

You must expect no leniency here. You must pay in full, and you cannot pay too promptly, or you will be put to heavy charges. Trust nothing to me, sir. Money, money, money." When he had said these words in an emphatic manner, he acknowledged Mr. Twemlow's still polite motion of his head, and that amiable little worthy took his departure in the lowest spirits.

Fascination Fledgeby was in such a merry vein when the counting-house was cleared of him, that he had nothing for it but to go to the window, and lean his arms on the frame of the blind, and have his silent laugh out, with his back to his subordinate. When he turned round again with a composed countenance, his subordinate still stood in the same place, and the dolls' dressmaker sat behind the door with a look of horror.

"Halloa!" cried Mr. Fledgeby, "you're forgetting this young lady, Mr. Riah, and she has been waiting long enough too. Sell her her waste,

please, and give her good measure if you can make up your mind to do the liberal thing for once."

He looked on for a time, as the Jew filled her little basket with such scraps as she was used to buy; but, his merry vein coming on again, he was obliged to turn round to the window once more, and lean his arms on the blind.

"There, my Cinderella dear," said the old man in a whisper, and with a worn-out look, "the basket's full now. Bless you! And get you gone!"

"Don't call me your Cinderella dear," returned Miss Wren. "Oh, you cruel godmother!"

She shook that emphatic little forefinger of hers in his face at parting, as earnestly and reproachfully as she had ever shaken it at her grim old child at home.

"You are not the godmother at all!" said she. "You are the Wolf in the Forest, the wicked Wolf! And if ever my dear Lizzie is sold and betrayed, I shall know who sold and betrayed her!"

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. WEGG PREPARES A GRINDSTONE FOR MR. BOFFIN'S NOSE.

HAVING assisted at a few more exhibitions of the lives of Misers, Mr. Venus became almost indispensable to the evenings at the Bower. The circumstance of having another listener to the wonders unfolded by Wegg, or, as it were, another calculator to cast up the guineas found in teapots, chimneys, racks and mangers, and other such banks of deposit, seemed greatly to heighten Mr. Boffin's enjoyment; while Silas Wegg, for his part, though of a jealous temperament which might under ordinary circumstances have resented the anatomist's getting into favour, was so very anxious to keep his eye on that gentleman—lest, being too much left to himself, he should be tempted to play any tricks

with the precious document in his keeping—that he never lost an opportunity of commending him to Mr. Boffin's notice as a third party whose company was much to be desired. Another friendly demonstration towards him Mr. Wegg now regularly gratified. After each sitting was over, and the patron had departed, Mr. Wegg invariably saw Mr. Venus home. To be sure, he as invariably requested to be refreshed with a sight of the paper in which he was a joint proprietor; but he never failed to remark that it was the great pleasure he derived from Mr. Venus's improving society which had insensibly lured him round to Clerkenwell again, and that, finding himself once more attracted to the spot by the social powers

of Mr. V., he would beg leave to go through that little incidental procedure, as a matter of form. "For well I know, sir," Mr. Wegg would add, "that a man of your delicate mind would wish to be checked off whenever the opportunity arises, and it is not for me to balk your feelings."

A certain rustiness in Mr. Venus, which never became so lubricated by the oil of Mr. Wegg but that he turned under the screw in a creaking and stiff manner, was very noticeable at about this period. While assisting at the literary evenings, he even went so far, on two or three occasions, as to correct Mr. Wegg when he grossly mispronounced a word, or made nonsense of a passage; insomuch that Mr. Wegg took to surveying his course in the day, and to making arrangements for getting round rocks at night instead of running straight upon them. Of the slightest anatomical reference he became particularly shy, and, if he saw a bone ahead, would go any distance out of his way rather than mention it by name.

The adverse destinies ordained that one evening Mr. Wegg's labouring bark became beset by polysyllables, and embarrassed among a perfect archipelago of hard words. It being necessary to take soundings every minute, and to feel the way with the greatest caution, Mr. Wegg's attention was fully employed. Advantage was taken of this dilemma by Mr. Venus, to pass a scrap of paper into Mr. Boffin's hand, and lay his finger on his own lip.

When Mr. Boffin got home at night he found that the paper contained Mr. Venus's card and these words: "Should be glad to be honoured with a call respecting business of your own, about dusk on an early evening."

The very next evening saw Mr. Boffin peeping in at the preserved frogs in Mr. Venus's shop-window, and saw Mr. Venus espying Mr. Boffin with the readiness of one on the alert, and beckoning that gentleman into his interior. Responding,

Mr. Boffin was invited to seat himself on the box of human miscellanies before the fire, and did so, looking round the place with admiring eyes. The fire being low and fitful, and the dusk gloomy, the whole stock seemed to be winking and blinking with both eyes, as Mr. Venus did. The French gentleman, though he had no eyes, was not at all behind-hand, but appeared, as the flame rose and fell, to open and shut his no eyes, with the regularity of the glass-eyed dogs and ducks and birds. The big-headed babies were equally obliging in lending their grotesque aid to the general effect.

"You see, Mr. Venus, I've lost no time," said Mr. Boffin. "Here I am."

"Here you are, sir," assented Mr. Venus.

"I don't like secrecy," pursued Mr. Boffin—"at least, not in a general way I don't—but I dare say you'll show me good reason for being secret so far."

"I think I shall, sir," returned Venus.

"Good," said Mr. Boffin. "You don't expect Wegg, I take it for granted?"

"No, sir. I expect no one but the present company."

Mr. Boffin glanced about him, as accepting under that inclusive denomination the French gentleman and the circle in which he didn't move, and repeated, "The present company."

"Sir," said Mr. Venus, "before entering upon business, I shall have to ask you for your word and honour that we are in confidence."

"Let's wait a bit and understand what the expression means," answered Mr. Boffin. "In confidence for how long? In confidence for ever and a day?"

"I take the hint, sir," said Venus; "you think you might consider the business, when you came to know it, to be of a nature incompatible with confidence on your part?"

"I might," said Mr. Boffin with a cautious look.

"True, sir. Well, sir," observed Venus, after clutching at his dusty hair, to brighten his ideas, "let us put it another way. I open the business with you, relying upon your honour not to do anything in it, and not to mention me in it, without my knowledge."

"That sounds fair," said Mr. Boffin. "I agree to that."

"I have your word and honour, sir?"

"My good fellow," retorted Mr. Boffin, "you have my word; and how you can have that, without my honour too, I don't know. I've sorted a lot of dust in my time, but I never knew the two things go into separate heaps."

This remark seemed rather to abash Mr. Venus. He hesitated, and said, "Very true, sir;" and again, "Very true, sir," before resuming the thread of his discourse.

"Mr. Boffin, if I confess to you that I fell into a proposal of which you were the subject, and of which you oughtn't to have been the subject, you will allow me to mention, and will please take into favourable consideration, that I was in a crushed state of mind at the time."

The Golden Dustman, with his hands folded on the top of his stout stick, with his chin resting upon them, and with something leering and whimsical in his eyes, gave a nod and said, "Quite so, Venus."

"That proposal, sir, was a conspiring breach of your confidence, to such an extent, that I ought at once to have made it known to you. But I didn't, Mr. Boffin, and I fell into it."

Without moving eye or finger, Mr. Boffin gave another nod, and placidly repeated, "Quite so, Venus."

"Not that I was ever hearty in it, sir," the penitent anatomist went on, "or that I ever viewed myself with anything but reproach for having turned out of the paths of science into the paths of—" he was going to say "villainy," but, unwilling to press too hard upon himself, sub-

stituted with great emphasis—"Weggery."

Placid and whimsical of look as ever, Mr. Boffin answered: "Quite so, Venus."

"And now, sir," said Venus, "having prepared your mind in the rough, I will articulate the details." With which brief professional exordium, he entered on the history of the friendly move, and truly recounted it. One might have thought that it would have extracted some show of surprise or anger, or other emotion, from Mr. Boffin, but it extracted nothing beyond his former comment: "Quite so, Venus."

"I have astonished you, sir, I believe?" said Mr. Venus, pausing dubiously.

Mr. Boffin simply answered as aforesaid: "Quite so, Venus."

By this time the astonishment was all on the other side. It did not, however, so continue. For, when Venus passed to Wegg's discovery, and from that to their having both seen Mr. Boffin dig up the Dutch bottle, that gentleman changed colour, changed his attitude, became extremely restless, and ended (when Venus ended) by being in a state of manifest anxiety, trepidation, and confusion.

"Now, sir," said Venus, finishing off; "you best know what was in that Dutch bottle, and why you dug it up and took it away. I don't pretend to know anything more about it than I saw. All I know is this: I am proud of my calling after all (though it has been attended by one dreadful drawback which has told upon my heart, and almost equally upon my skeleton), and I mean to live by my calling. Putting the same meaning into other words, I do not mean to turn a single dishonest penny by this affair. As the best amends I can make you for having ever gone into it, I make known to you, as a warning, what Wegg has found out. My opinion is, that Wegg is not to be silenced at a modest price, and I build that opinion on his beginning

to dispose of your property the moment he knew his power. Whether it's worth your while to silence him at any price, you will decide for yourself, and take your measures accordingly. As far as I am concerned, I have no price. If I am ever called upon for the truth, I tell it, but I want to do no more than I have now done and ended."

"Thank'ee, Venus!" said Mr. Boffin, with a hearty grip of his hand; "thank'ee, Venus, thank'ee, Venus!" And then walked up and down the little shop in great agitation. "But look here, Venus," he by-and-by resumed, nervously sitting down again; "if I have to buy Wegg up, I shan't buy him any cheaper for your being out of it. Instead of his having half the money—it was to have been half, I suppose? Share and share alike?"

"It was to have been half, sir," answered Venus.

"Instead of that, he'll now have all. I shall pay the same, if not more. For you tell me he's an unconscionable dog, a ravenous rascal."

"He is," said Venus.

"Don't you think, Venus," insinuated Mr. Boffin, after looking at the fire for awhile—"don't you feel as if—you might like to pretend to be in it till Wegg was bought up, and then ease your mind by handing over to me what you had made believe to pocket?"

"No I don't, sir," returned Venus, very positively.

"Not to make amends?" insinuated Mr. Boffin.

"No, sir. It seems to me, after maturely thinking it over, that the best amends for having got out of the square is to get back into the square."

"Humph!" mused Mr. Boffin. "When you say the square, you mean —"

"I mean," said Venus, stoutly and shortly, "the right."

"It appears to me," said Mr. Boffin, grumbling over the fire in an injured manner, "that the right is with me, if it's anywhere. I have

much more right to the old man's money than the Crown can ever have. What was the Crown to him except the King's Taxes? Whereas, me and my wife, we was all in all to him."

Mr. Venus, with his head upon his hands, rendered melancholy by the contemplation of Mr. Boffin's avarice, only murmured to steep himself in the luxury of that frame of mind: "She did not wish so to regard herself, nor yet to be so regarded."

"And how am I to live," asked Mr. Boffin, piteously, "if I'm to be going buying fellows up out of the little that I've got? And how am I to set about it? When am I to get my money ready? When am I to make a bid? You haven't told me when he threatens to drop down upon me."

Venus explained under what conditions, and with what views, the dropping down upon Mr. Boffin was held over until the Mounds should be cleared away. Mr. Boffin listened attentively. "I suppose," said he, with a gleam of hope, "there's no doubt about the genuineness and date of this confounded will?"

"None whatever," said Mr. Venus.

"Where might it be deposited at present?" asked Mr. Boffin, in a wheedling tone.

"It's in my possession, sir."

"Is it?" he cried, with great eagerness. "Now, for any liberal sum of money that could be agreed upon, Venus, would you put it in the fire?"

"No, sir, I wouldn't," interrupted Mr. Venus.

"Nor pass it over to me?"

"That would be the same thing. No, sir," said Mr. Venus.

The Golden Dustman seemed about to pursue these questions, when a stumping noise was heard outside, coming towards the door. "Hush! here's Wegg!" said Venus. "Get behind the young alligator in the corner, Mr. Boffin, and judge him for yourself. I won't light a candle till he's gone; there'll only be the glow of the fire; Wegg's well acquainted with the alligator, and he won't

take particular notice of him. Draw your legs in, Mr. Boffin, at present I see a pair of shoes at the end of his tail. Get your head well behind his smile, Mr. Boffin, and you'll lie comfortable there; you'll find plenty of room behind his smile. He's a little dusty, but he's very like you in tone. Are you right, sir?"

Mr. Boffin had but whispered an affirmative response, when Wegg came stumping in. "Partner," said that gentleman in a sprightly manner, "how's yourself?"

"Tolerable," returned Mr. Venus. "Not much to boast of."

"In-deed!" said Wegg: "sorry, partner, that you're not picking up faster, but your soul's too large for your body, sir; that's where it is. And how's our stock in trade, partner? Safe bind, safe find, partner? Is that about it?"

"Do you wish to see it?" asked Venus.

"If you please, partner," said Wegg, rubbing his hands. "I wish to see it jintly with yourself. Or, in similar words to some that was set to music some time back:

"I wish you to see it with your eyes,
And I will pledge with mine."

Turning his back and turning a key, Mr. Venus produced the document, holding on by his usual corner. Mr. Wegg, holding on by the opposite corner, sat down on the seat so lately vacated by Mr. Boffin, and looked it over. "All right, sir," he slowly and unwillingly admitted, in his reluctance to loose his hold, "all right!" And greedily watched his partner as he turned his back again, and turned his key again.

"There's nothing new, I suppose?" said Venus, resuming his low chair behind the counter.

"Yes there is, sir," replied Wegg; "there was something new this morning. That foxy old grasper and griper—"

"Mr. Boffin?" inquired Venus, with a glance towards the alligator's yard or two of smile.

"Mister be blowed!" cried Wegg, yielding to his honest indignation. "Boffin. Dusty Boffin. That foxy old grunter and grinder, sir, turns into the yard this morning, to meddle with our property, a menial tool of his own, a young man by the name of Sloppy. Ecod, when I say to him, 'What do you want here, young man? This is a private yard,' he pulls out a paper from Boffin's other blackguard, the one I was passed over for. 'This is to authorise Sloppy to overlook the carting and to watch the work.' That's pretty strong, I think, Mr. Venus?"

"Remember he doesn't know yet of our claim on the property," suggested Venus.

"Then he must have a hint of it," said Wegg, "and a strong one that'll jog his terrors a bit. Give him an inch, and he'll take an ell. Let him alone this time, and what'll he do with our property next? I tell you what, Mr. Venus; it comes to this; I must be overbearing with Boffin, or I shall fly into several pieces. I can't contain myself when I look at him. Every time I see him putting his hand in his pocket, I see him putting it into my pocket. Every time I hear him jingling his money, I hear him taking liberties with my money. Flesh and blood can't bear it. No," said Mr. Wegg, greatly exasperated, "and I'll go further. A wooden leg can't bear it!"

"But, Mr. Wegg," urged Venus, "it was your own idea that he should not be exploded upon, till the Mounds were carted away."

"But it was likewise my idea, Mr. Venus," retorted Wegg, "that if he came sneaking and sniffing about the property, he should be threatened, given to understand that he has no right to it, and be made our slave. Wasn't that my idea, Mr. Venus?"

"It certainly was, Mr. Wegg."

"It certainly was, as you say, partner," assented Wegg, put into a better humour by the ready admission. "Very well. I consider his planting one of his menial tools in the

yard, an act of sneaking and sniffing. And his nose shall be put to the grindstone for it."

"It was not your fault, Mr. Wegg, I must admit," said Venus, "that he got off with the Dutch bottle that night."

"As you handsomely say again, partner! No, it was not my fault. I'd have had that bottle out of him. Was it to be borne that he should come, like a thief in the dark, digging among stuff that was far more ours than his (seeing that we could deprive him of every grain of it, if he didn't buy us at our own figure), and carrying off treasure from its bowels? No, it was not to be borne. And for that, too, his nose shall be put to the grindstone."

"How do you propose to do it, Mr. Wegg?"

"To put his nose to the grindstone? I propose," returned that estimable man, "to insult him openly. And, if looking into this eye of mine, he dares to offer a word in answer, to retort upon him before he can take his breath, 'Add another word to that, you dusty old dog, and you're a beggar!'"

"Suppose he says nothing, Mr. Wegg?"

"Then," replied Wegg, "we shall have come to an understanding with very little trouble, and I'll break him and drive him, Mr. Venus. I'll put him in harness, and I'll bear him up tight, and I'll break him and drive him. The harder the old Dust is driven, sir, the higher he'll pay. And I mean to be paid high, Mr. Venus, I promise you."

"You speak quite revengefully, Mr. Wegg."

"Revengefully, sir? Is it for him that I have declined and falled, night after night? Is it for his pleasure that I've waited at home of an evening, like a set of skittles, to be set up and knocked over, set up and knocked over, by whatever balls—or books—he chose to bring against me? Why, I'm a hundred times the man he is, sir; five hundred times!"

Perhaps it was with the malicious

intent of urging him on to his worst that Mr. Venus looked as if he doubted that.

"What? Was it outside the house at present ockpoyed, to its disgrace, by that minion of fortune and worm of the hour," said Wegg, falling back upon his strongest terms of reprobation, and slapping the counter, "that I, Silas Wegg, five hundred times the man he ever was, sat in all weathers, waiting for a errand or a customer? Was it outside that very house as I first set eyes upon him, rolling in the lap of luxury, when I was a selling halfpenny ballads there for a living? And am I to grovel in the dust for him to walk over? No!"

There was a grin upon the ghastly countenance of the French gentleman under the influence of the firelight, as if he were computing how many thousand slanderers and traitors array themselves against the fortunate, on premises exactly answering to those of Mr. Wegg. One might have fancied that the big-headed babies were toppling over with their hydrocephalic attempts to reckon up the children of men who transform their benefactors into their injurers by the same process. The yard or two of smile on the part of the alligator might have been invested with the meaning, "All about this was quite familiar knowledge down in the depths of the slime, ages ago."

"But," said Wegg, possibly with some slight perception to the foregoing effect, "your speaking countenance remarks, Mr. Venus, that I'm duller and savager than usual. Perhaps I have allowed myself to brood too much. Begone, dull Care! 'Tis gone, sir. I've looked in upon you, and empire resumes her sway. For, as the song says—subject to your correction, sir—

'When the heart of a man is depressed with cares,
The mist is dispelled if Venus appears.
Like the notes of a fiddle, you sweetly, sir,
Raises our spirits and charms our ears.'

Good night, sir."

"I shall have a word or two to say to you, Mr. Wegg, before long," remarked Venus, "respecting my share in the project we've been speaking of."

"My time, sir," returned Wegg, "is yours. In the meanwhile let it be fully understood that I shall not neglect bringing the grindstone to bear, nor yet bringing Dusty Boffin's nose to it. His nose once brought to it, shall be held to it by these hands, Mr. Venus, till the sparks flies out in showers."

With this agreeable promise Wegg stamped out, and shut the shop-door after him. "Wait till I light a candle, Mr. Boffin," said Venus, "and you'll come out more comfortable." So, he lighting a candle and holding it up at arm's length, Mr. Boffin disengaged himself from behind the alligator's smile, with an expression of countenance so very downcast that it not only appeared as if the alligator had the whole of the joke to himself, but further as if it had been conceived and executed at Mr. Boffin's expense.

"That's a treacherous fellow," said Mr. Boffin, dusting his arms and legs as he came forth, the alligator having been but musty company. "That's a dreadful fellow."

"The alligator, sir?" said Venus.

"No, Venus, no. The Serpent."

"You'll have the goodness to notice, Mr. Boffin," remarked Venus, "that I said nothing to him about my going out of the affair altogether, because I didn't wish to take you any ways by surprise. But I can't be too soon out of it for my satisfaction, Mr. Boffin, and I now put it to you when it will suit your views for me to retire?"

"Thank 'ee, Venus, thank 'ee, Venus; but I don't know what to say," returned Mr. Boffin. "I don't know what to do. He'll drop down on me any way. He seems fully determined to drop down; don't he?"

Mr. Venus opined that such was clearly his intention.

"You might be a sort of protection

for me, if you remained in it," said Mr. Boffin; "you might stand betwixt him and me, and take the edge off him. Don't you feel as if you could make a show of remaining in it, Venus, till I had time to turn myself round?"

Venus naturally inquired how long Mr. Boffin thought it might take him to turn himself round?

"I am sure I don't know," was the answer, given quite at a loss. "Everything is so at sixes and sevens. If I had never come into the property, I shouldn't have minded. But being in it, it would be very trying to be turned out; now, don't you acknowledge that it would, Venus?"

Mr. Venus preferred, he said, to leave Mr. Boffin to arrive at his own conclusions on that delicate question.

"I am sure I don't know what to do," said Mr. Boffin. "If I ask advice of any one else, it's only letting in another person to be bought out, and then I shall be ruined that way, and might as well have given up the property and gone slap to the work-house. If I was to take advice of my young man, Rekesmith, I should have to buy *him* out. Sooner or later, of course, he'd drop down upon me, like Wegg. I was brought into the world to be dropped down upon, it appears to me."

Mr. Venus listened to these lamentations in silence, while Mr. Boffin jogged to and fro, holding his pockets as if he had a pain in them.

"After all, you haven't said what you mean to do yourself, Venus. When you do go out of it, how do you mean to go?"

Venus replied that as Wegg had found the document and handed it to him, it was his intention to hand it back to Wegg, with the declaration that he himself would have nothing to say to it, or do with it, and that Wegg must act as he chose, and take the consequences.

"And then he drops down with his whole weight upon me!" cried Mr. Boffin, ruefully. "I'd sooner be

dropped upon by you than by him, or even by you jointly, than by him alone!"

Mr. Venus could only repeat that it was his fixed intention to betake himself to the paths of science, and to walk in the same all the days of his life; not dropping down upon his fellow-creatures until they were deceased, and then only to articulate them to the best of his humble ability.

"How long could you be persuaded to keep up the appearance of remaining in it?" asked Mr. Boffin, retiring on his other idea. "Could you be got to do so till the Mounds are gone?"

No. That would protract the mental uneasiness of Mr. Venus too long, he said.

"Not if I was to show you reason now?" demanded Mr. Boffin; "not if I was to show you good and sufficient reason?"

If by good and sufficient reason Mr. Boffin meant honest and unimpeachable reason, that might weigh with Mr. Venus against his personal wishes and convenience. But he must add that he saw no opening to the possibility of such reason being shown him.

"Come and see me, Venus," said Mr. Boffin, "at my house."

"Is the reason there, sir?" asked Mr. Venus, with an incredulous smile and blink.

"It may be, or may not be," said Mr. Boffin, "just as you view it. But in the meantime don't go out of the matter. Look here. Do this. Give me your word that you won't take any steps with Wegg, without my knowledge, just as I have given you my word that I won't without yours."

"Done, Mr. Boffin!" said Venus, after a brief consideration.

"Thank 'ee, Venus, thank 'ee Venus! Done!"

"When shall I come to see you, Mr. Boffin?"

"When you like. The sooner the better. I must be going now. Good night, Venus."

"Good night, sir."

"And good night to the rest of the present company," said Mr. Boffin, glancing round the shop. "They make a queer show, Venus, and I should like to be better acquainted with them some day. Good night, Venus, good-night! Thank 'ee, Venus, thank 'ee, Venus!" With that he jogged out into the street, and jogged upon his homeward way.

"Now, I wonder," he meditated as he went along, nursing his stick, "whether it can be, that Venus is setting himself to get the better of Wegg? Whether it can be, that he means, when I have bought Wegg out, to have me all to himself and to pick me clean to the bones!"

It was a cunning and suspicious idea, quite in the way of his school of Misers, and he looked very cunning and suspicious as he went jogging through the streets. More than once or twice, more than twice or thrice, say half a dozen times, he took his stick from the arm on which he nursed it, and hit a straight sharp rap at the air with its head. Possibly the wooden countenance of Mr. Silas Wegg was incorporeally before him at those moments, for he hit with intense satisfaction.

He was within a few streets of his own house, when a little private carriage, coming in the contrary direction, passed him, turned round, and passed him again. It was a little carriage of eccentric movement, for again he heard it stop behind him and turn round, and again he saw it pass him. Then it stopped, and then went on, out of sight. "But, not far out of sight, for, when he came to the corner of his own street, there it stood again.

There was a lady's face at the window as he came up with this carriage, and he was passing it when the lady softly called to him by his name.

"I beg your pardon, Ma'am?" said Mr. Boffin, coming to a stop.

"It is Mrs. Lammle," said the lady.

Mr. Boffin went up to the window, and hoped Mrs. Lammle was well.

"Not very well, dear Mr. Boffin; I have fluttered myself by being—perhaps foolishly—uneasy and anxious. I have been waiting for you some time. Can I speak to you?"

Mr. Boffin proposed that Mrs. Lammle should drive on to his house, a few hundred yards further.

"I would rather not, Mr. Boffin, unless you particularly wish it. I feel the difficulty and delicacy of the matter so much that I would rather avoid speaking to you at your own home. You must think this very strange?"

Mr. Boffin said no, but meant yes.

"It is because I am so grateful for the good opinion of all my friends, and am so touched by it, that I cannot bear to run the risk of forfeiting it in any case, even in the cause of duty. I have asked my husband (my

dear Alfred, Mr. Boffin) whether it is the cause of duty, and he has most emphatically said Yes. I wish I had asked him sooner. It would have spared me much distress."

("Can this be more dropping down upon me!" thought Mr. Boffin, quite bewildered.)

"It was Alfred who sent me to you, Mr. Boffin. Alfred said, 'Don't come back, Sophronia, until you have seen Mr. Boffin, and told him all. Whatever he may think of it, he ought certainly to know it.' Would you mind coming into the carriage?"

Mr. Boffin answered, "Not at all," and took his seat at Mrs. Lammle's side.

"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