor?'

'Yes. I am the master.'

'And a lovely thing it must be,' said Riderhood, 'fur to learn young folks wot's right, and fur to know wot THEY know wot you do it. Beg your pardon, learned governor! By your leave!That there black board; wot's it for?'

'It is for drawing on, or writing on.'

'Is it though!' said Riderhood. 'Who'd have thought it, from the looks on it! WOULD you be so kind as write your name upon it, learned governor?' (In a wheedling tone.)

Bradley hesitated for a moment; but placed his usual signature, enlarged, upon the board.

'I ain't a learned character myself,' said Riderhood, surveying the class, 'but I do admire learning in others. I should dearly like to hear these here young folks read that there name off, from the writing.'

The arms of the class went up. At the miserable master's nod, the shrill chorus arose: 'Bradley Headstone!'

'No?' cried Riderhood. 'You don't mean it? Headstone! Why, that's in a churchyard. Hooroar for another turn!'

Another tossing of arms, another nod, and another shrill chorus:

'Bradley Headstone!'

'I've got it now!' said Riderhood, after attentively listening, and internally repeating: 'Bradley. I see. Chris'en name, Bradley sim'lar to Roger which is my own. Eh? Fam'ly name, Headstone, sim'lar to Riderhood which is my own. Eh?'

Shrill chorus. 'Yes!'

'Might you be acquainted, learned governor,' said Riderhood, 'with a person of about your own heighth and breadth, and wot 'ud pull down in a scale about your own weight, answering to a name sounding summat like Totherest?'

With a desperation in him that made him perfectly quiet, though his jaw was heavily squared; with his eyes upon Riderhood; and with traces of quickened breathing in his nostrils; the schoolmaster replied, in a suppressed voice, after a pause: 'I think I know the man you mean.'

'I thought you knowed the man I mean, learned governor. I want the man.'

With a half glance around him at his pupils, Bradley returned:

'Do you suppose he is here?'

'Begging your pardon, learned governor, and by your leave,' said Riderhood, with a laugh, 'how could I suppose he's here, when there's nobody here but you, and me, and these young lambs wot you're a learning on? But he is most excellent company, that man, and I want him to come and see me at my Lock, up the river.'

'I'll tell him so.'

'D'ye think he'll come?' asked Riderhood.

'I am sure he will.'

'Having got your word for him,' said Riderhood, 'I shall count upon him. P'raps you'd so fur obleege me, learned governor, as tell him that if he don't come precious soon, I'll look him up.'

'He shall know it.'

'Thankee. As I says a while ago,' pursued Riderhood, changing his hoarse tone and leering round upon the class again, 'though not a learned character my own self, I do admire learning in others, to be sure! Being here and having met with your kind attention, Master, might I, afore I go, ask a question of these here young lambs of yourn?'

'If it is in the way of school,' said Bradley, always sustaining his dark look at the other, and speaking in his suppressed voice, 'you may.'

'Oh! It's in the way of school!' cried Riderhood. 'I'll pound it, Master, to be in the way of school. Wot's the diwisions of water, my lambs? Wot sorts of water is there on the land?'

Shrill chorus: 'Seas, rivers, lakes, and ponds.'

'Seas, rivers, lakes, and ponds,' said Riderhood. 'They've got all the lot, Master! Blowed if I shouldn't have left out lakes, never having clapped eyes upon one, to my knowledge. Seas, rivers, lakes, and ponds. Wot is it, lambs, as they ketches in seas, rivers, lakes, and ponds?'

Shrill chorus (with some contempt for the ease of the question):

'Fish!'

'Good agin!' said Riderhood. 'But wot else is it, my lambs, as they sometimes ketches in rivers?'

Chorus at a loss. One shrill voice: 'Weed!'

'Good agin!' cried Riderhood. 'But it ain't weed neither. You'll never guess, my dears. Wot is it, besides fish, as they sometimes ketches in rivers? Well! I'll tell you. It's suits o' clothes.'

Bradley's face changed.

'Leastways, lambs,' said Riderhood, observing him out of the corners of his eyes, 'that's wot I my own self sometimes ketches in rivers. For strike me blind, my lambs, if I didn't ketch in a river the wery bundle under my arm!'

The class looked at the master, as if appealing from the irregular entrapment of this mode of examination. The master looked at the examiner, as if he would have torn him to pieces.

'I ask your pardon, learned governor,' said Riderhood, smearing his sleeve across his mouth as he laughed with a relish, 'tain't fair to the lambs, I know. It

wos a bit of fun of mine. But upon my soul I drawed this here bundle out of a river! It's a Bargeman's suit of clothes. You see, it had been sunk there by the man as wore it, and I got it up.'

'How do you know it was sunk by the man who wore it?' asked Bradley.

'Cause I see him do it,' said Riderhood.

They looked at each other. Bradley, slowly withdrawing his eyes, turned his face to the black board and slowly wiped his name out.

'A heap of thanks, Master,' said Riderhood, 'for bestowing so much of your time, and of the lambses' time, upon a man as hasn't got no other recommendation to you than being a honest man. Wishing to see at my Lock up the river, the person as we've spoke of, and as you've answered for, I takes my leave of the lambs and of their learned governor both.'

With those words, he slouched out of the school, leaving the master to get through his weary work as he might, and leaving the whispering pupils to observe the master's face until he fell into the fit which had been long impending.

The next day but one was Saturday, and a holiday. Bradley rose early, and set out on foot for Plashwater Weir Mill Lock. He rose so early that it was not yet light when he began his journey. Before extinguishing the candle by which he had dressed himself, he made a little parcel of his decent silver watch and its decent guard, and wrote inside the paper: 'Kindly take care of these for me.' He then addressed the parcel to Miss Peecher, and left it on the most protected corner of the little seat in her little porch.

It was a cold hard easterly morning when he latched the garden gate and turned away. The light snowfall which had feathered his schoolroom windows on the Thursday, still lingered in the air, and was falling white, while the wind blew black. The tardy day did not appear until he had been on foot two hours, and had traversed a greater part of London from east to west. Such breakfast as he had, he took at the comfortless publichouse where he had parted from Riderhood on the occasion of their nightwalk. He took it, standing at the littered bar, and looked loweringly at a man who stood where Riderhood had stood that early morning.

He outwalked the short day, and was on the towingpath by the river, somewhat footsore, when the night closed in. Still two or three miles short of the Lock, he slackened his pace then, but went steadily on. The ground was now covered with snow, though thinly, and there were floating lumps of ice in the more exposed parts of the river, and broken sheets of ice under the shelter of the

banks. He took heed of nothing but the ice, the snow, and the distance, until he saw a light ahead, which he knew gleamed from the Lock House window. It arrested his steps, and he looked all around. The ice, and the snow, and he, and the one light, had absolute possession of the dreary scene. In the distance before him, lay the place where he had struck the worse than useless blows that mocked him with Lizzie's presence there as Eugene's wife. In the distance behind him, lay the place where the children with pointing arms had seemed to devote him to the demons in crying out his name. Within there, where the light was, was the man who as to both distances could give him up to ruin. To these limits had his world shrunk.

He mended his pace, keeping his eyes upon the light with a strange intensity, as if he were taking aim at it. When he approached it so nearly as that it parted into rays, they seemed to fasten themselves to him and draw him on. When he struck the door with his hand, his foot followed so quickly on his hand, that he was in the room before he was bidden to enter.

The light was the joint product of a fire and a candle. Between the two, with his feet on the iron fender, sat Riderhood, pipe in mouth.

He looked up with a surly nod when his visitor came in. His visitor looked down with a surly nod. His outer clothing removed, the visitor then took a seat on the opposite side of the fire.

'Not a smoker, I think?' said Riderhood, pushing a bottle to him across the table.

'No.'

They both lapsed into silence, with their eyes upon the fire.

'You don't need to be told I am here,' said Bradley at length. 'Who is to begin?'

'I'll begin,' said Riderhood, 'when I've smoked this here pipe out.'

He finished it with great deliberation, knocked out the ashes on the hob, and put it by.

'I'll begin,' he then repeated, 'Bradley Headstone, Master, if you wish it.'

'Wish it? I wish to know what you want with me.'

'And so you shall.' Riderhood had looked hard at his hands and his pockets, apparently as a precautionary measure lest he should have any weapon about him. But, he now leaned forward, turning the collar of his waistcoat with an inquisitive finger, and asked, 'Why, where's your watch?'

'I have left it behind.'

'I want it. But it can be fetched. I've took a fancy to it.'

Bradley answered with a contemptuous laugh.

'I want it,' repeated Riderhood, in a louder voice, 'and I mean to have it.'

'That is what you want of me, is it?'

'No,' said Riderhood, still louder; 'it's on'y part of what I want of you. I want money of you.'

'Anything else?'

'Everythink else!' roared Riderhood, in a very loud and furious way. 'Answer me like that, and I won't talk to you at all.'

Bradley looked at him.

'Don't so much as look at me like that, or I won't talk to you at all,' vociferated Riderhood. 'But, instead of talking, I'll bring my hand down upon you with all its weight,' heavily smiting the table with great force, 'and smash you!'

'Go on,' said Bradley, after moistening his lips.

'O! I'm a going on. Don't you fear but I'll go on fullfast enough for you, and fur enough for you, without your telling. Look here, Bradley Headstone, Master. You might have split the T'other governor to chips and wedges, without my caring, except that I might have come upon you for a glass or so now and then. Else why have to do with you at all? But when you copied my clothes, and when you copied my neckhankercher, and when you shook blood upon me after you had done the trick, you did wot I'll be paid for and paid heavy for. If it come to be throw'd upon you, you was to be ready to throw it upon me, was you? Where else but in Plashwater Weir Mill Lock was there a man dressed according as described? Where else but in Plashwater Weir Mill Lock was there a man as had had words with him coming through in his boat? Look at the Lockkeeper in Plashwater Weir Mill Lock, in them same answering clothes and with that same answering red neckhankercher, and see whether his clothes happens to be bloody or not. Yes, they do happen to be bloody. Ah, you sly devil!'

Bradley, very white, sat looking at him in silence.

'But two could play at your game,' said Riderhood, snapping his fingers at him half a dozen times, 'and I played it long ago; long afore you tried your clumsy hand at it; in days when you hadn't begun croaking your lecters or what not in

your school. I know to a figure how you done it. Where you stole away, I could steal away arter you, and do it knowinger than you. I know how you come away from London in your own clothes, and where you changed your clothes, and hid your clothes. I see you with my own eyes take your own clothes from their hidingplace among them felled trees, and take a dip in the river to account for your dressing yourself, to any one as might come by. I see you rise up Bradley Headstone, Master, where you sat down Bargeman. I see you pitch your Bargeman's bundle into the river. I hooked your Bargeman's bundle out of the river. I've got your Bargeman's clothes, tore this way and that way with the scuffle, stained green with the grass, and spattered all over with what bust from the blows. I've got them, and I've got you. I don't care a curse for the T'other governor, alive or dead, but I care a many curses for my own self. And as you laid your plots agin me and was a sly devil agin me, I'll be paid for itI'll be paid for itI'll be paid for ittill I've drained you dry!'

Bradley looked at the fire, with a working face, and was silent for a while. At last he said, with what seemed an inconsistent composure of voice and feature:

'You can't get blood out of a stone, Riderhood.'

'I can get money out of a schoolmaster though.'

'You can't get out of me what is not in me. You can't wrest from me what I have not got. Mine is but a poor calling. You have had more than two guineas from me, already. Do you know how long it has taken me (allowing for a long and arduous training) to earn such a sum?'

'I don't know, nor I don't care. Yours is a 'spectable calling. To save your 'spectability, it's worth your while to pawn every article of clothes you've got, sell every stick in your house, and beg and borrow every penny you can get trusted with. When you've done that and handed over, I'll leave you. Not afore.'

'How do you mean, you'll leave me?'

'I mean as I'll keep you company, wherever you go, when you go away from here. Let the Lock take care of itself. I'll take care of you, once I've got you.'

Bradley again looked at the fire. Eyeing him aside, Riderhood took up his pipe, refilled it, lighted it, and sat smoking. Bradley leaned his elbows on his knees, and his head upon his hands, and looked at the fire with a most intent abstraction.

'Riderhood,' he said, raising himself in his chair, after a long silence, and drawing out his purse and putting it on the table. 'Say I part with this, which is

all the money I have; say I let you have my watch; say that every quarter, when I draw my salary, I pay you a certain portion of it.'

'Say nothink of the sort,' retorted Riderhood, shaking his head as he smoked. 'You've got away once, and I won't run the chance agin. I've had trouble enough to find you, and shouldn't have found you, if I hadn't seen you slipping along the street overnight, and watched you till you was safe housed. I'll have one settlement with you for good and all.'

'Riderhood, I am a man who has lived a retired life. I have no resources beyond myself. I have absolutely no friends.'

'That's a lie,' said Riderhood. 'You've got one friend as I knows of; one as is good for a SavingsBank book, or I'm a blue monkey!'

Bradley's face darkened, and his hand slowly closed on the purse and drew it back, as he sat listening for what the other should go on to say.

'I went into the wrong shop, fust, last Thursday,' said Riderhood. 'Found myself among the young ladies, by George! Over the young ladies, I see a Missis. That Missis is sweet enough upon you, Master, to sell herself up, slap, to get you out of trouble. Make her do it then.'

Bradley stared at him so very suddenly that Riderhood, not quite knowing how to take it, affected to be occupied with the encircling smoke from his pipe; fanning it away with his hand, and blowing it off.

'You spoke to the mistress, did you?' inquired Bradley, with that former composure of voice and feature that seemed inconsistent, and with averted eyes.

'Poof! Yes,' said Riderhood, withdrawing his attention from the smoke. 'I spoke to her. I didn't say much to her. She was put in a fluster by my dropping in among the young ladies (I never did set up for a lady's man), and she took me into her parlour to hope as there was nothink wrong. I tells her, "O no, nothink wrong. The master's my wery good friend." But I see how the land laid, and that she was comfortable off.'

Bradley put the purse in his pocket, grasped his left wrist with his right hand, and sat rigidly contemplating the fire.

'She couldn't live more handy to you than she does,' said Riderhood, 'and when I goes home with you (as of course I am a going), I recommend you to clean her out without loss of time. You can marry her, arter you and me have come to a settlement. She's nicelooking, and I know you can't be keeping company with no one else, having been so lately disapinted in another quarter.'

Not one other word did Bradley utter all that night. Not once did he change his attitude, or loosen his hold upon his wrist. Rigid before the fire, as if it were a charmed flame that was turning him old, he sat, with the dark lines deepening in his face, its stare becoming more and more haggard, its surface turning whiter and whiter as if it were being overspread with ashes, and the very texture and colour of his hair degenerating.

Not until the late daylight made the window transparent, did this decaying statue move. Then it slowly arose, and sat in the window looking out.

Riderhood had kept his chair all night. In the earlier part of the night he had muttered twice or thrice that it was bitter cold; or that the fire burnt fast, when he got up to mend it; but, as he could elicit from his companion neither sound nor movement, he had afterwards held his peace. He was making some disorderly preparations for coffee, when Bradley came from the window and put on his outer coat and hat.

'Hadn't us better have a bit o' breakfast afore we start?' said Riderhood. 'It ain't good to freeze a empty stomach, Master.'

Without a sign to show that he heard, Bradley walked out of the Lock House. Catching up from the table a piece of bread, and taking his Bargeman's bundle under his arm, Riderhood immediately followed him. Bradley turned towards London. Riderhood caught him up, and walked at his side.

The two men trudged on, side by side, in silence, full three miles. Suddenly, Bradley turned to retrace his course. Instantly, Riderhood turned likewise, and they went back side by side.

Bradley reentered the Lock House. So did Riderhood. Bradley sat down in the window. Riderhood warmed himself at the fire. After an hour or more, Bradley abruptly got up again, and again went out, but this time turned the other way. Riderhood was close after him, caught him up in a few paces, and walked at his side.

This time, as before, when he found his attendant not to be shaken off, Bradley suddenly turned back. This time, as before, Riderhood turned back along with him. But, not this time, as before, did they go into the Lock House, for Bradley came to a stand on the snowcovered turf by the Lock, looking up the river and down the river. Navigation was impeded by the frost, and the scene was a mere white and yellow desert.

'Come, come, Master,' urged Riderhood, at his side. 'This is a dry game. And where's the good of it? You can't get rid of me, except by coming to a settlement. I am a going along with you wherever you go.'

Without a word of reply, Bradley passed quickly from him over the wooden bridge on the lock gates. 'Why, there's even less sense in this move than t'other,' said Riderhood, following. 'The Weir's there, and you'll have to come back, you know.'

Without taking the least notice, Bradley leaned his body against a post, in a resting attitude, and there rested with his eyes cast down. 'Being brought here,' said Riderhood, gruffly, 'I'll turn it to some use by changing my gates.' With a rattle and a rush of water, he then swungto the lock gates that were standing open, before opening the others. So, both sets of gates were, for the moment, closed.

'You'd better by far be reasonable, Bradley Headstone, Master,' said Riderhood, passing him, 'or I'll drain you all the dryer for it, when we do settle.Ah! Would you!'

Bradley had caught him round the body. He seemed to be girdled with an iron ring. They were on the brink of the Lock, about midway between the two sets of gates.

'Let go!' said Riderhood, 'or I'll get my knife out and slash you wherever I can cut you. Let go!'

Bradley was drawing to the Lockedge. Riderhood was drawing away from it. It was a strong grapple, and a fierce struggle, arm and leg. Bradley got him round, with his back to the Lock, and still worked him backward.

'Let go!' said Riderhood. 'Stop! What are you trying at? You can't drown Me. Ain't I told you that the man as has come through drowning can never be drowned? I can't be drowned.'

'I can be!' returned Bradley, in a desperate, clenched voice. 'I am resolved to be. I'll hold you living, and I'll hold you dead. Come down!'

Riderhood went over into the smooth pit, backward, and Bradley Headstone upon him. When the two were found, lying under the ooze and scum behind one of the rotting gates, Riderhood's hold had relaxed, probably in falling, and his eyes were staring upward. But, he was girdled still with Bradley's iron ring, and the rivets of the iron ring held tight.

Chapter 16

*PERSONS AND THINGS IN GENERAL

Mr and Mrs John Harmon's first delightful occupation was, to set all matters right that had strayed in any way wrong, or that might, could, would, or should, have strayed in any way wrong, while their name was in abeyance. In tracing out affairs for which John's fictitious death was to be considered in any way responsible, they used a very broad and free construction; regarding, for instance, the dolls' dressmaker as having a claim on their protection, because of her association with Mrs Eugene Wrayburn, and because of Mrs Eugene's old association, in her turn, with the dark side of the story. It followed that the old man, Riah, as a good and serviceable friend to both, was not to be disclaimed. Nor even Mr Inspector, as having been trepanned into an industrious hunt on a false scent. It may be remarked, in connexion with that worthy officer, that a rumour shortly afterwards pervaded the Force, to the effect that he had confided to Miss Abbey Potterson, over a jug of mellow flip in the bar of the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters, that he 'didn't stand to lose a farthing' through Mr Harmon's coming to life, but was quite as well satisfied as if that gentleman had been barbarously murdered, and he (Mr Inspector) had pocketed the government reward.

In all their arrangements of such nature, Mr and Mrs John Harmon derived much assistance from their eminent solicitor, Mr Mortimer Lightwood; who laid about him professionally with such unwonted despatch and intention, that a piece of work was vigorously pursued as soon as cut out; whereby Young Blight was acted on as by that transatlantic dram which is poetically named An EyeOpener, and found himself staring at real clients instead of out of window. The accessibility of Riah proving very useful as to a few hints towards the disentanglement of Eugene's affairs, Lightwood applied himself with infinite zest to attacking and harassing Mr Fledgeby: who, discovering himself in danger of being blown into the air by certain explosive transactions in which he had been engaged, and having been sufficiently flayed under his beating, came to a parley and asked for quarter. The harmless Twemlow profited by the conditions entered into, though he little thought it. Mr Riah unaccountably melted; waited in person on him over the stable yard in Duke Street, St James's, no longer ravening but mild, to inform him that payment of interest as heretofore, but henceforth at Mr Lightwood's offices, would appease his Jewish rancour; and departed with the secret that Mr John Harmon had advanced the money and become the creditor. Thus, was the sublime Snigsworth's wrath averted, and thus did he snort no larger amount of moral grandeur at the Corinthian column in the print over the fireplace, than was normally in his (and the British) constitution.

Mrs Wilfer's first visit to the Mendicant's bride at the new abode of Mendicancy, was a grand event. Pa had been sent for into the City, on the very

day of taking possession, and had been stunned with astonishment, and broughtto, and led about the house by one ear, to behold its various treasures, and had been enraptured and enchanted. Pa had also been appointed Secretary, and had been enjoined to give instant notice of resignation to Chicksey, Veneering, and Stobbles, for ever and ever. But Ma came later, and came, as was her due, in state.

The carriage was sent for Ma, who entered it with a bearing worthy of the occasion, accompanied, rather than supported, by Miss Lavinia, who altogether declined to recognize the maternal majesty. Mr George Sampson meekly followed. He was received in the vehicle, by Mrs Wilfer, as if admitted to the honour of assisting at a funeral in the family, and she then issued the order, 'Onward!' to the Mendicant's menial.

'I wish to goodness, Ma,' said Lavvy, throwing herself back among the cushions, with her arms crossed, 'that you'd loll a little.'

'How!' repeated Mrs Wilfer. 'Loll!'

'Yes, Ma.'

'I hope,' said the impressive lady, 'I am incapable of it.'

'I am sure you look so, Ma. But why one should go out to dine with one's own daughter or sister, as if one's underpetticoat was a blackboard, I do NOT understand.'

'Neither do I understand,' retorted Mrs Wilfer, with deep scorn, 'how a young lady can mention the garment in the name of which you have indulged. I blush for you.'

'Thank you, Ma,' said Lavvy, yawning, 'but I can do it for myself, I am obliged to you, when there's any occasion.'

Here, Mr Sampson, with the view of establishing harmony, which he never under any circumstances succeeded in doing, said with an agreeable smile: 'After all, you know, ma'am, we know it's there.' And immediately felt that he had committed himself.

'We know it's there!' said Mrs Wilfer, glaring.

'Really, George,' remonstrated Miss Lavinia, 'I must say that I don't understand your allusions, and that I think you might be more delicate and less personal.'

'Go it!' cried Mr Sampson, becoming, on the shortest notice, a prey to despair. 'Oh yes! Go it, Miss Lavinia Wilfer!'

'What you may mean, George Sampson, by your omnibusdriving expressions, I cannot pretend to imagine. Neither,' said Miss Lavinia, 'Mr George Sampson, do I wish to imagine. It is enough for me to know in my own heart that I am not going to' having imprudently got into a sentence without providing a way out of it, Miss Lavinia was constrained to close with 'going to it'. A weak conclusion which, however, derived some appearance of strength from disdain.

'Oh yes!' cried Mr Sampson, with bitterness. 'Thus it ever is. I never'

'If you mean to say,' Miss Lavvy cut him short, that you never brought up a young gazelle, you may save yourself the trouble, because nobody in this carriage supposes that you ever did. We know you better.' (As if this were a homethrust.)

'Lavinia,' returned Mr Sampson, in a dismal vein, 'I did not mean to say so. What I did mean to say, was, that I never expected to retain my favoured place in this family, after Fortune shed her beams upon it. Why do you take me,' said Mr Sampson, 'to the glittering halls with which I can never compete, and then taunt me with my moderate salary? Is it generous? Is it kind?'

The stately lady, Mrs Wilfer, perceiving her opportunity of delivering a few remarks from the throne, here took up the altercation.

'Mr Sampson,' she began, 'I cannot permit you to misrepresent the intentions of a child of mine.'

'Let him alone, Ma,' Miss Lavvy interposed with haughtiness. 'It is indifferent to me what he says or does.'

'Nay, Lavinia,' quoth Mrs Wilfer, 'this touches the blood of the family. If Mr George Sampson attributes, even to my youngest daughter'

('I don't see why you should use the word "even", Ma,' Miss Lavvy interposed, 'because I am quite as important as any of the others.')

'Peace!' said Mrs Wilfer, solemnly. 'I repeat, if Mr George Sampson attributes, to my youngest daughter, grovelling motives, he attributes them equally to the mother of my youngest daughter. That mother repudiates them, and demands of Mr George Sampson, as a youth of honour, what he WOULD have? I may be mistakennothing is more likelybut Mr George Sampson,' proceeded Mrs Wilfer, majestically waving her gloves, 'appears to me to be seated in a firstclass equipage. Mr George Sampson appears to me to be on his way, by his own admission, to a residence that may be termed Palatial. Mr George Sampson appears to me to be invited to participate in theshall I say

theElevation which has descended on the family with which he is ambitious, shall I say to Mingle? Whence, then, this tone on Mr Sampson's part?'

'It is only, ma'am,' Mr Sampson explained, in exceedingly low spirits, 'because, in a pecuniary sense, I am painfully conscious of my unworthiness. Lavinia is now highly connected. Can I hope that she will still remain the same Lavinia as of old? And is it not pardonable if I feel sensitive, when I see a disposition on her part to take me up short?'

'If you are not satisfied with your position, sir,' observed Miss Lavinia, with much politeness, 'we can set you down at any turning you may please to indicate to my sister's coachman.'

'Dearest Lavinia,' urged Mr Sampson, pathetically, 'I adore you.'

'Then if you can't do it in a more agreeable manner,' returned the young lady, 'I wish you wouldn't.'

'I also,' pursued Mr Sampson, 'respect you, ma'am, to an extent which must ever be below your merits, I am well aware, but still up to an uncommon mark. Bear with a wretch, Lavinia, bear with a wretch, ma'am, who feels the noble sacrifices you make for him, but is goaded almost to madness,' Mr Sampson slapped his forehead, 'when he thinks of competing with the rich and influential.'

'When you have to compete with the rich and influential, it will probably be mentioned to you,' said Miss Lavvy, 'in good time. At least, it will if the case is MY case.'

Mr Sampson immediately expressed his fervent Opinion that this was 'more than human', and was brought upon his knees at Miss Lavinia's feet.

It was the crowning addition indispensable to the full enjoyment of both mother and daughter, to bear Mr Sampson, a grateful captive, into the glittering halls he had mentioned, and to parade him through the same, at once a living witness of their glory, and a bright instance of their condescension. Ascending the staircase, Miss Lavinia permitted him to walk at her side, with the air of saying: 'Notwithstanding all these surroundings, I am yours as yet, George. How long it may last is another question, but I am yours as yet.' She also benignantly intimated to him, aloud, the nature of the objects upon which he looked, and to which he was unaccustomed: as, 'Exotics, George,' 'An aviary, George,' 'An ormolu clock, George,' and the like. While, through the whole of the decorations, Mrs Wilfer led the way with the bearing of a Savage Chief, who would feel himself compromised by manifesting the slightest token of surprise or admiration.

Indeed, the bearing of this impressive woman, throughout the day, was a pattern to all impressive women under similar circumstances. She renewed the acquaintance of Mr and Mrs Boffin, as if Mr and Mrs Boffin had said of her what she had said of them, and as if Time alone could quite wear her injury out. She regarded every servant who approached her, as her sworn enemy, expressly intending to offer her affronts with the dishes, and to pour forth outrages on her moral feelings from the decanters. She sat erect at table, on the right hand of her soninlaw, as half suspecting poison in the viands, and as bearing up with native force of character against other deadly ambushes. Her carriage towards Bella was as a carriage towards a young lady of good position, whom she had met in society a few years ago. Even when, slightly thawing under the influence of sparkling champagne, she related to her soninlaw some passages of domestic interest concerning her papa, she infused into the narrative such Arctic suggestions of her having been an unappreciated blessing to mankind, since her papa's days, and also of that gentleman's having been a frosty impersonation of a frosty race, as struck cold to the very soles of the feet of the hearers. The Inexhaustible being produced, staring, and evidently intending a weak and washy smile shortly, no sooner beheld her, than it was stricken spasmodic and inconsolable. When she took her leave at last, it would have been hard to say whether it was with the air of going to the scaffold herself, or of leaving the inmates of the house for immediate execution. Yet, John Harmon enjoyed it all merrily, and told his wife, when he and she were alone, that her natural ways had never seemed so dearly natural as beside this foil, and that although he did not dispute her being her father's daughter, he should ever remain stedfast in the faith that she could not be her mother's.

This visit was, as has been said, a grand event. Another event, not grand but deemed in the house a special one, occurred at about the same period; and this was, the first interview between Mr Sloppy and Miss Wren.

The dolls' dressmaker, being at work for the Inexhaustible upon a fulldressed doll some two sizes larger than that young person, Mr Sloppy undertook to call for it, and did so.

'Come in, sir,' said Miss Wren, who was working at her bench. 'And who may you be?'

Mr Sloppy introduced himself by name and buttons.

'Oh indeed!' cried Jenny. 'Ah! I have been looking forward to knowing you. I heard of your distinguishing yourself.'

'Did you, Miss?' grinned Sloppy. 'I am sure I am glad to hear it, but I don't

know how.'

'Pitching somebody into a mudcart,' said Miss Wren.

'Oh! That way!' cried Sloppy. 'Yes, Miss.' And threw back his head and laughed.

'Bless us!' exclaimed Miss Wren, with a start. 'Don't open your mouth as wide as that, young man, or it'll catch so, and not shut again some day.'

Mr Sloppy opened it, if possible, wider, and kept it open until his laugh was out.

'Why, you're like the giant,' said Miss Wren, 'when he came home in the land of Beanstalk, and wanted Jack for supper.'

'Was he goodlooking, Miss?' asked Sloppy.

'No,' said Miss Wren. 'Ugly.'

Her visitor glanced round the roomwhich had many comforts in it now, that had not been in it beforeand said: 'This is a pretty place, Miss.'

'Glad you think so, sir,' returned Miss Wren. 'And what do you think of Me?'

The honesty of Mr Sloppy being severely taxed by the question, he twisted a button, grinned, and faltered.

'Out with it!' said Miss Wren, with an arch look. 'Don't you think me a queer little comicality?' In shaking her head at him after asking the question, she shook her hair down.

'Oh!' cried Sloppy, in a burst of admiration. 'What a lot, and what a colour!'

Miss Wren, with her usual expressive hitch, went on with her work. But, left her hair as it was; not displeased by the effect it had made.

'You don't live here alone; do you, Miss?' asked Sloppy.

'No,' said Miss Wren, with a chop. 'Live here with my fairy godmother.'

'With;' Mr Sloppy couldn't make it out; 'with who did you say, Miss?'

'Well!' replied Miss Wren, more seriously. 'With my second father. Or with my first, for that matter.' And she shook her head, and drew a sigh. 'If you had known a poor child I used to have here,' she added, 'you'd have understood me. But you didn't, and you can't. All the better!'

'You must have been taught a long time,' said Sloppy, glancing at the array of dolls in hand, 'before you came to work so neatly, Miss, and with such a pretty taste.'

'Never was taught a stitch, young man!' returned the dressmaker, tossing her head. 'Just gobbled and gobbled, till I found out how to do it. Badly enough at first, but better now.'

'And here have I,' said Sloppy, in something of a selfreproachful tone, 'been a learning and a learning, and here has Mr Boffin been a paying and a paying, ever so long!'

'I have heard what your trade is,' observed Miss Wren; 'it's cabinetmaking.'

Mr Sloppy nodded. 'Now that the Mounds is done with, it is. I'll tell you what, Miss. I should like to make you something.'

'Much obliged. But what?'

'I could make you,' said Sloppy, surveying the room, 'I could make you a handy set of nests to lay the dolls in. Or I could make you a handy little set of drawers, to keep your silks and threads and scraps in. Or I could turn you a rare handle for that crutchstick, if it belongs to him you call your father.'

'It belongs to me,' returned the little creature, with a quick flush of her face and neck. 'I am lame.'

Poor Sloppy flushed too, for there was an instinctive delicacy behind his buttons, and his own hand had struck it. He said, perhaps, the best thing in the way of amends that could be said. 'I am very glad it's yours, because I'd rather ornament it for you than for any one else. Please may I look at it?'

Miss Wren was in the act of handing it to him over her bench, when she paused. 'But you had better see me use it,' she said, sharply. 'This is the way. Hoppetty, Kicketty, Peppegpeg. Not pretty; is it?'

'It seems to me that you hardly want it at all,' said Sloppy.

The little dressmaker sat down again, and gave it into his hand, saying, with that better look upon her, and with a smile: 'Thank you!'

'And as concerning the nests and the drawers,' said Sloppy, after measuring the handle on his sleeve, and softly standing the stick aside against the wall, 'why, it would be a real pleasure to me. I've heerd tell that you can sing most beautiful; and I should be better paid with a song than with any money, for I always loved the likes of that, and often giv' Mrs Higden and Johnny a comic

song myself, with "Spoken" in it. Though that's not your sort, I'll wager.'

'You are a very kind young man,' returned the dressmaker; 'a really kind young man. I accept your offer.I suppose He won't mind,' she added as an afterthought, shrugging her shoulders; 'and if he does, he may!'

'Meaning him that you call your father, Miss,' asked Sloppy.

'No, no,' replied Miss Wren. 'Him, Him, Him!'

'Him, him, him?' repeated Sloppy; staring about, as if for Him.

'Him who is coming to court and marry me,' returned Miss Wren. 'Dear me, how slow you are!'

'Oh! HIM!' said Sloppy. And seemed to turn thoughtful and a little troubled. 'I never thought of him. When is he coming, Miss?'

'What a question!' cried Miss Wren. 'How should I know!'

'Where is he coming from, Miss?'

'Why, good gracious, how can I tell! He is coming from somewhere or other, I suppose, and he is coming some day or other, I suppose. I don't know any more about him, at present.'

This tickled Mr Sloppy as an extraordinarily good joke, and he threw back his head and laughed with measureless enjoyment. At the sight of him laughing in that absurd way, the dolls' dressmaker laughed very heartily indeed. So they both laughed, till they were tired.

'There, there, there!' said Miss Wren. 'For goodness' sake, stop, Giant, or I shall be swallowed up alive, before I know it. And to this minute you haven't said what you've come for.'

'I have come for little Miss Harmonses doll,' said Sloppy.

'I thought as much,' remarked Miss Wren, 'and here is little Miss Harmonses doll waiting for you. She's folded up in silver paper, you see, as if she was wrapped from head to foot in new Bank notes. Take care of her, and there's my hand, and thank you again.'

'I'll take more care of her than if she was a gold image,' said Sloppy, 'and there's both MY hands, Miss, and I'll soon come back again.'

But, the greatest event of all, in the new life of Mr and Mrs John Harmon, was a visit from Mr and Mrs Eugene Wrayburn. Sadly wan and worn was the once

gallant Eugene, and walked resting on his wife's arm, and leaning heavily upon a stick. But, he was daily growing stronger and better, and it was declared by the medical attendants that he might not be much disfigured byandby. It was a grand event, indeed, when Mr and Mrs Eugene Wrayburn came to stay at Mr and Mrs John Harmon's house: where, by the way, Mr and Mrs Boffin (exquisitely happy, and daily cruising about, to look at shops,) were likewise staying indefinitely.

To Mr Eugene Wrayburn, in confidence, did Mrs John Harmon impart what she had known of the state of his wife's affections, in his reckless time. And to Mrs John Harmon, in confidence, did Mr Eugene Wrayburn impart that, please God, she should see how his wife had changed him!

'I make no protestations,' said Eugene; 'who does, who means them!I have made a resolution.'

'But would you believe, Bella,' interposed his wife, coming to resume her nurse's place at his side, for he never got on well without her: 'that on our wedding day he told me he almost thought the best thing he could do, was to die?'

'As I didn't do it, Lizzie,' said Eugene, 'I'll do that better thing you suggestedfor your sake.'

That same afternoon, Eugene lying on his couch in his own room upstairs, Lightwood came to chat with him, while Bella took his wife out for a ride. 'Nothing short of force will make her go,' Eugene had said; so, Bella had playfully forced her.

'Dear old fellow,' Eugene began with Lightwood, reaching up his hand, 'you couldn't have come at a better time, for my mind is full, and I want to empty it. First, of my present, before I touch upon my future. M. R. F., who is a much younger cavalier than I, and a professed admirer of beauty, was so affable as to remark the other day (he paid us a visit of two days up the river there, and much objected to the accommodation of the hotel), that Lizzie ought to have her portrait painted. Which, coming from M. R. F., may be considered equivalent to a melodramatic blessing.'

'You are getting well,' said Mortimer, with a smile.

'Really,' said Eugene, 'I mean it. When M. R. F. said that, and followed it up by rolling the claret (for which he called, and I paid), in his mouth, and saying, "My dear son, why do you drink this trash?" it was tantamount in himto a paternal benediction on our union, accompanied with a gush of tears. The coolness of M. R. F. is not to be measured by ordinary standards.'

'True enough,' said Lightwood.

'That's all,' pursued Eugene, 'that I shall ever hear from M. R. F. on the subject, and he will continue to saunter through the world with his hat on one side. My marriage being thus solemnly recognized at the family altar, I have no further trouble on that score. Next, you really have done wonders for me, Mortimer, in easing my moneyperplexities, and with such a guardian and steward beside me, as the preserver of my life (I am hardly strong yet, you see, for I am not man enough to refer to her without a trembling voiceshe is so inexpressibly dear to me, Mortimer!), the little that I can call my own will be more than it ever has been. It need be more, for you know what it always has been in my hands. Nothing.'

'Worse than nothing, I fancy, Eugene. My own small income (I devoutly wish that my grandfather had left it to the Ocean rather than to me!) has been an effective Something, in the way of preventing me from turning to at Anything. And I think yours has been much the same.'

'There spake the voice of wisdom,' said Eugene. 'We are shepherds both. In turning to at last, we turn to in earnest. Let us say no more of that, for a few years to come. Now, I have had an idea, Mortimer, of taking myself and my wife to one of the colonies, and working at my vocation there.'

'I should be lost without you, Eugene; but you may be right.'

'No,' said Eugene, emphatically. 'Not right. Wrong!'

He said it with such a livelyalmost angryflash, that Mortimer showed himself greatly surprised.

'You think this thumped head of mine is excited?' Eugene went on, with a high look; 'not so, believe me. I can say to you of the healthful music of my pulse what Hamlet said of his. My blood is up, but wholesomely up, when I think of it. Tell me! Shall I turn coward to Lizzie, and sneak away with her, as if I were ashamed of her! Where would your friend's part in this world be, Mortimer, if she had turned coward to him, and on immeasurably better occasion?'

'Honourable and stanch,' said Lightwood. 'And yet, Eugene'

'And yet what, Mortimer?'

'And yet, are you sure that you might not feel (for her sake, I say for her sake) any slight coldness towards her on the part ofSociety?'

'O! You and I may well stumble at the word,' returned Eugene, laughing. 'Do we mean our Tippins?'

'Perhaps we do,' said Mortimer, laughing also.

'Faith, we DO!' returned Eugene, with great animation. 'We may hide behind the bush and beat about it, but we DO! Now, my wife is something nearer to my heart, Mortimer, than Tippins is, and I owe her a little more than I owe to Tippins, and I am rather prouder of her than I ever was of Tippins. Therefore, I will fight it out to the last gasp, with her and for her, here, in the open field. When I hide her, or strike for her, faintheartedly, in a hole or a corner, do you whom I love next best upon earth, tell me what I shall most righteously deserve to be told:that she would have done well to turn me over with her foot that night when I lay bleeding to death, and spat in my dastard face.'

The glow that shone upon him as he spoke the words, so irradiated his features that he looked, for the time, as though he had never been mutilated. His friend responded as Eugene would have had him respond, and they discoursed of the future until Lizzie came back. After resuming her place at his side, and tenderly touching his hands and his head, she said:

'Eugene, dear, you made me go out, but I ought to have stayed with you. You are more flushed than you have been for many days. What have you been doing?'

'Nothing,' replied Eugene, 'but looking forward to your coming back.'

'And talking to Mr Lightwood,' said Lizzie, turning to him with a smile. 'But it cannot have been Society that disturbed you.'

'Faith, my dear love!' retorted Eugene, in his old airy manner, as he laughed and kissed her, 'I rather think it WAS Society though!'

The word ran so much in Mortimer Lightwood's thoughts as he went home to the Temple that night, that he resolved to take a look at Society, which he had not seen for a considerable period.

Chapter 17

THE VOICE OF SOCIETY

Behoves Mortimer Lightwood, therefore, to answer a dinner card from Mr and Mrs Veneering requesting the honour, and to signify that Mr Mortimer Lightwood will be happy to have the other honour. The Veneerings have been, as usual, indefatigably dealing dinner cards to Society, and whoever desires to

take a hand had best be quick about it, for it is written in the Books of the Insolvent Fates that Veneering shall make a resounding smash next week. Yes. Having found out the clue to that great mystery how people can contrive to live beyond their means, and having overjobbed his jobberies as legislator deputed to the Universe by the pure electors of PocketBreaches, it shall come to pass next week that Veneering will accept the Chiltern Hundreds, that the legal gentleman in Britannia's confidence will again accept the PocketBreaches Thousands, and that the Veneerings will retire to Calais, there to live on Mrs Veneering's diamonds (in which Mr Veneering, as a good husband, has from time to time invested considerable sums), and to relate to Neptune and others, how that, before Veneering retired from Parliament, the House of Commons was composed of himself and the six hundred and fiftyseven dearest and oldest friends he had in the world. It shall likewise come to pass, at as nearly as possible the same period, that Society will discover that it always did despise Veneering, and distrust Veneering, and that when it went to Veneering's to dinner it always had misgivingsthough very secretly at the time, it would seem, and in a perfectly private and confidential manner.

The next week's books of the Insolvent Fates, however, being not yet opened, there is the usual rush to the Veneerings, of the people who go to their house to dine with one another and not with them. There is Lady Tippins. There are Podsnap the Great, and Mrs Podsnap. There is Twemlow. There are Buffer, Boots, and Brewer. There is the Contractor, who is Providence to five hundred thousand men. There is the Chairman, travelling three thousand miles per week. There is the brilliant genius who turned the shares into that remarkably exact sum of three hundred and seventy five thousand pounds, no shillings, and nopence.

To whom, add Mortimer Lightwood, coming in among them with a reassumption of his old languid air, founded on Eugene, and belonging to the days when he told the story of the man from Somewhere.

That fresh fairy, Tippins, all but screams at sight of her false swain. She summons the deserter to her with her fan; but the deserter, predetermined not to come, talks Britain with Podsnap. Podsnap always talks Britain, and talks as if he were a sort of Private Watchman employed, in the British interests, against the rest of the world. 'We know what Russia means, sir,' says Podsnap; 'we know what France wants; we see what America is up to; but we know what England is. That's enough for us.'

However, when dinner is served, and Lightwood drops into his old place over against Lady Tippins, she can be fended off no longer. 'Long banished Robinson Crusoe,' says the charmer, exchanging salutations, 'how did you

leave the Island?'

'Thank you,' says Lightwood. 'It made no complaint of being in pain anywhere.'

'Say, how did you leave the savages?' asks Lady Tippins.

'They were becoming civilized when I left Juan Fernandez,' says Lightwood. 'At least they were eating one another, which looked like it.'

'Tormentor!' returns the dear young creature. 'You know what I mean, and you trifle with my impatience. Tell me something, immediately, about the married pair. You were at the wedding.'

'Was I, bytheby?' Mortimer pretends, at great leisure, to consider. 'So I was!'

'How was the bride dressed? In rowing costume?'

Mortimer looks gloomy, and declines to answer.

'I hope she steered herself, skiffed herself, paddled herself, larboarded and starboarded herself, or whatever the technical term may be, to the ceremony?' proceeds the playful Tippins.

'However she got to it, she graced it,' says Mortimer.

Lady Tippins with a skittish little scream, attracts the general attention. 'Graced it! Take care of me if I faint, Veneering. He means to tell us, that a horrid female waterman is graceful!'

'Pardon me. I mean to tell you nothing, Lady Tippins,' replies Lightwood. And keeps his word by eating his dinner with a show of the utmost indifference.

'You shall not escape me in this way, you morose backwoodsman,' retorts Lady Tippins. 'You shall not evade the question, to screen your friend Eugene, who has made this exhibition of himself. The knowledge shall be brought home to you that such a ridiculous affair is condemned by the voice of Society. My dear Mrs Veneering, do let us resolve ourselves into a Committee of the whole House on the subject.'

Mrs Veneering, always charmed by this rattling sylph, cries. 'Oh yes! Do let us resolve ourselves into a Committee of the whole House! So delicious!' Veneering says, 'As many as are of that opinion, say Aye,contrary, Nothe Ayes have it.' But nobody takes the slightest notice of his joke.

'Now, I am Chairwoman of Committees!' cries Lady Tippins.

('What spirits she has!' exclaims Mrs Veneering; to whom likewise nobody attends.)

'And this,' pursues the sprightly one, 'is a Committee of the whole House to whatyoumaycallitelicit, I supposethe voice of Society. The question before the Committee is, whether a young man of very fair family, good appearance, and some talent, makes a fool or a wise man of himself in marrying a female waterman, turned factory girl.'

'Hardly so, I think,' the stubborn Mortimer strikes in. 'I take the question to be, whether such a man as you describe, Lady Tippins, does right or wrong in marrying a brave woman (I say nothing of her beauty), who has saved his life, with a wonderful energy and address; whom he knows to be virtuous, and possessed of remarkable qualities; whom he has long admired, and who is deeply attached to him.'

'But, excuse me,' says Podsnap, with his temper and his shirtcollar about equally rumpled; 'was this young woman ever a female waterman?'

'Never. But she sometimes rowed in a boat with her father, I believe.'

General sensation against the young woman. Brewer shakes his head. Boots shakes his head. Buffer shakes his head.

'And now, Mr Lightwood, was she ever,' pursues Podsnap, with his indignation rising high into those hairbrushes of his, 'a factory girl?'

'Never. But she had some employment in a paper mill, I believe.'

General sensation repeated. Brewer says, 'Oh dear!' Boots says, 'Oh dear!' Buffer says, 'Oh dear!' All, in a rumbling tone of protest.

'Then all I have to say is,' returns Podsnap, putting the thing away with his right arm, 'that my gorge rises against such a marriagethat it offends and disgusts methat it makes me sickand that I desire to know no more about it.'

('Now I wonder,' thinks Mortimer, amused, 'whether YOU are the Voice of Society!')

'Hear, hear, hear!' cries Lady Tippins. 'Your opinion of this MESALLIANCE, honourable colleagues of the honourable member who has just sat down?'

Mrs Podsnap is of opinion that in these matters there should be an equality of station and fortune, and that a man accustomed to Society should look out for a woman accustomed to Society and capable of bearing her part in it withan ease and elegance of carriagethat.' Mrs Podsnap stops there, delicately

intimating that every such man should look out for a fine woman as nearly resembling herself as he may hope to discover.

('Now I wonder,' thinks Mortimer, 'whether you are the Voice!')

Lady Tippins next canvasses the Contractor, of five hundred thousand power. It appears to this potentate, that what the man in question should have done, would have been, to buy the young woman a boat and a small annuity, and set her up for herself. These things are a question of beefsteaks and porter. You buy the young woman a boat. Very good. You buy her, at the same time, a small annuity. You speak of that annuity in pounds sterling, but it is in reality so many pounds of beefsteaks and so many pints of porter. On the one hand, the young woman has the boat. On the other hand, she consumes so many pounds of beefsteaks and so many pints of porter. Those beefsteaks and that porter are the fuel to that young woman's engine. She derives therefrom a certain amount of power to row the boat; that power will produce so much money; you add that to the small annuity; and thus you get at the young woman's income. That (it seems to the Contractor) is the way of looking at it.

The fair enslaver having fallen into one of her gentle sleeps during the last exposition, nobody likes to wake her. Fortunately, she comes awake of herself, and puts the question to the Wandering Chairman. The Wanderer can only speak of the case as if it were his own. If such a young woman as the young woman described, had saved his own life, he would have been very much obliged to her, wouldn't have married her, and would have got her a berth in an Electric Telegraph Office, where young women answer very well.

What does the Genius of the three hundred and seventyfive thousand pounds, no shillings, and nopence, think? He can't say what he thinks, without asking: Had the young woman any money?

'No,' says Lightwood, in an uncompromising voice; 'no money.'

'Madness and moonshine,' is then the compressed verdict of the Genius. 'A man may do anything lawful, for money. But for no money!Bosh!'

What does Boots say?

Boots says he wouldn't have done it under twenty thousand pound.

What does Brewer say?

Brewer says what Boots says.

What does Buffer say?

Buffer says he knows a man who married a bathingwoman, and bolted.

Lady Tippins fancies she has collected the suffrages of the whole Committee (nobody dreaming of asking the Veneerings for their opinion), when, looking round the table through her eyeglass, she perceives Mr Twemlow with his hand to his forehead.

Good gracious! My Twemlow forgotten! My dearest! My own! What is his vote?

Twemlow has the air of being ill at ease, as he takes his hand from his forehead and replies.

'I am disposed to think,' says he, 'that this is a question of the feelings of a gentleman.'

'A gentleman can have no feelings who contracts such a marriage,' flushes Podsnap.

'Pardon me, sir,' says Twemlow, rather less mildly than usual, 'I don't agree with you. If this gentleman's feelings of gratitude, of respect, of admiration, and affection, induced him (as I presume they did) to marry this lady'

'This lady!' echoes Podsnap.

'Sir,' returns Twemlow, with his wristbands bristling a little, 'YOU repeat the word; I repeat the word. This lady. What else would you call her, if the gentleman were present?'

This being something in the nature of a poser for Podsnap, he merely waves it away with a speechless wave.

'I say,' resumes Twemlow, 'if such feelings on the part of this gentleman, induced this gentleman to marry this lady, I think he is the greater gentleman for the action, and makes her the greater lady. I beg to say, that when I use the word, gentleman, I use it in the sense in which the degree may be attained by any man. The feelings of a gentleman I hold sacred, and I confess I am not comfortable when they are made the subject of sport or general discussion.'

'I should like to know,' sneers Podsnap, 'whether your noble relation would be of your opinion.'

'Mr Podsnap,' retorts Twemlow, 'permit me. He might be, or he might not be. I cannot say. But, I could not allow even him to dictate to me on a point of great delicacy, on which I feel very strongly.'

Somehow, a canopy of wet blanket seems to descend upon the company, and

Lady Tippins was never known to turn so very greedy or so very cross.

Mortimer Lightwood alone brightens. He has been asking himself, as to every other member of the Committee in turn, 'I wonder whether you are the Voice!' But he does not ask himself the question after Twemlow has spoken, and he glances in Twemlow's direction as if he were grateful.

When the company disperseby which time Mr and Mrs Veneering have had quite as much as they want of the honour, and the guests have had quite as much as THEY want of the other honourMortimer sees Twemlow home, shakes hands with him cordially at parting, and fares to the Temple, gaily.

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