

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 interruptions—rather striking interruptions possibly, but interruptions still—of 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 awake 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 dead-tired 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 bright-red 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 much-perplexed 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 II.

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 gentleness—those 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 poor husband's character—"

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

"My child, your favourable opinion, then, of your husband—you 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. nor 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, manœuvred 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 self-praise is no recommendation."

"Self-praise, 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 self-laudation, 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 bearings—between her propitiatory bearing there, and her defiant bearing at Mr. Twemlow's—was 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 above-board 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 pocket-book, "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 arm-hole of his waistcoat: "it shall be your department."

"I would rather," said Mr. Boffin, "that it was your husband's, ma'am, because—but 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 a 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 soft-headed and soft-hearted 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 five-pound notes are better than nothing, though so little, so little! And now I have found that—oh, 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 jeweller's 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 grand-mamma'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 is to 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 blotting-paper. Oh, my gracious! I must tear myself away, or Pa and Ma will both find out! Dear, dear, Sophronia, good, good-bye!"

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

"Good-bye, dear Mr. Lammle—I mean Alfred. You won't think after to-day 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 custard-coloured 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 breakfast-room, he found Mrs. Lammle still standing on her side of the table, and Mr. Lammle on his side.

"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 undecieve 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 table-cloth, 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 five-pound 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 of the parasol point indented into the table-cloth, 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 arm in arm, 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 III.

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 cross-ways 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 to-night, 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 the personage, "the fact is, he has given me another look-in, to make sure of what he calls our stock-in-trade 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, Venus?" 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?"