

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

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

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

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

"Did you hear him?" retorted Wegg. "Did you hear him say that he was resolved to lift him? Did you hear him say, you cur, that he was going to have the Mounds cleared off, when no doubt the whole place will be rummaged? If you haven't the spirit of a mouse to defend your rights, I have. Let me go after him."

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

CHAPTER VII.

THE FRIENDLY MOVE TAKES UP A STRONG POSITION.

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

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

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

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

Mr. Venus admitted that he had never known those distinguished persons, and added, in effect, that he had never so much as desired the honour of their acquaintance.

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

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

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

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

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

"What question?" said Venus.

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

"No, I can't," said Venus.

"I knew it! And why not?" returned Wegg, with the same joyful candour. "Because I lay no claims to a speaking countenance. Because I am well aware of my deficiencies. All men are not gifted alike. But I can answer in words. And in what words? These. I wanted to give you a delightful sap—pur—tze!"

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

"Your speaking countenance," said Wegg, "being answered to its satisfaction, only asks then, 'What have you found?' Why, I hear it say the words!"

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

"Hear me out!" said Wegg. "I'm a-going to. Hear me out! Man and brother, partner in feelings equally with undertakings and actions, I have found a cash-box."

"Where?"

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

"When?" said Venus, bluntly.

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

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

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

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

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

"There were papers in it?" said Venus.

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

"We must know its contents," said Venus.

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

"Without coming to me!" exclaimed Venus.

"Exactly so, sir!" returned Wegg, blandly and buoyantly. "I see I take you with me! Hear, hear, hear! Resolved, as your discriminating good sense perceives, that if you was to have a sap—pur—ize, it should be a complete one! Well, sir. And so, as you have honoured me by anticipating, I examined the document. Regularly executed, regularly witnessed, very short. Inasmuch as he has never made friends, and has ever had a rebellious family, he, John Harmon, gives to Nicodemus Boffin the Little Mound, which is quite enough for him, and gives the whole rest and residue of his property to the Crown."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Venus smote the table with his hand.

"—Hear me out!" said Wegg. "Hear me out! I'll go and fetch 'em."

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

"There's something in that," assented Venus. "Come to my place."

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

They found the usual dim light burning in the window of Mr. Venus's establish-

ment, imperfectly disclosing to the public the usual pair of preserved frogs, sword in hand, with their point of honour still unsettled. Mr. Venus had closed his shop door on coming out, and now opened it with the key and shut it again as soon as they were within; but not before he had put up and barred the shutters of the shop window. "No one can get in without being let in," said he then, "and we couldn't be more snug than here." So he raked together the yet warm cinders in the rusty grate, and made a fire, and trimmed the candle on the little counter. As the fire cast its flickering gleams here and there upon the dark greasy walls; the Hindoo baby, the African baby, the articulated English baby, the assortment of skulls, and the rest of the collection, came starting to their various stations as if they had all been out, like their master, and were punctual in a general rendezvous to assist at the secret. The French gentleman had grown considerably since Mr. Wegg last saw him, being now accommodated with a pair of legs and a head, though his arms were yet in abeyance. To whomsoever the head had originally belonged, Silas Wegg would have regarded it as a personal favour if he had not cut quite so many teeth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I am," said Wegg.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There's the Miscellanies of several human specimens," said Venus, " (though you mightn't think it,) in the box on which you're sitting. There's the Miscellanies of several human specimens in the lovely compo-one behind the door;" with a nod towards the French gentleman. "It still wants a pair of arms. I don't say that I'm in any hurry for 'em."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On this head, Silas Wegg had much to say. Silas had to say That, he would beg to remind his comrade, brother, and partner, of the impressive passages they had read that evening; of the evident parallel in Mr. Boffin's mind between them and the late owner of the Bower, and the present circumstances of the Bower; of the bottle; and of the box. That, the fortunes of his brother and comrade, and of himself, were evidently made, inasmuch as they had but to put their price upon this document, and get that price from the minion of fortune and the worm of the hour: who now appeared to be less of a minion and more of a worm than had been previously supposed. That, he considered it plain that such price was stateable in a single expressive word, and that word was, "Halves!" That, the question then arose when "Halves!" should be called. That, here he had a plan of action to recommend, with a conditional clause. That, the plan of action was that they should lie by with patience; that they should allow the Mounds to be gradually levelled and cleared away, while retaining to themselves their present opportunity of watching the process—which would be, he conceived, to put the trouble and cost of daily digging and delving upon somebody else, while they might nightly turn such complete disturbance of the dust to the account of their own private investigations; and that, when the Mounds were gone, and they had

worked those chances for their own joint benefit solely, they should then, and not before, explode on the minion and worm. But here came the conditional clause, and to this he entreated the special attention of his comrade, brother, and partner. It was not to be borne that the minion and worm should carry off any of that property which was now to be regarded as their own property. When he, Mr. Wegg, had seen the minion surreptitiously making off with that bottle, and its precious contents unknown, he had looked upon him in the light of a mere robber, and, as such, would have despoiled him of his ill-gotten gain, but for the judicious interference of his comrade, brother, and partner. Therefore, the conditional clause he proposed was, that, if the minion should return in his late sneaking manner, and if, being closely watched, he should be found to possess himself of anything, no matter what, the sharp sword impending over his head should be instantly shown him, he should be strictly examined as to what he knew or suspected, should be severely handled by them his masters, and should be kept in a state of abject moral bondage and slavery until the time when they should see fit to permit him to purchase his freedom at the price of half his possessions. If, said Mr. Wegg by way of peroration, he had erred in saying only "Halves!" he trusted to his comrade, brother, and partner not to hesitate to set him right, and to reprove his weakness. It might be more according to the rights of things, to say Two-thirds; it might be more according to the rights of things, to say Three-fourths. On those points he was ever open to correction.

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

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

Still swilling tea, Mr. Venus nodded assent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah, dear me, dear me!" exclaimed Wegg with a sigh, but eyeing him while

pretending to keep him company in eyeing the fire, "such is woman! And I remember you said that night, sitting there as I sat here—said that night when your peace of mind was first laid low, that you had taken an interest in these very affairs. Such is coincidence!"

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

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

"Pleasant Riderhood."

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

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

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

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

"Ay, ay, ay, sir!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

For, Silas Wegg felt it to be quite out of the question that he could lay his



THE EVIL GENIUS OF THE HOUSE OF BOFFIN.

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

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

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

Mrs. Boffin descended and went in.

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

Bella lightly descended and ran in after her.

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

A little while, and the Secretary came out.

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

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

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

Having now composed his mind for slumber, he turned homeward. Such was the greed of the fellow, that his mind had shot beyond halves, two-thirds, three-fourths, and gone straight to spoliation of the whole. "Though that wouldn't quite do," he considered, growing cooler as he got away. "That's what would happen to him if he didn't buy us up. We should get nothing by that."

We so judge others by ourselves, that it had never come into his head before, that he might not buy us up, and might prove honest, and prefer to be poor. It caused him a slight tremor as it passed; but a very slight one, for the idle thought was gone directly.

"He's grown too fond of money for that," said Wegg; "he's grown too fond of money." The burden fell into a strain or tune as he stumped along the pavements. All the way home he stumped it out of the rattling streets, *piano* with his own foot, and *forte* with his wooden leg, "He's GROWN too FOND of MONEY for THAT, he's GROWN too FOND of MONEY."

Even next day Silas soothed himself with this melodious strain, when he was called out of bed at daybreak, to set open the yard-gate and admit the train of carts and horses that came to carry off the little Mound. And all day long, as he kept unwinking watch on the slow process which promised to protract itself through many days and weeks, whenever (to save himself from being choked with dust) he patrolled a little cinderous beat he established for the purpose, without taking his eyes from the diggers, he still stumped to the tune: "He's GROWN too FOND of MONEY for THAT, he's GROWN too FOND of MONEY."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE END OF A LONG JOURNEY.

THE train of carts and horses came and went all day from dawn to nightfall, making little or no daily impression on the heap of ashes, though, as the days