

CHAPTER XIII.

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, open-hearted, 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 fro—both 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 disappointed—as he thought—in 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 cast-away-like, 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," said 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 master-stroke of secret arrangement, the inexhaustible baby here appeared at the door, suspended in mid-air 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 writing-table. 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 in to the property wrongful, however innocent, and—more than that—might 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 certain confabulation regarding a 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 on 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, Oh, 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 though, fully 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't—why, 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 ecstasy 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 to-day,' 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 to-morrow!' 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 church-organ 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 hard-hearted 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 heart—was making me grasping, calculating, insolent, insufferable—and you took the pains to be the dearest and kindest finger-post 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 pinte'd out, I did put it to John, what did he think of going in for some such general scheme as you have pinte'd 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, by-the-bye, 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 in 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 regular brown one. Couldn't abear to make-believe 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 demonstration—I allude to Mew says the cat, Quack quack says the duck, and Bow-wow-wow says the dog—I assure you, my dear, that on that celebrated day, them flinty and un-believing 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 fellow-conspirators 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 Bow-wow-wow 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 then—John Harmon now for good, and John Roke-smith for nevermore—to 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 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 this—delivered in the grisliest growling of the regular brown bear. "A pretty and a hopeful picter? Mew, Quack quack, Bow-wow!" And then trotted silently down-stairs, with his shoulders in a state of the liveliest commotion.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHECKMATE TO THE FRIENDLY MOVE.

MR. and Mrs. John Harmon had so timed their taking possession of their right-ful name and their London house, that the event befell on the very day when the last waggon-load 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 foreman-representative 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 tied-up 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 eight-and-forty 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