

standing near him, so that they both stood in one little cloud of smoke; "I would that you answered my three questions! What is to come of it? What are you doing? Where are you going?"

"And my dear Mortimer," returned Eugene, lightly fanning away the smoke with his hand for the better exposition of his frankness of face and manner, "believe me, I would answer them instantly if I could. But to enable me to do so, I must first have found out the troublesome conundrum long abandoned. Here it is. Eugene Wrayburn." Tapping his forehead and breast. "Riddle-me, riddle-me-ree, perhaps you can't tell me what this may be?—No, upon my life I can't. I give it up!"

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH A FRIENDLY MOVE IS ORIGINATED.

THE arrangement between Mr Boffin and his literary man, Mr Silas Wegg, so far altered with the altered habits of Mr Boffin's life, as that the Roman Empire usually declined in the morning and in the eminently aristocratic family mansion, rather than in the evening, as of yore, and in Boffin's Bower. There were occasions, however, when Mr Boffin, seeking a brief refuge from the blandishments of fashion, would present himself at the Bower after dark, to anticipate the next sallying forth of Wegg; and would there, on the old settle, pursue the downward fortunes of those enervated and corrupted masters of the world who were by this time on their last legs. If Wegg had been worse paid for his office, or better qualified to discharge it, he would have considered these visits complimentary and agreeable; but, holding the position of a handsomely-remunerated humbug, he resented them. This was quite according to rule, for the incompetent servant, by whomsoever employed, is always against his employer. Even those born governors, noble and right honourable creatures, who have been the most imbecile in high places, have uniformly shown them-

selves the most opposed (sometimes in belying distrust, sometimes in rapid insolence) to *their* employer. What is in such wise true of the public master and servant, is equally true of the private master and servant all the world over.

When Mr Silas Wegg did at last obtain free access to "Our House," as he had been wont to call the mansion outside which he had sat shelterless so long, and when he did at last find it in all particulars as different from his mental plans of it as according to the nature of things it well could be, that far-seeing and far-reaching character, by way of asserting himself and making out a case for compensation, affected to fall into a melancholy strain of musing over the mournful past; as if the house and he had had a fall in life together.

"And this, sir," Silas would say to his patron, sadly nodding his head and musing, "was once Our House! This, sir, is the building from which I have so often seen those great creatures, Miss Elizabeth, Master George, Aunt Jane, and Uncle Parker"—whose very names were of his own inventing—"pass and repass! And has it come to this, indeed! Ah, dear me, dear me!"

So tender were his lamentations, that the kindly Mr Boffin was quite sorry for him, and almost felt mistrustful that in buying the house he had done him an irreparable injury.

Two or three diplomatic interviews, the result of great subtlety on Mr Wegg's part, but assuming the mask of careless yielding to a fortuitous combination of circumstances impelling him towards Clerkenwell, had enabled him to complete his bargain with Mr Venus.

"Bring me round to the Bower," said Silas, when the bargain was closed, "next Saturday evening, and if a sociable glass of old Jamaickey warm should meet your views, I am not the man to begrudge it."

"You are aware of my being poor company, sir," replied Mr Venus, "but be it so."

It being so, here is Saturday evening come, and here is Mr Venus come, and ringing at the Bower-gate.

Mr Wegg opens the gate, descries a sort of brown paper truncheon under Mr Venus's arm, and remarks, in a dry tone: "Oh! I thought perhaps you might have come in a cab."

"No, Mr Wegg," replies Venus. "I am not above a parcel."

"Above a parcel! No!" says Wegg, with some dissatisfaction. But does not openly growl, "a certain sort of parcel might be above you."

"Here is your purchase, Mr Wegg," says Venus, politely handing it over, "and I am glad to restore it to the source from whence it—flowed."

"Thankee," says Wegg. "Now this affair is concluded, I may mention to you in a friendly way that I've my doubts whether, if I had consulted a lawyer, you could have kept this article back from me. I only throw it out as a legal point."

"Do you think so, Mr Wegg? I bought you in open contract."

"You can't buy human flesh and blood in this country, sir; not alive, you can't," says Wegg, shaking his head. "Then query, bone?"

"As a legal point?" asks Venus.

"As a legal point."

"I am not competent to speak upon that, Mr Wegg," says Venus, reddening and growing something louder; "but upon a point of fact I think myself competent to speak; and as a point of fact I would have seen you—will you allow me to say, further?"

"I wouldn't say more than further, if I was you," Mr Wegg suggests, pacifically.

"—Before I'd have given that packet into your hand without being paid my price for it. I don't pretend to know how the point of law may stand, but I'm thoroughly confident upon the point of fact."

As Mr Venus is irritable (no doubt owing to his disappointment in love), and as it is not the cue of Mr Wegg to have him out of temper, the latter gentleman soothingly remarks, "I only put it as a little case; I only put it ha'porthetically."

"Then I'd rather, Mr Wegg, you put it another time, penn'orthetically," is Mr Venus's retort, "for I tell you candidly I don't like your little cases."

Arrived by this time in Mr Wegg's sitting-room, made bright on the chilly evening by gaslight and fire, Mr Venus softens and compliments him on his abode; profiting by the

occasion to remind Wegg that he (Venus) told him he had got into a good thing.

"Tolerable," Wegg rejoins. "But bear in mind, Mr Venus, that there's no gold without its alloy. Mix for yourself and take a seat in the chimbley-corner. Will you perform upon a pipe, sir?"

"I am but an indifferent performer, sir," returns the other; "but I'll accompany you with a whiff or two at intervals."

So, Mr Venus mixes, and Wegg mixes; and Mr Venus lights and puffs, and Wegg lights and puffs.

"And there's alloy even in this metal of yours, Mr Wegg, you was remarking?"

"Mystery," returns Wegg. "I don't like it, Mr Venus. I don't like to have the life knocked out of former inhabitants of this house, in the gloomy dark, and not know who did it."

"Might you have any suspicions, Mr Wegg?"

"No," returns that gentleman. "I know who profits by it. But I've no suspicions."

Having said which, Mr Wegg smokes and looks at the fire with a most determined expression of Charity; as if he had caught that cardinal virtue by the skirts as she felt it her painful duty to depart from him, and held her by main force.

"Similarly," resumes Wegg, "I have observations as I can offer upon certain points and parties; but I make no objections, Mr Venus. Here is an immense fortune drops from the clouds upon a person that shall be nameless. Here is a weekly allowance, with a certain weight of coals, drops from the clouds upon me. Which of us is the better man? Not the person that shall be nameless. That's an observation of mine, but I don't make it an objection. I take my allowance and my certain weight of coals. He takes his fortune. That's the way it works."

"It would be a good thing for me, if I could see things in the calm light you do, Mr Wegg."

"Again look here," pursues Silas, with an oratorical flourish of his pipe and his wooden leg; the latter having an undignified tendency to tilt him back in his chair; "here's another observation, Mr Venus, unaccompanied with an objection. Him that shall be nameless is liable to be talked over. He gets talked over. Him that shall be nameless,

having me at his right hand, naturally looking to be promoted higher, and you may perhaps say meriting to be promoted higher——”

(Mr Venus murmurs that he does say so.)

“—Him that shall be nameless, under such circumstances passes me by, and puts a talking-over stranger above my head. Which of us two is the better man? Which of us two can repeat most poetry? Which of us two has, in the service of him that shall be nameless, tackled the Romans, both civil and military, till he has got as husky as if he'd been weaned and ever since brought up on sawdust? Not the talking-over stranger. Yet the house is as free to him as if it was his, and he has his room, and is put upon a footing, and draws about a thousand a year. I am banished to the Bower, to be found in it like a piece of furniture whenever wanted. Merit, therefore, don't win. That's the way it works. I observe it, because I can't help observing it, being accustomed to take a powerful sight of notice; but I don't object. Ever here before, Mr Venus?”

“Not inside the gate, Mr Wegg.”

“You've been as far as the gate then, Mr Venus?”

“Yes, Mr Wegg, and peeped in from curiosity.”

“Did you see anything?”

“Nothing but the dust-yard.”

Mr Wegg rolls his eyes all round the room, in that ever unsatisfied quest of his, and then rolls his eyes all round Mr Venus; as if suspicious of his having found something about him to be found out.

“And yet, sir,” he pursues, “being acquainted with old Mr Harmon, one would have thought it might have been polite in you, too, to give him a call. And you're naturally of a polite disposition, you are.” This last clause as a softening compliment to Mr Venus.

“It is true, sir,” replies Venus, winking his weak eyes, and running his fingers through his dusty shock of hair, “that I was so, before a certain observation soured me. You understand to what I allude, Mr Wegg? To a certain written statement respecting not wishing to be regarded in a certain light. Since that, all is fled, save gall.”

“Not all,” says Mr Wegg, in a tone of sentimental condolence.

“Yes, sir,” returns Venus, “all! The world may deem it

harsh, but I'd quite as soon pitch into my best friend as not. Indeed, I'd sooner!”

Involuntarily making a pass with his wooden leg to guard himself as Mr Venus springs up in the emphasis of this unsociable declaration, Mr Wegg tilts over on his back, chair and all, and is rescued by that harmless misanthrope, in a disjointed state and ruefully rubbing his head.

“Why, you lost your balance, Mr Wegg,” says Venus, handing him his pipe.

“And about time to do it,” grumbles Silas, “when a man's visitors, without a word of notice, conduct themselves with the sudden viciousness of Jacks-in-boxes! Don't come flying out of your chair like that, Mr Venus!”

“I ask your pardon, Mr Wegg. I am so soured.”

“Yes, but hang it,” says Wegg argumentatively, “a well-governed mind can be soured sitting! And as to being regarded in lights, there's bumpy lights as well as bony. *In* which,” again rubbing his head, “I object to regard myself.”

“I'll bear it in memory, sir.”

“If you'll be so good.” Mr Wegg slowly subdues his ironical tone and his lingering irritation, and resumes his pipe. “We were talking of old Mr Harmon being a friend of yours.”

“Not a friend, Mr Wegg. Only known to speak to, and to have a little deal with now and then. A very inquisitive character, Mr Wegg, regarding what was found in the dust. As inquisitive as secret.”

“Ah! You found him secret?” returns Wegg, with a greedy relish.

“He had always the look of it, and the manner of it.”

“Ah!” with another roll of his eyes. “As to what was found in the dust now. Did you ever hear him mention how he found it, my dear friend? Living on the mysterious premises, one would like to know. For instance, where he found things? Or, for instance, how he set about it? Whether he began at the top of the mounds, or whether he began at the bottom. Whether he prodded;” Mr Wegg's pantomime is skilful and expressive here; “or whether he scooped? Should you say scooped, my dear Mr Venus; or should you—as a man—say prodded?”

“I should say neither, Mr Wegg.”

"As a fellow-man, Mr Venus — mix again — why neither?"

"Because I suppose, sir, that what was found, was found in the sorting and sifting. All the mounds are sorted and sifted?"

"You shall see 'em and pass your opinion. Mix again?"

On each occasion of his saying "mix again," Mr Wegg, with a hop on his wooden leg, hitches his chair a little nearer; more as if he were proposing that himself and Mr Venus should mix again, than that they should replenish their glasses.

"Living (as I said before) on the mysterious premises," says Wegg when the other has acted on his hospitable entreaty, "one likes to know. Would you be inclined to say now—as a brother—that he ever hid things in the dust, as well as found 'em?"

"Mr Wegg, on the whole I should say he might."

Mr Wegg claps on his spectacles, and admiringly surveys Mr Venus from head to foot.

"As a mortal equally with myself, whose hand I take in mine for the first time this day, having accountably overlooked that act so full of boundless confidence binding a fellow-creetur to a fellow-creetur," says Wegg, holding Mr Venus's palm out, flat and ready for smiting, and now smiting it; "as such—and no other—for I scorn all lowlier ties betwixt myself and the man walking with his face erect that alone I call my Twin—regarded and regarding in this trustful bond—what do you think he might have hid?"

"It is but a supposition, Mr Wegg."

"As a Being with his hand upon his heart," cries Wegg; and the apostrophe is not the less impressive for the Being's hand being actually upon his rum and water; "put your supposition into language, and bring it out, Mr Venus!"

"He was the species of old gentleman, sir," slowly returns that practical anatomist, after drinking, "that I should judge likely to take such opportunities as this place offered, of stowing away money, valuables, may be papers."

"As one that was ever an ornament of human life," says Mr Wegg, again holding out Mr Venus's palm as if it were going to tell his fortune by chiromancy, and holding his own up ready for smiting it when the time should come: "as

one that the poet might have had his eye on, in writing the national naval words:

Helm a-weather, now lay her close,
Yard arm and yard arm she lies;
Again, cried I, Mr Venus, give her t'other dose,
Man shrouds and grapple, sir, or she flies!

—that is to say, regarded in the light of true British Oak, for such you are — explain, Mr Venus, the expression 'papers'!"

"Seeing that the old gentleman was generally cutting off some near relation, or blocking out some natural affection," Mr Venus rejoins, "he most likely made a good many wills and codicils."

The palm of Silas Wegg descends with a sounding smack upon the palm of Venus, and Wegg lavishly exclaims, "Twin in opinion equally with feeling! Mix a little more!"

Having now hitched his wooden leg and his chair close in front of Mr Venus, Mr Wegg rapidly mixes for both, gives his visitor his glass, touches its rim with the rim of his own, puts his own to his lips, puts it down, and spreading his hands on his visitor's knees thus addresses him:

"Mr Venus. It ain't that I object to being passed over for a stranger, though I regard the stranger as a more than doubtful customer. It ain't for the sake of making money, though money is ever welcome. It ain't for myself, though I am not so haughty as to be above doing myself a good turn. It's for the cause of the right."

Mr Venus, passively winking his weak eyes both at once, demands: "What is, Mr Wegg?"

"The friendly move, sir, that I now propose. You see the move, sir?"

"Till you have pointed it out, Mr Wegg, I can't say whether I do or not."

"If there is anything to be found on these premises, let us find it together. Let us make the friendly move of agreeing to look for it together. Let us make the friendly move of agreeing to share the profits of it equally betwixt us. In the cause of the right." Thus Silas assuming a noble air.

"Then," says Mr Venus, looking up, after meditating with his hair held in his hands, as if he could only fix his attention by fixing his head; "if anything was to be unbu-

ried from under the dust, it would be kept a secret by you and me? Would that be it, Mr Wegg?"

"That would depend upon what it was, Mr Venus. Say it was money, or plate, or jewellery, it would be as much ours as anybody else's."

Mr Venus rubs an eyebrow, interrogatively.

"In the cause of the right it would. Because it would be unknowingly sold with the mounds else, and the buyer would get what he was never meant to have, and never bought. And what would that be, Mr Venus, but the cause of the wrong?"

"Say it was papers," Mr Venus propounds.

"According to what they contained we should offer to dispose of 'em to the parties most interested," replied Wegg, promptly.

"In the cause of the right, Mr Wegg?"

"Always so, Mr Venus. If the parties should use them in the cause of the wrong, that would be their act and deed. Mr Venus, I have an opinion of you, sir, to which it is not easy to give mouth. Since I called upon you that evening when you were, as I may say, floating your powerful mind in tea, I have felt that you required to be roused with an object. In this friendly move, sir, you will have a glorious object to rouse you."

Mr Wegg then goes on to enlarge upon what throughout has been uppermost in his crafty mind:—the qualifications of Mr Venus for such a search. He expatiates on Mr Venus's patient habits and delicate manipulation; on his skill in piecing little things together; on his knowledge of various tissues and textures; on the likelihood of small indications leading him on to the discovery of great concealments. "While as to myself," says Wegg, "I am not good at it. Whether I gave myself up to prodding, or whether I gave myself up to scooping, I couldn't do it with that delicate touch so as not to show that I was disturbing the mounds. Quite different with *you*, going to work (as *you* would) in the light of a fellow-man, holily pledged in a friendly move to his brother man." Mr Wegg next modestly remarks on the want of adaptation in a wooden leg to ladders and such like airy perches, and also hints at an inherent tendency in that timber fiction, when called into action for the purposes of a promenade on an ashey slope, to stick itself into the yield-

ing foothold, and peg its owner to one spot. Then, leaving this part of the subject, he remarks on the special phenomenon that before his installation in the Bower, it was from Mr Venus that he first heard of the legend of hidden wealth in the Mounds: "which," he observes with a vaguely pious air, "was surely never meant for nothing." Lastly, he returns to the cause of the right, gloomily foreshadowing the possibility of something being unearthed to criminate Mr Boffin (of whom he once more candidly admits it cannot be denied that he profits by a murder), and anticipating his denunciation by the friendly movers to avenging justice. And this, Mr Wegg expressly points out, not at all for the sake of the reward—though it would be a want of principle not to take it.

To all this, Mr Venus, with his shock of dusty hair cocked after the manner of a terrier's ears, attends profoundly. When Mr Wegg, having finished, opens his arms wide, as if to show Mr Venus how bare his breast is, and then folds them pending a reply, Mr Venus winks at him with both eyes some little time before speaking.

"I see you have tried it by yourself, Mr Wegg," he says when he does speak. "You have found out the difficulties by experience."

"No, it can hardly be said that I have tried it," replies Wegg, a little dashed by the hint. "I have just skimmed it. Skimmed it."

"And found nothing besides the difficulties?"

Wegg shakes his head.

"I scarcely know what to say to this, Mr Wegg," observes Venus, after ruminating for a while.

"Say yes," Wegg naturally urges.

"If I wasn't soured, my answer would be no. But being soured, Mr Wegg, and driven to reckless madness and desperation, I suppose it's Yes."

Wegg joyfully reproduces the two glasses, repeats the ceremony of clinking their rims, and inwardly drinks with great heartiness to the health and success in life of the young lady who has reduced Mr Venus to his present convenient state of mind.

The articles of the friendly move are then severally recited and agreed upon. They are but secrecy, fidelity, and perseverance. The Bower to be always free of access to

Mr Venus for his researches, and every precaution to be taken against their attracting observation in the neighbourhood.

"There's a footstep!" exclaims Venus.

"Where?" cries Wegg, starting.

"Outside. St!"

They are in the act of ratifying the treaty of friendly move, by shaking hands upon it. They softly break off, light their pipes which have gone out, and lean back in their chairs. No doubt, a footstep. It approaches the window, and a hand taps at the glass. "Come in!" calls Wegg; meaning come round by the door. But the heavy old-fashioned sash is slowly raised, and a head slowly looks in out of the dark background of night.

"Pray is Mr Silas Wegg here? Oh! I see him!"

The friendly movers might not have been quite at their ease, even though the visitor had entered in the usual manner. But, leaning on the breast-high window, and staring in out of the darkness, they find the visitor extremely embarrassing. Especially Mr Venus: who removes his pipe, draws back his head, and stares at the starrer, as if it were his own Hindoo baby come to fetch him home.

"Good evening, Mr Wegg. The yard gate-lock should be looked to, if you please; it don't catch."

"Is it Mr Rokesmith?" falters Wegg.

"It is Mr Rokesmith. Don't let me disturb you. I am not coming in. I have only a message for you, which I undertook to deliver on my way home to my lodgings. I was in two minds about coming beyond the gate without ringing: not knowing but you might have a dog about."

"I wish I had," mutters Wegg, with his back turned as he rose from his chair. "St! Hush! The talking-over stranger, Mr Venus."

"Is that any one I know?" inquires the staring Secretary.

"No, Mr Rokesmith. Friend of mine. Passing the evening with me."

"Oh! I beg his pardon. Mr Boffin wishes you to know that he does not expect you to stay at home any evening, on the chance of his coming. It has occurred to him that he may, without intending it, have been a tie upon you. In future, if he should come without notice, he will take his

chance of finding you, and it will be all the same to him if he does not. I undertook to tell you on my way. That's all."

With that, and "Good night," the Secretary lowers the window, and disappears. They listen and hear his footsteps go back to the gate, and hear the gate close after him.

"And for that individual, Mr Venus," remarks Wegg, when he is fully gone, "I have been passed over! Let me ask you what you think of him?"

Apparently, Mr Venus does not know what to think of him, for he makes sundry efforts to reply, without delivering himself of any other articulate utterance than that he has "a singular look."

"A double look, you mean, sir," rejoins Wegg, playing bitterly upon the word. "That's *his* look. Any amount of singular look for me, but not a double look! That's an under-handed mind, sir."

"Do you say there's something against him?" Venus asks.

"Something against him?" repeats Wegg. "Something? What would the relief be to my feelings—as a fellow-man—if I wasn't the slave of truth, and didn't feel myself compelled to answer, Everything!"

See into what wonderful maudlin refuges, featherless ostriches plunge their heads! It is such unspeakable moral compensation to Wegg, to be overcome by the consideration that Mr Rokesmith has an underhanded mind!

"On this starlight night, Mr Venus," he remarks, when he is showing that friendly mover out across the yard, and both are something the worse for mixing again and again: "on this starlight night to think that talking-over strangers, and underhanded minds, can go walking home under the sky, as if they was all square!"

"The spectacle of those orbs," says Mr Venus, gazing upward with his hat tumbling off, "brings heavy on me her crushing words that she did not wish to regard herself nor yet to be regarded in that——"

"I know! I know! You needn't repeat 'em," says Wegg, pressing his hand. "But think how those stars steady me in the cause of the right against some that shall be nameless. It isn't that I bear malice. But see how they glisten with old remembrances! Old remembrances of what, sir?"

Mr Venus begins drearily replying, "Of her words, in her own handwriting, that she does not wish to regard herself, nor yet——" when Silas cuts him short with dignity.

"No, sir! Remembrances of Our House, of Master George, of Aunt Jane, of Uncle Parker, all laid waste! All offered up sacrifices to the minion of fortune and the worm of the hour!"

CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH AN INNOCENT ELOPEMENT OCCURS.

THE minion of fortune and the worm of the hour, or in less cutting language, Nicodemus Boffin, Esquire, the Golden Dustman, had become as much at home in his eminently aristocratic family mansion as he was likely ever to be. He could not but feel that, like an eminently aristocratic family cheese, it was much too large for his wants, and bred an infinite amount of parasites; but he was content to regard this drawback on his property as a sort of perpetual Legacy Duty. He felt the more resigned to it, forasmuch as Mrs Boffin enjoyed herself completely, and Miss Bella was delighted.

That young lady was, no doubt, an acquisition to the Boffins. She was far too pretty to be unattractive anywhere, and far too quick of perception to be below the tone of her new career. Whether it improved her heart might be a matter of taste that was open to question; but as touching another matter of taste, its improvement of her appearance and manner, there could be no question whatever.

And thus it soon came about that Miss Bella began to set Mrs Boffin right; and even further, that Miss Bella began to feel ill at ease, and as it were responsible, when she saw Mrs Boffin going wrong. Not that so sweet a disposition and so sound a nature could ever go very wrong even among the great visiting authorities who agreed that the Boffins were "charmingly vulgar" (which for certain was not their own case in saying so), but that when she made a slip on the social ice on which all the children of Podsnap-