

"Drive slowly anywhere," Mrs. Lammle called to her coachman, "and don't let the carriage rattle."

"It *must* be more dropping down, I think," said Mr. Boffin to himself. "What next?"

CHAPTER XV.

THE GOLDEN DUSTMAN AT HIS WORST.

THE breakfast table at Mr. Boffin's was usually a very pleasant one, and was always presided over by Bella. As though he began each new day in his healthy natural character, and some waking hours were necessary to his relapse into the corrupting influences of his wealth, the face and the demeanour of the Golden Dustman were generally unclouded at that meal. It would have been easy to believe then, that there was no change in him. It was as the day went on that the clouds gathered, and the brightness of the morning became obscured. One might have said that the shadows of avarice and distrust lengthened as his own shadow lengthened, and that the night closed around him gradually.

But, one morning long afterwards to be remembered, it was black midnight with the Golden Dustman when he first appeared. His altered character had never been so grossly marked. His bearing towards his Secretary was so charged with insolent distrust and arrogance, that the latter rose and left the table before breakfast was half done. The look he directed at the Secretary's retiring figure was so cunningly malignant, that Bella would have sat astounded and indignant, even though he had not gone the length of secretly threatening Rokesmith with his clenched fist as he closed the door. This unlucky morning, of all mornings in the year, was the morning next after Mr. Boffin's interview with Mrs. Lammle in her little carriage.

Bella looked to Mrs. Boffin's face for comment on, or explanation of, this stormy humour in her husband, but none was there. An anxious and a distressed observation of her own face was all she could read in it. When they were left alone together—which was not until noon, for Mr. Boffin sat long in his easy-chair, by turns jogging up and down the breakfast-room, clenching his fist and muttering—Bella, in consternation, asked her what had happened, what was wrong? "I am forbidden to speak to you about it, Bella dear; I mustn't tell you," was all the answer she could get. And still, whenever, in her wonder and dismay, she raised her eyes to Mrs. Boffin's face, she saw in it the same anxious and distressed observation of her own.

Oppressed by her sense that trouble was impending, and lost in speculations why Mrs. Boffin should look at her as if she had any part in it, Bella found the day long and dreary. It was far on in the afternoon when, she being in her own room, a servant brought her a message from Mr. Boffin begging her to come to his.

Mrs. Boffin was there, seated on a sofa, and Mr. Boffin was jogging up and down. On seeing Bella he stopped, beckoned her to him, and drew her arm through his. "Don't be alarmed, my dear," he said, gently; "I am not angry with you. Why you actually tremble! Don't be alarmed, Bella my dear. I'll see you righted."

"See me righted?" thought Bella. And then repeated aloud in a tone of astonishment: "see me righted, sir?"

"Ay, ay!" said Mr. Boffin. "See you righted. Send Mr. Rokesmith here, you sir."

Bella would have been lost in perplexity if there had been pause enough; but the servant found Mr. Rokesmith near at hand, and he almost immediately presented himself.

"Shut the door, sir!" said Mr. Boffin. "I have got something to say to you which I fancy you'll not be pleased to hear."

"I am sorry to reply, Mr. Boffin," returned the Secretary, as, having closed the door, he turned and faced him, "that I think that very likely."

"What do you mean?" blustered Mr. Boffin.

"I mean that it has become no novelty to me to hear from your lips what I would rather not hear."

"Oh! Perhaps we shall change that," said Mr. Boffin, with a threatening roll of his head.

"I hope so," returned the Secretary. He was quiet and respectful; but stood, as Bella thought (and was glad to think), on his manhood too.

"Now, sir," said Mr. Boffin, "look at this young lady on my arm."

Bella involuntarily raising her eyes, when this sudden reference was made to herself, met those of Mr. Rokesmith. He was pale and seemed agitated. Then her eyes passed on to Mrs. Boffin's, and she met the look again. In a flash it enlightened her, and she began to understand what she had done.

"I say to you, sir," Mr. Boffin repeated, "look at this young lady on my arm."

"I do so," returned the Secretary.

As his glance rested again on Bella for a moment, she thought there was reproach in it. But it is possible that the reproach was within herself.

"How dare you, sir," said Mr. Boffin, "tamper, unknown to me, with this young lady? How dare you come out of your station, and your place in my house, to pester this young lady with your impudent addresses?"

"I must decline to answer questions," said the Secretary, "that are so offensively asked."

"You decline to answer?" retorted Mr. Boffin. "You decline to answer, do you? Then I'll tell you what it is, Rokesmith; I'll answer for you. There are two sides in this matter, and I'll take 'em separately. The first side is, sheer Insolence. That's the first side."

The Secretary smiled with some bitterness, as though he would have said, "So I see and hear."

"It was sheer Insolence in you, I tell you," said Mr. Boffin, "even to think of this young lady. This young lady was far above *you*. This young lady was no match for *you*. This young lady was lying in wait (as she was qualified to do) for money, and you had no money."

Bella hung her head and seemed to shrink a little from Mr. Boffin's protecting arm.

"What are you, I should like to know," pursued Mr. Boffin, "that you were to have the audacity to follow up this young lady? This young lady was looking about the market for a good bid; she wasn't in it to be snapped up by fellows that had no money to lay out; nothing to buy with."

"Oh, Mr. Boffin! Mrs. Boffin, pray say something for me!" murmured Bella, disengaging her arm, and covering her face with her hands.

"Old lady," said Mr. Boffin, anticipating his wife, "you hold your tongue. Bella, my dear, don't you let yourself be put out. I'll right you."

"But you don't, you don't right me!" exclaimed Bella, with great emphasis.

"You wrong me, wrong me!"

"Don't you be put out, my dear," complacently retorted Mr. Boffin. "I'll bring this young man to book. Now, you Rokesmith! You can't decline to hear, you know, as well as to answer. You hear me tell you that the first side of your

conduct was Insolence—Insolence and Presumption. Answer me one thing, if you can. Didn't this young lady tell you so herself?"

"Did I, Mr. Rokesmith?" asked Bella with her face still covered. "O say, Mr. Rokesmith! Did I?"

"Don't be distressed, Miss Wilfer; it matters very little now."

"Ah! You can't deny it, though!" said Mr. Boffin, with a knowing shake of his head.

"But I have asked him to forgive me since," cried Bella; "and I would ask him to forgive me now again, upon my knees, if it would spare him!"

Here Mrs. Boffin broke out a-crying.

"Old lady," said Mr. Boffin, "stop that noise! Tender-hearted in you, Miss Bella; but I mean to have it out right through with this young man, having got him into a corner. Now, you Rokesmith. I tell you that's one side of your conduct—Insolence and Presumption. Now, I'm a-coming to the other, which is much worse. This was a speculation of yours."

"I indignantly deny it."

"It's of no use your denying it; it doesn't signify a bit whether you deny it or not; I've got a head on my shoulders, and it ain't a baby's. What!" said Mr. Boffin,

gathering himself together in his most suspicious attitude, and wrinkling his face into a very map of curves and corners. "Don't I know what grabs are made at a man with money? If I didn't keep my eyes open, and my pockets buttoned,

shouldn't I be brought to the workhouse before I knew where I was? Wasn't the experience of Dancer, and Elwes, and Hopkins, and Blewbury Jones, and

ever so many more of 'em, similar to mine? Didn't everybody want to make

grabs at what they'd got, and bring 'em to poverty and ruin? Weren't they

forced to hide everything belonging to 'em, for fear it should be snatched from

'em? Of course they was. I shall be told next that they didn't know human natur!"

"They! Poor creatures," murmured the Secretary.

"What do you say?" asked Mr. Boffin, snapping at him. "However, you

needn't be at the trouble of repeating it, for it ain't worth hearing, and won't go

down with *me*. I'm a-going to unfold your plan, before this young lady; I'm a-going

to show this young lady the second view of you; and nothing you can say will

stave it off. (Now, attend here, Bella, my dear.) Rokesmith, you're a needy

chap. You're a chap that I pick up in the street. Are you, or ain't you?"

"Go on, Mr. Boffin; don't appeal to me."

"Not appeal to *you*," retorted Mr. Boffin as if he hadn't done so. "No, I

should hope not! Appealing to *you* would be rather a rum course. As I was

saying, you're a needy chap that I pick up in the street. You come and ask me in

the street to take you for a Secretary, and I take you. Very good."

"Very bad," murmured the Secretary.

"What do you say?" asked Mr. Boffin, snapping at him again.

He returned no answer. Mr. Boffin, after eyeing him with a comical look of

discomfited curiosity, was fain to begin afresh.

"This Rokesmith is a needy young man that I take for my Secretary out of the

open street. This Rokesmith gets acquainted with my affairs, and gets to know

that I mean to settle a sum of money on this young lady. 'Oho!' says this Roke-

smit; here Mr. Boffin clapped a finger against his nose, and tapped it several

times with a sneaking air, as embodying Rokesmith confidentially confabulating

with his own nose; "This will be a good haul; I'll go in for this!" And so

this Rokesmith, greedy and hungering, begins a-creeping on his hands and knees

towards the money. Not so bad a speculation either: for if this young lady had

had less spirit, or had had less sense, through being at all in the romantic line, by

George he might have worked it out and made it pay! But fortunately she was

too many for him, and a pretty figure he cuts now he is exposed. There he stands!" said Mr. Boffin, addressing Rokesmith himself with ridiculous inconsistency. "Look at him!"

"Your unfortunate suspicions, Mr. Boffin—" began the Secretary.

"Precious unfortunate for *you*, I can tell you," said Mr. Boffin.

"—are not to be combated by any one, and I address myself to no such hopeless task. But I will say a word upon the truth."

"Yah! Much you care about the truth," said Mr. Boffin, with a snap of his fingers.

"Noddy! My dear love!" expostulated his wife.

"Old lady," returned Mr. Boffin, "you keep still. I say to this Rokesmith here, much he cares about the truth. I tell him again, much he cares about the truth."

"Our connection being at an end, Mr. Boffin," said the Secretary, "it can be of very little moment to me what you say."

"Oh! You are knowing enough," retorted Mr. Boffin, with a sly look, "to have found out that our connection's at an end, eh? But you can't get beforehand with me. Look at this in my hand. This is your pay, on your discharge. You can only follow suit. You can't deprive me of the lead. Let's have no pretending that you discharge yourself. I discharge you."

"So that I go," remarked the Secretary, waving the point aside with his hand, "it is all one to me."

"Is it?" said Mr. Boffin. "But it's two to me, let me tell you. Allowing a fellow that's found out to discharge himself, is one thing; discharging him for insolence and presumption, and likewise for designs upon his master's money, is another. One and one's two; not one. (Old lady, don't you cut in. You keep still.)"

"Have you said all you wish to say to me?" demanded the Secretary.

"I don't know whether I have or not," answered Mr. Boffin. "It depends."

"Perhaps you will consider whether there are any other strong expressions that you would like to bestow upon me?"

"I'll consider that," said Mr. Boffin, obstinately, "at my convenience, and not at yours. You want the last word. It may not be suitable to let you have it."

"Noddy! My dear, dear Noddy! You sound so hard," cried poor Mrs. Boffin, not to be quite repressed.

"Old lady," said her husband, but without harshness, "if you cut in when requested not, I'll get a pillow and carry you out of the room upon it. What do you want to say, you Rokesmith?"

"To you, Mr. Boffin, nothing. But to Miss Wilfer and to your good kind wife, a word."

"Out with it then," replied Mr. Boffin, "and cut it short, for we've had enough of you."

"I have borne," said the Secretary, in a low voice, "with my false position here, that I might not be separated from Miss Wilfer. To be near her, has been a recompense to me from day to day, even for the undeserved treatment I have had here, and for the degraded aspect in which she has often seen me. Since Miss Wilfer rejected me, I have never again urged my suit, to the best of my belief, with a spoken syllable or a look. But I have never changed in my devotion to her, except—if she will forgive my saying so—that it is deeper than it was, and better founded."

"Now, mark this chap's saying Miss Wilfer, when he means £ s. d.!" cried Mr. Boffin, with a cunning wink. "Now, mark this chap's making Miss Wilfer stand for Pounds, Shillings, and Pence!"



BELLA "RIGHTED" BY THE GOLDEN DUSTMAN.

"My feeling for Miss Wilfer," pursued the Secretary, without deigning to notice him, "is not one to be ashamed of. I avow it. I love her. Let me go where I may when I presently leave this house, I shall go into a blank life, leaving her."

"Leaving *£ s. d.* behind me," said Mr. Boffin, by way of commentary, with another wink.

"That I am incapable," the Secretary went on, still without heeding him, "of a mercenary project, or a mercenary thought, in connection with Miss Wilfer, is nothing meritorious in me, because any prize that I could put before my fancy would sink into insignificance beside her. If the greatest wealth or the highest rank were hers, it would only be important in my sight as removing her still further from me, and making me more hopeless, if that could be. Say," remarked the Secretary, looking full at his late master, "say that with a word she could strip Mr. Boffin of his fortune and take possession of it, she would be of no greater worth in my eyes than she is."

"What do you think by this time, old lady," asked Mr. Boffin, turning to his wife in a bantering tone, "about this Rokesmith here, and his caring for the truth? You needn't say what you think, my dear, because I don't want you to cut in, but you can think it all the same. As to taking possession of my property, I warrant you he wouldn't do that himself if he could."

"No," returned the Secretary, with another full look.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Mr. Boffin. "There's nothing like a good 'un while you *are* about it."

"I have been for a moment," said the Secretary, turning from him and falling into his former manner, "diverted from the little I have to say. My interest in Miss Wilfer began when I first saw her; even began when I had only heard of her. It was, in fact, the cause of my throwing myself in Mr. Boffin's way, and entering his service. Miss Wilfer has never known this until now. I mention it now, only as a corroboration (though I hope it may be needless) of my being free from the sordid design attributed to me."

"Now, this is a very artful dodge," said Mr. Boffin, with a deep look. "This is a longer-headed schemer than I thought him. See how patiently and methodically he goes to work. He gets to know about me and my property, and about this young lady, and her share in poor young John's story, and he puts this and that together, and he says to himself, 'I'll get in with Boffin, and I'll get in with this young lady, and I'll work 'em both at the same time, and I'll bring my pigs to market somewhere.' I hear him say it, bless you! Why, I look at him, now, and I see him say it."

Mr. Boffin pointed at the culprit, as it were in the act, and hugged himself in his great penetration.

"But luckily he hadn't to deal with the people he supposed, Bella, my dear!" said Mr. Boffin. "No! Luckily he had to deal with you, and with me, and with Daniel and Miss Dancer, and with Elwes, and with Vulture Hopkins, and with Blewbury Jones and all the rest of us, one down t'other come on. And he's beat; that's what he is; regularly beat. He thought to squeeze money out of us, and he has done for himself instead, Bella, my dear!"

Bella my dear made no response, gave no sign of acquiescence. When she had first covered her face she had sunk upon a chair with her hands resting on the back of it, and had never moved since. There was a short silence at this point, and Mrs. Boffin softly rose as if to go to her. But Mr. Boffin stopped her with a gesture, and she obediently sat down again and stayed where she was.

"There's your pay, Mr. Rokesmith," said the Golden Dustman, jerking the

folded scrap of paper he had in his hand towards his late Secretary. "I dare say you can stoop to pick it up, after what you have stooped to here."

"I have stooped to nothing but this," Rokesmith answered as he took it from the ground; "and this is mine, for I have earned it by the hardest of hard labour."

"You're a pretty quick packer, I hope," said Mr. Boffin; "because the sooner you are gone, bag and baggage, the better for all parties."

"You need have no fear of my lingering."

"There's just one thing though," said Mr. Boffin, "that I should like to ask you before we come to a good riddance, if it was only to show this young lady how conceited you schemers are, in thinking that nobody finds out how you contradict yourselves."

"Ask me anything you wish to ask," returned Rokesmith, "but use the expedition that you recommend."

"You pretend to have a mighty admiration for this young lady?" said Mr. Boffin, laying his hand protectingly on Bella's head without looking down at her.

"I do not pretend."

"Oh! Well. You have a mighty admiration for this young lady—since you are so particular?"

"Yes."

"How do you reconcile that, with this young lady's being a weak-spirited, improvident idiot, not knowing what was due to herself, flinging up her money to the church-weathercocks, and racing off at a splitting pace for the workhouse?"

"I don't understand you."

"Don't you? Or won't you? What else could you have made this young lady out to be, if she had listened to such addresses as yours?"

"What else, if I had been so happy as to win her affections and possess her heart?"

"Win her affections," retorted Mr. Boffin, with ineffable contempt, "and possess her heart! Mew says the cat, Quack-quack says the duck, Bow-wow-wow says the dog! Win her affections and possess her heart! Mew, Quack-quack, Bow-wow!"

John Rokesmith stared at him in his outburst, as if with some faint idea that he had gone mad.

"What is due to this young lady," said Mr. Boffin, "is Money, and this young lady right well knows it."

"You slander the young lady."

"You slander the young lady; you with your affections and hearts and trumpery," returned Mr. Boffin. "It's of a piece with the rest of your behaviour. I heard of these doings of yours only last night, or you should have heard of 'em from me, sooner, take your oath of it. I heard of 'em from a lady with as good a headpiece as the best, and she knows this young lady, and I know this young lady, and we all three know that it's Money she makes a stand for—money, money, money—and that you and your affections and hearts are a Lie, sir!"

"Mrs. Boffin," said Rokesmith, quietly turning to her, "for your delicate and unvarying kindness I thank you with the warmest gratitude. Good-bye! Miss Wilfer, good-bye!"

"And now, my dear," said Mr. Boffin, laying his hand on Bella's head again, "you may begin to make yourself quite comfortable, and I hope you feel that you've been righted."

But Bella was so far from appearing to feel it, that she shrank from his hand and from the chair, and, starting up in an incoherent passion of tears, and stretching

out her arms, cried, "Oh, Mr. Rokesmith, before you go, if you could but make me poor again! Oh! Make me poor again, Somebody, I beg and pray, or my heart will break if this goes on! Pa, dear, make me poor again and take me home! I was bad enough there, but I have been so much worse here. Don't give me money, Mr. Boffin, I won't have money. Keep it away from me, and only let me speak to good little Pa, and lay my head upon his shoulder, and tell him all my griefs. Nobody else can understand me, nobody else can comfort me, nobody else knows how unworthy I am, and yet can love me like a little child. I am better with Pa than any one—more innocent, more sorry, more glad!" So, crying out in a wild way that she could not bear this, Bella dropped her head on Mrs. Boffin's ready breast.

John Rokesmith from his place in the room, and Mr. Boffin from his, looked on at her in silence until she was silent herself. Then Mr. Boffin observed in a soothing and comfortable tone, "There, my dear, there; you are righted now, and it's all right. I don't wonder, I'm sure, at your being a little flurried by having a scene with this fellow, but it's all over, my dear, and you're righted, and it's—and it's all right!" Which Mr. Boffin repeated with a highly satisfied air of completeness and finality.

"I hate you!" cried Bella, turning suddenly upon him, with a stamp of her little foot—"at least, I can't hate you, but I don't like you!"

"HUL—LO!" exclaimed Mr. Boffin in an amazed under-tone.

"You're a scolding, unjust, abusive, aggravating, bad old creature!" cried Bella. "I am angry with my ungrateful self for calling you names; but you are, you are; you know you are!"

Mr. Boffin stared here, and stared there, as misdoubting that he must be in some sort of fit.

"I have heard you with shame," said Bella. "With shame for myself, and with shame for you. You ought to be above the base tale-bearing of a time-serving woman; but you are above nothing now."

Mr. Boffin, seeming to become convinced that this was a fit, rolled his eyes and loosened his neckcloth.

"When I came here, I respected you and honoured you, and I soon loved you," cried Bella. "And now I can't bear the sight of you. At least, I don't know that I ought to go so far as that—only you're a—you're a Monster!" Having shot this bolt out with a great expenditure of force, Bella hysterically laughed and cried together.

"The best wish I can wish you is," said Bella, returning to the charge, "that you had not one single farthing in the world. If any true friend and well-wisher could make you a bankrupt, you would be a Duck; but as a man of property you are a Demon!"

After despatching this second bolt with a still greater expenditure of force, Bella laughed and cried still more.

"Mr. Rokesmith, pray stay one moment. Pray hear one word from me before you go! I am deeply sorry for the reproaches you have borne on my account. Out of the depths of my heart I earnestly and truly beg your pardon."

As she stepped towards him, he met her. As she gave him her hand, he put it to his lips, and said, "God bless you!" No laughing was mixed with Bella's crying then; her tears were pure and fervent.

"There is not an ungenerous word that I have heard addressed to you—heard with scorn and indignation, Mr. Rokesmith—but it has wounded me far more than you, for I have deserved it, and you never have. Mr. Rokesmith, it is to me you owe this perverted account of what passed between us that night. I parted with the secret, even while I was angry with myself for doing so. It was very bad in me,

but indeed it was not wicked. I did it in a moment of conceit and folly—one of my many such moments—one of my many such hours—years. As I am punished for it severely, try to forgive it!”

“I do with all my soul.”

“Thank you. Oh, thank you! Don’t part from me till I have said one other word, to do you justice. The only fault you can be truly charged with, in having spoken to me as you did that night—with how much delicacy and how much forbearance no one but I can know or be grateful to you for—is that you laid yourself open to be slighted by a worldly shallow girl whose head was turned, and who was quite unable to rise to the worth of what you offered her. Mr. Rokesmith, that girl has often seen herself in a pitiful and poor light since, but never in as pitiful and poor a light as now, when the mean tone in which she answered you—sordid and vain girl that she was—has been echoed in her ears by Mr. Boffin.”

He kissed her hand again.

“Mr. Boffin’s speeches were detestable to me, shocking to me,” said Bella, starting that gentleman with another stamp of her little foot. “It is quite true that there was a time, and very lately, when I deserved to be so ‘righted,’ Mr. Rokesmith; but I hope that I shall never deserve it again!”

He once more put her hand to his lips, and then relinquished it, and left the room. Bella was hurrying back to the chair in which she had hidden her face so long, when, catching sight of Mrs. Boffin by the way, she stopped at her. “He is gone,” sobbed Bella, indignantly, despairingly, in fifty ways at once, with her arms round Mrs. Boffin’s neck. “He has been most shamefully abused, and most unjustly and most basely driven away, and I am the cause of it!”

All this time Mr. Boffin had been rolling his eyes over his loosened neckerchief, as if his fit were still upon him. Appearing now to think that he was coming to, he stared straight before him for a while, tied his neckerchief again, took several long inspirations, swallowed several times, and ultimately exclaimed with a deep sigh, as if he felt himself on the whole better: “Well!”

No word, good or bad, did Mrs. Boffin say; but she tenderly took care of Bella, and glanced at her husband as if for orders. Mr. Boffin, without imparting any, took his seat on a chair over against them, and there sat leaning forward, with a fixed countenance, his legs apart, a hand on each knee, and his elbows squared, until Bella should dry her eyes and raise her head, which in the fulness of time she did.

“I must go home,” said Bella, rising hurriedly. “I am very grateful to you for all you have done for me, but I can’t stay here.”

“My darling girl!” remonstrated Mrs. Boffin.

“No, I can’t stay here,” said Bella; “I can’t indeed.—Ugh! you vicious old thing!” (This to Mr. Boffin.)

“Don’t be rash, my love,” urged Mrs. Boffin. “Think well of what you do.”

“Yes, you had better think well,” said Mr. Boffin.

“I shall never more think well of *you*,” cried Bella, cutting him short, with intense defiance in her expressive little eyebrows, and championship of the late Secretary in every dimple. “No! Never again! Your money has changed you to marble. You are a hard-hearted Miser. You are worse than Dancer, worse than Hopkins, worse than Blackberry Jones, worse than any of the wretches. And more!” proceeded Bella, breaking into tears again, “you were wholly undeserving of the Gentleman you have lost.”

“Why, you don’t mean to say, Miss Bella,” the Golden Dustman slowly remonstrated, “that you set up Rokesmith against me?”

“I do!” said Bella. “He is worth a Million of you.”

Very pretty she looked, though very angry, as she made herself as tall as she possibly could (which was not extremely tall), and utterly renounced her patron with a lofty toss of her rich brown head.

“I would rather he thought well of me,” said Bella, “though he swept the street for bread, than that you did, though you splashed the mud upon him from the wheels of a chariot of pure gold.—There!”

“Well I’m sure!” cried Mr. Boffin, staring.

“And for a long time past, when you have thought you set yourself above him, I have only seen you under his feet,” said Bella.—“There! And throughout I saw in him the master, and I saw in you the man.—There! And when you used him shamefully, I took his part and loved him.—There! I boast of it!” After which strong avowal Bella underwent reaction, and cried to any extent, with her face on the back of her chair.

“Now, look here,” said Mr. Boffin, as soon as he could find an opening for breaking the silence and striking in. “Give me your attention, Bella. I am not angry.”

“I am!” said Bella.

“I say,” resumed the Golden Dustman, “I am not angry, and I mean kindly to you, and I want to overlook this. So you’ll stay where you are, and we’ll agree to say no more about it.”

“No, I can’t stay here,” cried Bella, rising hurriedly again; “I can’t think of staying here. I must go home for good.”

“Now, don’t be silly,” Mr. Boffin reasoned. “Don’t do what you can’t undo; don’t do what you’re sure to be sorry for.”

“I shall never be sorry for it,” said Bella; “and I should always be sorry, and should every minute of my life despise myself, if I remained here after what has happened.”

“At least, Bella,” argued Mr. Boffin, “let there be no mistake about it. Look before you leap, you know. Stay where you are, and all’s well, and all’s as it was to be. Go away, and you can never come back.”

“I know that I can never come back, and that’s what I mean,” said Bella.

“You mustn’t expect,” Mr. Boffin pursued, “that I’m a-going to settle money on you, if you leave us like this, because I am not. No, Bella! Be careful! Not one brass farthing.”

“Expect!” said Bella, haughtily. “Do you think that any power on earth could make me take it, if you did, sir?”

But there was Mrs. Boffin to part from, and, in the full flush of her dignity, the impressive little soul collapsed again. Down upon her knees before that good woman, she rocked herself upon her breast, and cried, and sobbed, and folded her in her arms with all her might.

“You’re a dear, a dear, the best of dears!” cried Bella. “You’re the best of human creatures. I can never be thankful enough to you, and can never forget you. If I should live to be blind and deaf, I know I shall see and hear you, in my fancy, to the last of my dim old days!”

Mrs. Boffin wept most heartily, and embraced her with all fondness; but said not one single word except that she was her dear girl. She said that often enough, to be sure, for she said it over and over again; but not one word else.

Bella broke from her at length, and was going weeping out of the room, when in her own little queer affectionate way, she half relented towards Mr. Boffin.

“I am very glad,” sobbed Bella, “that I called you names, sir, because you richly deserved it. But I am very sorry that I called you names, because you used to be so different. Say good-bye!”

“Good-bye,” said Mr. Boffin, shortly.

"If I knew which of your hands was the least spoilt, I would ask you to let me touch it," said Bella, "for the last time. But not because I repent of what I have said to you. For I don't. It's true!"

"Try the left hand," said Mr. Boffin, holding it out in a stolid manner; "it's the least used."

"You have been wonderfully good and kind to me," said Bella, "and I kiss it for that. You have been as bad as bad could be to Mr. Rokesmith, and I throw it away for that. Thank you for myself, and good-bye!"

"Good-bye," said Mr. Boffin as before.

Bella caught him round the neck and kissed him, and ran out for ever.

She ran up-stairs, and sat down on the floor in her own room and cried abundantly. But the day was declining and she had no time to lose. She opened all the places where she kept her dresses; selected only those she had brought with her, leaving all the rest; and made a great misshapen bundle of them to be sent for afterwards.

"I won't take one of the others," said Bella, tying the knots of the bundle very tight, in the severity of her resolution. "I'll leave all the presents behind, and begin again entirely on my own account." That the resolution might be thoroughly carried into practice, she even changed the dress she wore for that in which she had come to the grand mansion. Even the bonnet she put on was the bonnet that had mounted into the Boffin chariot at Holloway.

"Now, I am complete," said Bella. "It's a little trying, but I have steeped my eyes in cold water, and I won't cry any more. You have been a pleasant room to me, dear room. Adieu! We shall never see each other again."

With a parting kiss of her fingers to it she softly closed the door, and went with a light foot down the great staircase, pausing and listening as she went, that she might meet none of the household. No one chanced to be about, and she got down to the hall in quiet. The door of the late Secretary's room stood open. She peeped in as she passed, and divined from the emptiness of his table, and the general appearance of things, that he was already gone. Softly opening the great hall door, and softly closing it upon herself, she turned and kissed it on the outside—insensible old combination of wood and iron that it was!—before she ran away from the house at a swift pace.

"That was well done!" panted Bella, slackening in the next street, and subsiding into a walk. "If I had left myself any breath to cry with, I should have cried again. Now poor dear darling little Pa, you are going to see your lovely woman unexpectedly."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FEAST OF THE THREE HOBGOBLINS.

THE City looked unpromising enough, as Bella made her way along its gritty streets. Most of its money-mills were slackening sail, or had left off grinding for the day. The master-millers had already departed, and the journeymen were departing. There was a jaded aspect on the business lanes and courts, and the very pavements had a weary appearance, confused by the tread of a million of feet. There must be hours of night to temper down the day's distraction of so feverish a place. As yet the worry of the newly-stopped whirling and grinding on the part of the money-mills seemed to linger in the air, and the quiet was more like