

CHAPTER XIV.

CHECKMATE TO THE FRIENDLY MOVE.

Mr. and Mrs. John Harmon had so timed their taking possession of their rightful 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, night-light, 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 velvet-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 attempts were on foot to circumvent him. So continually broken was his rest through these means, that he led the life of having wagered to keep ten thousand dog-watches in ten thousand hours, and looked piteously upon himself as always getting up and yet never going to bed. So gaunt and haggard had he grown at last, that his wooden leg showed disproportionate, and presented a thriving appearance in contrast with the rest of his plagued body, which might almost have been termed chubby.

However, Wegg's comfort was, that all his disagreeables were now over, and that he was immediately coming into his property. Of late, the grindstone did undoubtedly appear to have been whirling at his own nose rather than Boffin's, but Boffin's nose was now to be sharpened fine. Thus far, Mr. Wegg had let his dusty friend off lightly, having been balked in that amiable design of frequently dining with him, by the machinations of the sleepless dust-man. He had been constrained to depute Mr. Venus to keep their dusty friend, Boffin, under inspection, while he himself turned lank and lean at the Bower.

To Mr. Venus's museum Mr. Wegg repaired when at length the Mounds were down and gone. It being evening, he found that gentleman, as he expected, seated over his fire; but did not find him, as he expected, floating his powerful mind in tea.

"Why, you smell rather comfort-

able here!" said Wegg, seeming to take it ill, and stopping and sniffing as he entered.

"I am rather comfortable, sir," said Venus.

"You don't use lemon in your business, do you?" asked Wegg, sniffing again.

"No, Mr. Wegg," said Venus. "When I use it at all, I mostly use it in cobblers' punch."

"What do you call cobblers' punch?" demanded Wegg, in a worse humour than before.

"It's difficult to impart the receipt for it, sir," returned Venus, "because, however particular you may be in allotting your materials, so much will still depend upon the individual gifts, and there being a feeling thrown into it. But the groundwork is gin."

"In a Dutch bottle?" said Wegg gloomily, as he sat himself down.

"Very good, sir, very good!" cried Venus. "Will you partake, sir?"

"Will I partake?" returned Wegg very surlily. "Why, of course I will! Will a man partake, as has been tormented out of his five senses by an everlasting dustman with his head tied up! Will he, too! As if he wouldn't!"

"Don't let it put you out, Mr. Wegg. You don't seem in your usual spirits."

"If you come to that, you don't seem in your usual spirits," growled Wegg. "You seem to be setting up for lively."

This circumstance appeared, in his then state of mind, to give Mr. Wegg uncommon offence.

"And you've been having your hair cut!" said Wegg, missing the usual dusty shock.

"Yes, Mr. Wegg. But don't let that put you out, either."

"And I am blest if you ain't getting fat!" said Wegg, with culminating discontent. "What are you going to do next?"

"Well, Mr. Wegg," said Venus, smiling in a sprightly manner, "I suspect you could hardly guess what I am going to do next."

"I don't want to guess," retorted Wegg. "All I've got to say is, that it's well for you that the division of labour has been what it has been. It's well for you to have had so light a part in this business, when mine has been so heavy. You haven't had your rest broke, I'll be bound."

"Not at all, sir," said Venus. "Never rested so well in all my life, I thank you."

"Ah!" grumbled Wegg, "you should have been me. If you had been me, and had been fretted out of your bed, and your sleep, and your meals, and your mind, for a stretch of months together, you'd have been out of condition and out of sorts."

"Certainly, it has trained you down, Mr. Wegg," said Venus, contemplating his figure with an artist's eye. "Trained you down very low, it has! So weazen and yellow is the kivering upon your bones, that one might almost fancy you had come to give a look-in upon the French gentleman in the corner, instead of me."

Mr. Wegg, glancing in great dudgeon towards the French gentleman's corner, seemed to notice something new there, which induced him to glance at the opposite corner, and then to put on his glasses and stare at all the nooks and corners of the dim shop in succession.

"Why, you've been having the place cleaned up!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, Mr. Wegg. By the hand of adorable woman."

"Then what you're going to do next, I suppose, is to get married?"

"That's it, sir."

Silas took off his glasses again—finding himself too intensely disgusted by the sprightly appearance of his friend and partner, to bear a magnified view of him, and made the inquiry:

"To the old party?"

"Mr. Wegg!" said Venus, with a sudden flush of wrath. "The lady in question is not a old party."

"I meant," explained Wegg, testily, "to the party as formerly objected?"

"Mr. Wegg," said Venus, "in a case of so much delicacy, I must trouble you to say what you mean. There are strings that must not be played upon. No, sir! Not sounded, unless in the most respectful and tuneful manner. Of such melodious strings is Miss Pleasant Riderhood formed."

"Then it is the lady as formerly objected?" said Wegg.

"Sir," returned Venus with dignity, "I accept the altered phrase. It is the lady as formerly objected."

"When is it to come off?" asked Silas.

"Mr. Wegg," said Venus, with another flush. "I cannot permit it to be put in the form of a Fight. I must temperately but firmly call upon you, sir, to amend that question."

"When is the lady," Wegg reluctantly demanded, constraining his ill temper in remembrance of the partnership and its stock in trade, "a-going to give her 'and where she has already given her 'art?"

"Sir," returned Venus, "I again accept the altered phrase, and with pleasure. The lady is a-going to give her 'and where she has already given her 'art, next Monday."

"Then the lady's objection has been met?" said Silas.

"Mr. Wegg," said Venus, "as I did name to you, I think, on a former occasion, if not on former occasions—"

"On former occasions," interrupted Wegg.

"—What," pursued Venus, "what the nature of the lady's objection was, I may impart, without violating any of the tender confidences since sprung up between the lady and myself, how it has been met, through the kind interference of two good friends of mine: one, previously acquainted with the lady: and one, not. The pint was thrown out, sir, by those two friends when they did me the great service of waiting on the lady to try if a union betwixt the lady and me could not be brought to bear—the pint, I say, was thrown out by

them, sir, whether if, after marriage, I confined myself to the articulation of men, children, and the lower animals, it might not relieve the lady's mind of her feeling respecting being—as a lady—regarded in a bony light. It was a happy thought, sir, and it took root."

"It would seem, Mr. Venus," observed Wegg, with a touch of distrust, "that you are flush of friends?"

"Pretty well, sir," that gentleman answered, in a tone of placid mystery. "So-so, sir. Pretty well."

"However," said Wegg, after eyeing him with another touch of distrust, "I wish you joy. One man spends his fortune in one way, and another in another. You are going to try matrimony. I mean to try travelling."

"Indeed, Mr. Wegg?"

"Change of air, sea-scenery, and my natural rest, I hope may bring me round after the persecutions I have undergone from the dustman with his head tied up, which I just now mentioned. The tough job being ended and the Mounds laid low, the hour is come for Boffin to stump up. Would ten to-morrow morning suit you, partner, for finally bringing Boffin's nose to the grindstone?"

Ten to-morrow morning would quite suit Mr. Venus for that excellent purpose.

"You have had him well under inspection, I hope?" said Silas.

Mr. Venus had had him under inspection pretty well every day.

"Suppose you was just to step round to-night then, and give him orders from me—I say from me, because he knows I won't be played with—to be ready with his papers, his accounts, and his cash, at that time in the morning?" said Wegg.

"As a matter of form, which will be agreeable to your own feelings, before we go out (for I'll walk with you part of the way, though my leg gives under me with weariness), let's have a look at the stock in trade."

Mr. Venus produced it, and it was perfectly correct; Mr. Venus under-

took to produce it again in the morning, and to keep tryst with Mr. Wegg on Boffin's doorstep as the clock struck ten. At a certain point of the road between Clerkenwell and Boffin's house (Mr. Wegg expressly insisted that there should be no prefix to the Golden Dustman's name) the partners separated for the night.

It was a very bad night; to which succeeded a very bad morning. The streets were so unusually slushy, muddy, and miserable in the morning, that Wegg rode to the scene of action; arguing that a man who was, as it were, going to the Bank to draw out a handsome property, could well afford that trifling expense.

Venus was punctual, and Wegg undertook to knock at the door, and conduct the conference. Door knocked at. Door opened.

"Boffin at home?"

The servant replied that Mr. Boffin was at home.

"He'll do," said Wegg; "though it ain't what I call him."

The servant inquired if they had any appointment?

"Now, I tell you what, young fellow," said Wegg, "I won't have it. This won't do for me. I don't want menials. I want Boffin."

They were shown into a waiting-room, where the all-powerful Wegg wore his hat, and whistled, and with his forefinger stirred up a clock that stood upon the chimney-piece, until he made it strike. In a few minutes they were shown up-stairs into what used to be Boffin's room; which, besides the door of entrance, had folding-doors in it, to make it one of a suite of rooms when occasion required. Here, Boffin was seated at a library-table, and here Mr. Wegg, having imperiously motioned the servant to withdraw, drew up a chair and seated himself, in his hat, close beside him. Here, also, Mr. Wegg instantly underwent the remarkable experience of having his hat twitched off his head and thrown out of a window, which was opened and shut for the purpose.

"Be careful what insolent liberties you take in that gentleman's presence," said the owner of the hand which had done this, "or I will throw you after it."

Wegg involuntarily clapped his hand to his bare head, and stared at the Secretary. For, it was he addressed him with a severe countenance, and who had come in quietly by the folding-doors.

"Oh!" said Wegg, as soon as he recovered his suspended power of speech. "Very good! I gave directions for *you* to be dismissed. And you ain't gone, ain't you? Oh! We'll look into this presently. Very good!"

"No, nor I ain't gone," said another voice.

Somebody else had come in quietly by the folding-doors. Turning his head, Wegg beheld his persecutor, the ever-wakeful dustman, accoutred with fantail hat and velvetene smalls complete. Who, untying his tied-up broken head, revealed a head that was whole, and a face that was Sloppy's.

"Ha, ha, ha, gentlemen!" roared Sloppy in a peal of laughter, and with immeasurable relish. "He never thought as I could sleep standing, and often done it when I turned for Mrs. Higden! He never thought as I used to give Mrs. Higden the Police-news in different voices! But I did lead him a life all through it, gentlemen, I hope I really and truly did!" Here, Mr. Sloppy opening his mouth to a quite alarming extent, and throwing back his head to peal again, revealed incalculable buttons.

"Oh!" said Wegg, slightly discomfited, but not much as yet: "one and one is two not dismissed, is it? Bof—fin! Just let me ask a question. Who set this chap on, in this dress, when the carting began? Who employed this fellow?"

"I say!" remonstrated Sloppy, jerking his head forward. "No fellows, or I'll throw you out of window!"

Mr. Boffin appeased him with a wave of his hand, and said: "I employed him, Wegg."

"Oh! You employed him, Boffin? Very good. Mr. Venus, we raise our terms, and we can't do better than proceed to business. Bof—fin! I want the room cleared of these two scum."

"That's not going to be done, Wegg," replied Mr. Boffin, sitting composedly on the library-table, at one end, while the Secretary sat composedly on it at the other.

"Bof—fin! Not going to be done?" repeated Wegg. "Not at your peril?"

"No, Wegg," said Mr. Boffin, shaking his head good-humouredly. "Not at my peril, and not on any other terms."

Wegg reflected a moment, and then said: "Mr. Venus, will you be so good as hand me over that same doekymant?"

"Certainly, sir," replied Venus, handing it to him with much politeness. "There it is. Having now, sir, parted with it, I wish to make a small observation: not so much because it is anyways necessary, or expresses any new doctrine or discovery, as because it is a comfort to my mind. Silas Wegg, you are a precious old rascal."

Mr. Wegg, who, as if anticipating a compliment, had been beating time with the paper to the other's politeness until this unexpected conclusion came upon him, stopped rather abruptly.

"Silas Wegg," said Venus, "know that I took the liberty of taking Mr. Boffin into our concern as a sleeping partner, at a very early period of our firm's existence."

"Quite true," added Mr. Boffin; "and I tested Venus by making him a pretended proposal or two; and I found him on the whole a very honest man, Wegg."

"So Mr. Boffin, in his indulgence, is pleased to say," Venus remarked: "though in the beginning of this dirt, my hands were not, for a few

hours, quite as clean as I could wish. But I hope I made early and full amends."

"Venus, you did," said Mr. Boffin. "Certainly, certainly, certainly."

Venus inclined his head with respect and gratitude. "Thank you, sir. I am much obliged to you, sir, for all. For your good opinion now, for your way of receiving and encouraging me when I first put myself in communication with you, and for the influence since so kindly brought to bear upon a certain lady, both by yourself and by Mr. John Harmon." To whom, when thus making mention of him, he also bowed.

Wegg followed the name with sharp ears, and the action with sharp eyes, and a certain cringing air was infusing itself into his bullying air, when his attention was re-claimed by Venus.

"Everything else between you and me, Mr. Wegg," said Venus, "now explains itself, and you can now make out, sir, without further words from me. But totally to prevent any unpleasantness or mistake that might arise on what I consider an important point, to be made quite clear at the close of our acquaintance, I beg the leave of Mr. Boffin and Mr. John Harmon to repeat an observation which I have already had the pleasure of bringing under your notice. You are a precious old rascal!"

"You are a fool," said Wegg, with a snap of his fingers, "and I'd have got rid of you before now, if I could have struck out any way of doing it. I have thought it over, I can tell you. You may go, and welcome. You leave the more for me. Because, you know," said Wegg, dividing his next observation between Mr. Boffin and Mr. Harmon, "I am worth my price, and I mean to have it. This getting off is all very well in its way, and it tells with such an anatomical Pump as this one," pointing out Mr. Venus, "but it won't do with a Man.

I am here to be bought off, and I have named my figure. Now, buy me, or leave me."

"I'll leave you, Wegg," said Mr. Boffin, laughing, "as far as I am concerned."

"Bof—fin!" replied Wegg, turning upon him with a severe air, "I understand *your* new-born boldness. I see the brass underneath *your* silver plating. *You* have got *your* nose put out of joint. Knowing that you've nothing at stake, you can afford to come the independent game. Why, you're just so much sneary glass to see through, you know! But Mr. Harmon is in another situation. What Mr. Harmon risks, is quite another pair of shoes. Now, I've heard something lately about this being Mr. Harmon—I make out now, some hints that I've met on that subject in the newspaper—and I drop you, Bof—fin, as beneath my notice. I ask Mr. Harmon whether he has any idea of the contents of this present paper?"

"It is a will of my late father's, of more recent date than the will proved by Mr. Boffin (address whom again, as you have addressed him already, and I'll knock you down), leaving the whole of his property to the Crown," said John Harmon, with as much indifference as was compatible with extreme sternness.

"Right you are!" cried Wegg. "Then," screwing the weight of his body upon his wooden leg, and screwing his wooden head very much on one side, and screwing up one eye: "then, I put the question to you, what's this paper worth?"

"Nothing," said John Harmon.

Wegg had repeated the word with a sneer, and was entering on some sarcastic retort, when, to his boundless amazement, he found himself gripped by the cravat; shaken until his teeth chattered; shoved back, staggering, into a corner of the room; and pinned there.

"You scoundrel!" said John Harmon, whose seafaring hold was like that of a vice.

"You're knocking my head against the wall," urged Silas faintly.

"I mean to knock your head against the wall," returned John Harmon, suiting his action to his words, with the heartiest good-will; "and I'd give a thousand pounds for leave to knock your brains out. Listen, you scoundrel, and look at that Dutch bottle."

Sloppy held it up, for his edification.

"That Dutch bottle, scoundrel, contained the latest will of the many wills made by my unhappy self-tormenting father. That will gives everything absolutely to my noble benefactor and yours, Mr. Boffin, excluding and reviling me, and my sister (then already dead of a broken heart), by name. That Dutch bottle was found by my noble benefactor and yours, after he entered on possession of the estate. That Dutch bottle distressed him beyond measure, because, though I and my sister were both no more, it cast a slur upon our memory which he knew we had done nothing in our miserable youth, to deserve. That Dutch bottle, therefore, he buried in the Mound belonging to him, and there it lay while you, you thankless wretch, were prodding and poking—often very near it, I dare say. His intention was, that it should never see the light; but he was afraid to destroy it, lest to destroy such a document, even with his great generous motive, might be an offence at law. After the discovery was made here who I was, Mr. Boffin, still restless on the subject, told me, upon certain conditions impossible for such a hound as you to appreciate, the secret of that Dutch bottle. I urged upon him the necessity of its being dug up, and the paper being legally produced and established. The first thing you saw him do, and the second thing has been done without your knowledge. Consequently, the paper now rattling in your hand as I shake you—and I should like to shake the life out of you—is worth less than

the rotten cork of the Dutch bottle, do you understand?"

Judging from the fallen countenance of Silas as his head wagg'd backwards and forwards in a most uncomfortable manner, he did understand.

"Now, scoundrel," said John Harmon, taking another sailor-like turn on his cravat and holding him in his corner at arms' length, "I shall make two more short speeches to you, because I hope they will torment you. Your discovery was a genuine discovery (such as it was), for nobody had thought of looking into that place. Neither did we know you had made it, until Venus spoke to Mr. Boffin, though I kept you under good observation from my first appearance here, and though Sloppy has long made it the chief occupation and delight of his life, to attend you like your shadow. I tell you this, that you may know we knew enough of you to persuade Mr. Boffin to let us lead you on, deluded to the last possible moment, in order that your disappointment might be the heaviest possible disappointment. That's the first short speech, do you understand?"

Here, John Harmon assisted his comprehension with another shake.

"Now, scoundrel," he pursued, "I am going to finish. You supposed me just now to be the possessor of my father's property.—So I am. But through any act of my father's, or by any right I have? No. Through the munificence of Mr. Boffin. The conditions that he made with me, before parting with the secret of the Dutch bottle, were, that I should take the fortune, and that he should take his Mound and no more. I owe everything I possess, solely to the disinterestedness, uprightness, tenderness, goodness (there are no words to satisfy me) of Mr. and Mrs. Boffin. And when, knowing what I knew, I saw such a mud-worm as you presume to rise in this house against this noble soul, the wonder is," added John Harmon

through his clenched teeth, and with a very ugly turn indeed on Wegg's cravat, "that I didn't try to twist your head off, and fling *that* out of window! So. That's the last short speech, do you understand?"

Silas, released, put his hand to his throat, cleared it, and looked as if he had rather a large fishbone in that region. Simultaneously with this action on his part in his corner, a singular, and on the surface an incomprehensible, movement was made by Mr. Sloppy: who began backing towards Mr. Wegg along the wall, in the manner of a porter or heaver who is about to lift a sack of flour or coals.

"I am sorry, Wegg," said Mr. Boffin, in his clemency, "that my old lady and I can't have a better opinion of you than the bad one we are forced to entertain. But I shouldn't like to leave you, after all said and done, worse off in life than I found you. Therefore say in a word, before we part, what it'll cost to set you up in another stall."

"And in another place," John Harmon struck in. "You don't come outside these windows."

"Mr. Boffin," returned Wegg in avaricious humiliation: "when I first had the honour of making your acquaintance, I had got together a collection of ballads which was, I may say, above price."

"Then they can't be paid for," said John Harmon, "and you had better not try, my dear sir."

"Pardon me, Mr. Boffin," resumed Wegg, with a malignant glance in the last speaker's direction, "I was putting the case to you, who, if my senses did not deceive me, put the case to me. I had a very choice collection of ballads, and there was a new stock of gingerbread in the tin box. I say no more, but would rather leave it to you."

"But it's difficult to name what's right," said Mr. Boffin uneasily, with his hand in his pocket, "and I don't want to go beyond what's right, because you really have turned out such a very bad fellow. So artful, and so

ungrateful you have been, Wegg; for when did I ever injure you?"

"There was also," Mr. Wegg went on, in a meditative manner, "a errand connection, in which I was much respected. But I would not wish to be deemed covetuous, and I would rather leave it to you, Mr. Boffin."

"Upon my word, I don't know what to put it at," the Golden Dustman muttered.

"There was likewise," resumed Wegg, "a pair of trestles, for which alone a Irish person, who was deemed a judge of trestles, offered five and six—a sum I would not hear of, for I should have lost by it—and there was a stool, a umbrella, a clothes-horse, and a tray. But I leave it to you, Mr. Boffin."

The Golden Dustman seeming to be engaged in some abstruse calculation, Mr. Wegg assisted him with the following additional items.

"There was, further, Miss Elizabeth, Master George, Aunt Jane, and Uncle Parker. Ah! When a man thinks of the loss of such patronage as that; when a man finds so fair a garden rooted up by pigs; he finds it hard indeed, without going high, to work it into money. But I leave it wholly to you, sir."

Mr. Sloppy still continued his singular, and on the surface his incomprehensible, movement.

"Leading on has been mentioned," said Wegg with a melancholy air, "and it's not easy to say how far the tone of my mind may have been lowered by unwholesome reading on

the subject of Misers, when you was leading me and others on to think you one yourself, sir. All I can say is, that I felt my tone of mind a-lowering at the time. And how can a man put a price upon his mind! There was likewise a hat just now. But I leave the ole to you, Mr. Boffin."

"Come!" said Mr. Boffin. "Here's a couple of pound."

"In justice to myself, I couldn't take it, sir."

The words were but out of his mouth when John Harmon lifted his finger, and Sloppy, who was now close to Wegg, backed to Wegg's back, stooped, grasped his coat collar behind with both hands, and deftly swung him up like the sack of flour or coals before mentioned. A countenance of special discontent and amazement Mr. Wegg exhibited in this position, with his buttons almost as prominently on view as Sloppy's own, and with his wooden leg in a highly unaccommodating state. But, not for many seconds was his countenance visible in the room; for, Sloppy lightly trotted out with him and trotted down the staircase, Mr. Venus attending to open the street door. Mr. Sloppy's instructions had been to deposit his burden in the road; but a scavenger's cart happening to stand unattended at the corner, with its little ladder planted against the wheel, Mr. S. found it impossible to resist the temptation of shooting Mr. Silas Wegg into the cart's contents. A somewhat difficult feat, achieved with great dexterity, and with a prodigious splash.

CHAPTER XV.

WHAT WAS CAUGHT IN THE TRAPS THAT WERE SET.

How Bradley Headstone had been racked and riven in his mind since the quiet evening when by the river-side he had risen, as it were, out of the ashes of the Bargeman, none but he could have told. Not even he could

have told, for such misery can only be felt.

First, he had to bear the combined weight of the knowledge of what he had done, of that haunting reproach that he might have done it so much