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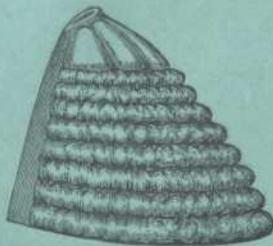
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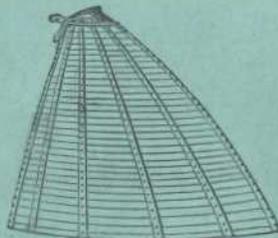
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Dessert Forks	1 0 0	1 10 0	1 12 0
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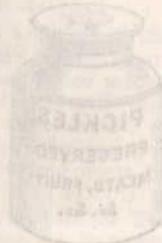
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A White Powder compounded of the choicest and most fragrant exotics. It bestows on the Teeth a pearl-like whiteness, frees them from tartar, and imparts to the gums a healthy firmness, and to the breath a pleasing fragrance. Price 2s. 9d. per box.

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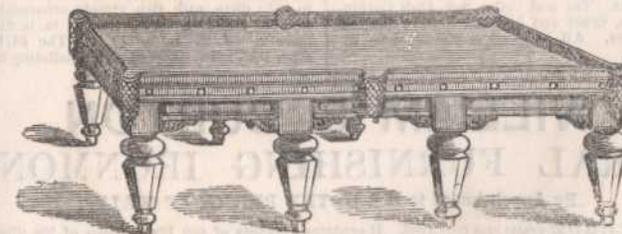
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	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.
12 Table Forks	1 13 0	2 0 0	2 4 0	2 10 0
12 Table Spoons	1 13 0	2 0 0	2 4 0	2 10 0
12 Dessert Forks	1 4 0	1 10 0	1 12 0	1 15 0
12 Dessert Spoons	1 4 0	1 10 0	1 12 0	1 15 0
12 Tea Spoons	16 0	1 0 0	1 2 0	1 5 0
6 Egg Spoons, } gilt bowls.	10 0	12 0	12 0	13 6
2 Sauce Ladles	6 0	8 0	8 0	9 0
1 Gravy Spoon	6 6	9 0	10 0	11 0
2 Salt Spoons, } gilt bowls.	3 4	4 0	4 0	4 6
1 Mustard Spoon, } gilt bowl.	1 8	2 0	2 0	2 3
1 Pair Sugar Tongs	2 6	3 6	3 6	4 0
1 Pair Fish Carvers	1 4 0	1 10 0	1 10 0	1 10 0
1 Butter Knife	2 6	4 0	5 6	6 0
1 Soup Ladle	10 0	12 0	15 0	17 0
1 Sugar Sifter	3 3	4 6	4 6	5 0
Total	9 19 9	12 9 0	13 9 6	14 17 3

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3½-inch ivory handles	12 0	9 6	4 6
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Ditto, with silver ferns	40 0	33 0	12 0
Ditto, carved handles, silver } ferns	50 0	43 0	17 6
Nickel electro-silver han- } dles, any pattern	25 0	19 0	17 6
Silver handles of any pattern	84 0	54 0	21 0
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Knives and Forks per dozen	11 0	8 6	2 0
White bone handles	21 0	17 0	4 6
Ditto, balance handles	17 0	14 0	4 0
Black horn, rim'd shoulders	12 0	9 0	3 0
Do., very strong rivetted hdls.			

The Largest Stock in existence of PLATED DESSERT KNIVES and FORKS, in Cases and otherwise, and of the new Plated Fish Carvers.

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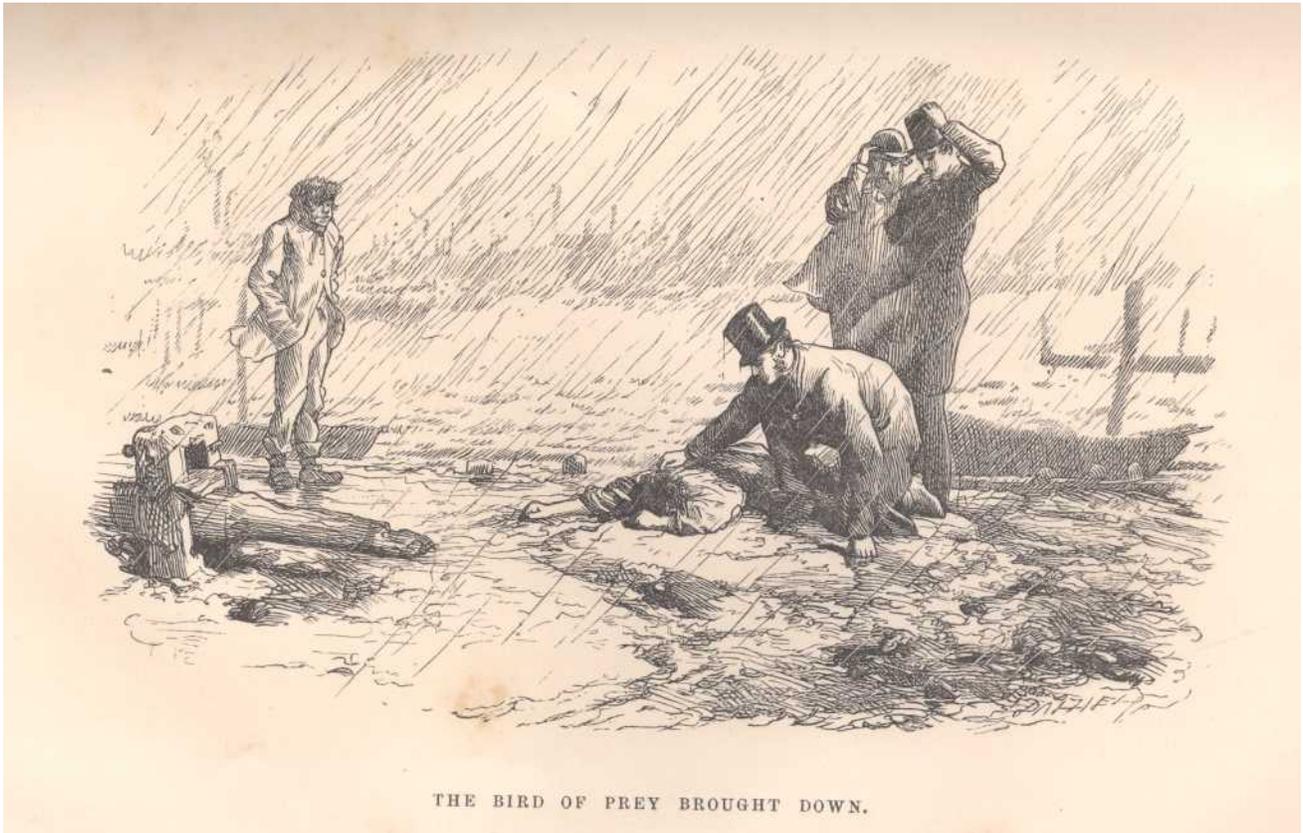
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OF

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CHAPTER XIV.

THE BIRD OF PREY BROUGHT DOWN.

COLD on the shore, in the raw cold of that leaden crisis in the four-and-twenty hours when the vital force of all the noblest and prettiest things that live is at its lowest, the three watchers looked each at the blank faces of the other two, and all at the blank face of Riderhood in his boat.

"Gaffer's boat, Gaffer in luck again, and yet no Gaffer!" So spake Riderhood, staring disconsolate.

As if with one accord, they all turned their eyes towards the light of the fire shining through the window. It was fainter and duller. Perhaps fire, like the higher animal and vegetable life it helps to sustain, has its greatest tendency towards death, when the night is dying and the day is not yet born.

"If it was me that had the law of this here job in hand," growled Riderhood with a threatening shake of his head, "blest if I wouldn't lay hold of *her*, at any rate!"

"Ay, but it is not you," said Eugene. With something so suddenly fierce in him that the informer returned submissively; "Well, well, well, 'tother governor, I didn't say it was. A man may speak."

"And vermin may be silent," said Eugene. "Hold your tongue, you water-rat!"

Astonished by his friend's unusual heat, Lightwood stared too, and then said: "What can have become of this man?"

"Can't imagine. Unless he dived overboard." The informer wiped his brow ruefully as he said it, sitting in his boat and always staring disconsolate.

"Did you make his boat fast?"

"She's fast enough till the tide runs back. I couldn't make her faster than she is. Come aboard of mine, and see for your ownselves."

There was a little backwardness in complying, for the freight looked too much for the boat; but on Riderhood's protesting "that he had had half a dozen, dead and alive, in her afore now, and she was nothing deep in the water nor down in the stern even then, to speak of," they carefully took their places, and trimmed the crazy thing. While they were doing so, Riderhood still sat staring disconsolate.

"All right. Give way!" said Lightwood.

"Give way, by George!" repeated Riderhood, before shoving off. "If he's gone and made off any how Lawyer Lightwood, it's enough to make me give way in a different manner. But he always *was* a cheat, con-found him! He always was a infernal cheat, was Gaffer. Nothing straightfor'ard, nothing on the square. So mean, so underhanded. Never going through with a thing, nor carrying it out like a man!"

"Hallo! Steady!" cried Eugene (he had recovered immediately on embarking), as they bumped heavily against a pile; and then in a lower voice reversed his late apostrophe by remarking ("I wish the boat of my honorable and gallant friend may be endowed with

philanthropy enough *not* to turn bottom-upward and extinguish us!) Steady, steady! Sit close, Mortimer. Here's the hail again. See how it flies, like a troop of wild cats, at Mr. Riderhood's eyes!"

Indeed he had the full benefit of it, and it so mauled him, though he bent his head low and tried to present nothing but the mangy cap to it, that he dropped under the lee of a tier of shipping, and they lay there until it was over. The squall had come up, like a spiteful messenger before the morning; there followed in its wake a ragged tear of light which ripped the dark clouds until they showed a great grey hole of day.

They were all shivering, and everything about them seemed to be shivering; the river itself, craft, rigging, sails, such early smoke as there yet was on the shore. Black with wet, and altered to the eye by white patches of hail and sleet, the huddled buildings looked lower than usual, as if they were cowering, and had shrunk with the cold. Very little life was to be seen on either bank, windows and doors were shut, and the staring black and white letters upon wharves and warehouses "looked," said Eugene to Mortimer, "like inscriptions over the graves of dead businesses."

As they glided slowly on, keeping under the shore and sneaking in and out among the shipping by back-alleys of water, in a pilfering way that seemed to be their boatman's normal manner of progression, all the objects among which they crept were so huge in contrast with their wretched boat, as to threaten to crush it. Not a ship's hull, with its rusty iron links of cable run out of hawse-holes long discolored with the iron's rusty tears, but seemed to be there with a fell intention. Not a figure-head but had the menacing look of bursting forward to run them down. Not a sluice gate, or a painted scale upon a post or wall, showing the depth of water, but seemed to hint, like the dreadfully facetious Wolf in bed in Grandmamma's cottage, "That's to drown *you* in, my dears!" Not a lumbering black barge, with its cracked and blistered side impending over them, but seemed to suck at the river with a thirst for sucking them under. And everything so vaunted the spoiling influences of water—discolored copper, rotten wood, honey-combed stone, green dank deposit—that the after-consequences of being crushed, sucked under, and drawn down, looked as ugly to the imagination as the main event.

Some half-hour of this work, and Riderhood unshipped his sculls, stood holding on to a barge, and hand over hand long-wise along the barge's side gradually worked his boat under her head into a secret little nook of scummy water. And driven into that nook, and wedged as he had described, was Gaffer's boat; that boat with the stain still in it, bearing some resemblance to a muffled human form.

"Now tell me I'm a liar!" said the honest man.

("With a morbid expectation," murmured Eugene to Lightwood, "that somebody is always going to tell him the truth.")

"This is Hexam's boat," said Mr. Inspector. "I know her well."

"Look at the broken scull. Look at the t'other scull gone. *Now* tell me I am a liar!" said the honest man.

Mr. Inspector stepped into the boat. Eugene and Mortimer looked on.

"And see now!" added Riderhood, creeping aft, and showing a

stretched rope made fast there and towing overboard. "Didn't I tell you he was in luck again?"

"Haul in," said Mr. Inspector.

"Easy to say haul in," answered Riderhood. "Not so easy done. His luck's got fouled under the keels of the barges. I tried to haul in last time, but I couldn't. See how taut the line is!"

"I must have it up," said Mr. Inspector. "I am going to take this boat ashore, and his luck along with it. Try easy now."

He tried easy now; but the luck resisted; wouldn't come.

"I mean to have it, and the boat too," said Mr. Inspector, playing the line.

But still the luck resisted; wouldn't come.

"Take care," said Riderhood. "You'll disfigure. Or pull asunder perhaps."

"I am not going to do either, not even to your Grandmother," said Mr. Inspector; "but I mean to have it. Come!" he added, at once persuasively and with authority to the hidden object in the water, as he played the line again; "it's no good this sort of game, you know. You *must* come up. I mean to have you."

There was so much virtue in this distinctly and decidedly meaning to have it, that it yielded a little, even while the line was played.

"I told you so," quoth Mr. Inspector, pulling off his outer coat, and leaning well over the stern with a will. "Come!"

It was an awful sort of fishing, but it no more disconcerted Mr. Inspector than if he had been fishing in a punt on a summer evening by some soothing weir high up the peaceful river. After certain minutes, and a few directions to the rest to "ease her a little for'ard," and "now ease her a trifle aft," and the like, he said composedly, "All clear!" and the line and the boat came free together.

Accepting Lightwood's proffered hand to help him up, he then put on his coat, and said to Riderhood, "Hand me over those spare sculls of yours, and I'll pull this in to the nearest stairs. Go ahead you, and keep out in pretty open water, that I mayn't get fouled again."

His directions were obeyed, and they pulled ashore directly; two in one boat, two in the other.

"Now," said Mr. Inspector, again to Riderhood, when they were all on the slushy stones; "you have had more practice in this than I have had, and ought to be a better workman at it. Undo the tow-rope, and we'll help you haul in."

Riderhood got into the boat accordingly. It appeared as if he had scarcely had a moment's time to touch the rope or look over the stern, when he came scrambling back, as pale as the morning, and gasped out:

"By the Lord, he's done me!"

"What do you mean?" they all demanded.

He pointed behind him at the boat, and gasped to that degree that he dropped upon the stones to get his breath.

"Gaffer's done me. It's Gaffer!"

They ran to the rope, leaving him gasping there. Soon, the form of the bird of prey, dead some hours, lay stretched upon the shore, with a new blast storming at it and clotting the wet hair with hail-stones.

Father, was that you calling me? Father! I thought I heard you call me twice before! Words never to be answered, those, upon the earth-side of the grave. The wind sweeps jeeringly over Father, whips him with the frayed ends of his dress and his jagged hair, tries to turn him where he lies stark on his back, and force his face towards the rising sun, that he may be shamed the more. A lull, and the wind is secret and prying with him; lifts and lets falls a rag; hides palpitating under another rag; runs nimbly through his hair and beard. Then, in a rush, it cruelly taunts him. Father, was that you calling me? Was it you, the voiceless and the dead? Was it you, thus buffeted as you lie here in a heap? Was it you, thus baptized unto Death, with these flying impurities now flung upon your face? Why not speak, Father? Soaking into this filthy ground as you lie here, is your own shape. Did you never see such a shape soaked into your boat? Speak, Father. Speak to us, the winds, the only listeners left you!

"Now see," said Mr. Inspector, after mature deliberation: kneeling on one knee beside the body, when they had stood looking down on the drowned man, as he had many a time looked down on many another man: "the way of it was this. Of course you gentlemen hardly failed to observe that he was towing by the neck and arms."

They had helped to release the rope, and of course not.

"And you will have observed before, and you will observe now, that this knot, which was drawn chock-tight round his neck by the strain of his own arms, is a slip-knot:" holding it up for demonstration.

Plain enough.

"Likewise you will have observed how he had run the other end of this rope to his boat."

It had the curves and indentations in it still, where it had been twined and bound.

"Now see," said Mr. Inspector, "see how it works round upon him. It's a wild tempestuous evening when this man that was," stooping to wipe some hailstones out of his hair with an end of his own drowned jacket,—"there! Now he's more like himself, though he's badly bruised,—when this man that was, rows out upon the river on his usual lay. He carries with him this coil of rope. He always carries with him this coil of rope. It's as well known to me as he was himself. Sometimes it lay in the bottom of his boat. Sometimes he hung it loose round his neck. He was a light-dresser was this man;—you see?" lifting the loose neckerchief over his breast, and taking the opportunity of wiping the dead lips with it—"and when it was wet, or freezing, or blew cold, he would hang this coil of line round his neck. Last evening he does this. Worse for him! He dodges about in his boat, does this man, till he gets chilled. His hands," taking up one of them, which dropped like a leaden weight, "get numbed. He sees some object that's in his way of business, floating. He makes ready to secure that object. He unwinds the end of his coil that he wants to take some turns on in his boat, and he takes turns enough on it to secure that it shan't run out. He makes it too secure, as it happens. He is a little longer about this than usual, his hands being numbed. His object drifts

up, before he is quite ready for it. He catches at it, thinks he'll make sure of the contents of the pockets anyhow, in case he should be parted from it, bends right over the stern, and in one of these heavy squalls, or in the cross-swell of two steamers, or in not being quite prepared, or through all or most or some, gets a lurch, overbalances and goes head-foremost overboard. Now see! He can swim, can this man, and instantly he strikes out. But in such striking-out he tangles his arms, pulls strong on the slip-knot, and it runs home. The object he had expected to take in tow, floats by, and his own boat tows him dead, to where we found him, all entangled in his own line. You'll ask me how I make out about the pockets? First, I'll tell you more; there was silver in 'em. How do I make that out? Simple and satisfactory. Because he's got it here." The lecturer held up the tightly clenched right hand.

"What is to be done with the remains?" asked Lightwood.

"If you wouldn't object to standing by him half a minute, sir," was the reply, "I'll find the nearest of our men to come and take charge of him;—I still call it *him*, you see," said Mr. Inspector, looking back as he went, with a philosophical smile upon the force of habit.

"Eugene," said Lightwood—and was about to add "we may wait a little distance," when turning his head he found that no Eugene was there.

He raised his voice and called "Eugene! Holloa!" But no Eugene replied.

It was broad daylight now, and he looked about. But no Eugene was in all the view.

Mr. Inspector speedily returning down the wooden stairs, with a police constable, Lightwood asked him if he had seen his friend leave them? Mr. Inspector could not exactly say that he had seen him go, but had noticed that he was restless.

"Singular and entertaining combination, sir, your friend."

"I wish it had not been a part of his singular and entertaining combination to give me the slip under these dreary circumstances at this time of the morning," said Lightwood. "Can we get anything hot to drink?"

We could, and we did. In a public-house kitchen with a large fire. We got hot brandy and water, and it revived us wonderfully. Mr. Inspector having to Mr. Riderhood announced his official intention of "keeping his eye upon him," stood him in a corner of the fireplace, like a wet umbrella, and took no further outward and visible notice of that honest man, except ordering a separate service of brandy and water for him: apparently out of the public funds.

As Mortimer Lightwood sat before the blazing fire, conscious of drinking brandy and water then and there in his sleep, and yet at one and the same time drinking burnt sherry at the Six Jolly Fellowships, and lying under the boat on the river shore, and sitting in the boat that Riderhood rowed, and listening to the lecture recently concluded, and having to dine in the Temple with an unknown man, who described himself as M. R. F. Eugene Gaffer Harmon, and said he lived at Hailstorm,—as he passed through these curious vicissitudes of fatigue and slumber, arranged upon the scale of a dozen

hours to the second, he became aware of answering aloud a communication of pressing importance that had never been made to him, and then turned it into a cough on beholding Mr. Inspector. For, he felt, with some natural indignation, that that functionary might otherwise suspect him of having closed his eyes, or wandered in his attention.

"Here just before us, you see," said Mr. Inspector.

"I see," said Lightwood, with dignity.

"And had hot brandy and water too, you see," said Mr. Inspector, "and then cut off at a great rate."

"Who?" said Lightwood.

"Your friend, you know."

"I know," he replied, again with dignity.

After hearing, in a mist through which Mr. Inspector loomed vague and large, that the officer took upon himself to prepare the dead man's daughter for what had befallen in the night, and generally that he took everything upon himself, Mortimer Lightwood stumbled in his sleep to a cab-stand, called a cab, and had entered the army and committed a capital military offence and been tried by court martial and found guilty and had arranged his affairs and been marched out to be shot, before the door banged.

Hard work rowing the cab through the City to the Temple, for a cup of from five to ten thousand pounds value, given by Mr. Boffin; and hard work holding forth at that immeasurable length to Eugene (when he had been rescued with a rope from the running pavement) for making off in that extraordinary manner! But he offered such ample apologies, and was so very penitent, that when Lightwood got out of the cab, he gave the driver a particular charge to be careful of him. Which the driver (knowing there was no other fare left inside) stared at prodigiously.

In short, the night's work had so exhausted and worn out this actor in it, that he had become a mere somnambulist. He was too tired to rest in his sleep, until he was even tired out of being too tired, and dropped into oblivion. Late in the afternoon he awoke, and in some anxiety sent round to Eugene's lodging hard by, to inquire if he were up yet?

Oh yes, he was up. In fact, he had not been to bed. He had just come home. And here he was, close following on the heels of the message.

"Why what bloodshot, dragged, dishevelled spectacle is this!" cried Mortimer.

"Are my feathers so very much ruffled?" said Eugene, coolly going up to the looking-glass. "They are rather out of sorts. But consider. Such a night for plumage!"

"Such a night?" repeated Mortimer. "What became of you in the morning?"

"My dear fellow," said Eugene, sitting on his bed, "I felt that we had bored one another so long, that an unbroken continuance of those relations must inevitably terminate in our flying to opposite points of the earth. I also felt that I had committed every crime in the Newgate Calendar. So, for mingled considerations of friendship and felony, I took a walk."

CHAPTER XV.

TWO NEW SERVANTS.

Mr. and Mrs. Boffin sat after breakfast, in the Bower, a prey to prosperity. Mr. Boffin's face denoted Care and Complication. Many disordered papers were before him, and he looked at them about as hopefully as an innocent civilian might look at a crowd of troops whom he was required at five minutes' notice to manoeuvre and review. He had been engaged in some attempts to make notes of these papers; but being troubled (as men of his stamp often are) with an exceedingly distrustful and corrective thumb, that busy member had so often interposed to smear his notes, that they were little more legible than the various impressions of itself, which blurred his nose and forehead. It is curious to consider, in such a case as Mr. Boffin's, what a cheap article ink is, and how far it may be made to go. As a grain of musk will scent a drawer for many years, and still lose nothing appreciable of its original weight, so a halfpenny-worth of ink would blot Mr. Boffin to the roots of his hair and the calves of his legs, without inscribing a line on the paper before him, or appearing to diminish in the inkstand.

Mr. Boffin was in such severe literary difficulties that his eyes were prominent and fixed, and his breathing was stertorous, when, to the great relief of Mrs. Boffin, who observed these symptoms with alarm, the yard bell rang.

"Who's that, I wonder!" said Mrs. Boffin.

Mr. Boffin drew a long breath, laid down his pen, looked at his notes as doubting whether he had the pleasure of their acquaintance, and appeared, on a second perusal of their countenances, to be confirmed in his impression that he had not, when there was announced by the hammer-headed young man:

"Mr. Rokesmith."

"Oh!" said Mr. Boffin. "Oh indeed! Our and the Wilfers' Mutual Friend, my dear. Yes. Ask him to come in."

Mr. Rokesmith appeared.

"Sit down, sir," said Mr. Boffin, shaking hands with him. "Mrs. Boffin you're already acquainted with. Well, sir, I am rather unprepared to see you, for, to tell you the truth, I've been so busy with one thing and another, that I've not had time to turn your offer over."

"That's apology for both of us: for Mr. Boffin, and for me as well," said the smiling Mrs. Boffin. "But Lor! we can talk it over now; can't us?"

Mr. Rokesmith bowed, thanked her, and said he hoped so.

"Let me see then," resumed Mr. Boffin, with his hand to his chin. "It was Secretary that you named; wasn't it?"

"I said Secretary," assented Mr. Rokesmith.

"It rather puzzled me at the time," said Mr. Boffin, "and it rather puzzled me and Mrs. Boffin when we spoke of it afterwards, because (not to make a mystery of our belief) we have always believed a Secretary to be a piece of furniture, mostly of mahogany, lined with green

baize or leather, with a lot of little drawers in it. Now, you won't think I take a liberty when I mention that you certainly ain't *that*."

Certainly not, said Mr. Rokesmith. But he had used the word in the sense of Steward.

"Why, as to Steward, you see," returned Mr. Boffin, with his hand still to his chin, "the odds are that Mrs. Boffin and me may never go upon the water. Being both bad sailors, we should want a Steward if we did; but there's generally one provided."

Mr. Rokesmith again explained; defining the duties he sought to undertake, as those of general superintendent, or manager, or over-looker, or man of business.

"Now, for instance—come!" said Mr. Boffin, in his pouncing way.

"If you entered my employment, what would you do?"

"I would keep exact accounts of all the expenditure you sanctioned, Mr. Boffin. I would write your letters, under your direction. I would transact your business with people in your pay or employment. I would," with a glance and a half-smile at the table, "arrange your papers—"

Mr. Boffin rubbed his inky ear, and looked at his wife.

"—And so arrange them as to have them always in order for immediate reference, with a note of the contents of each outside it."

"I tell you what," said Mr. Boffin, slowly crumpling his own blotted note in his hand; "if you'll turn to at these present papers, and see what you can make of 'em, I shall know better what I can make of you."

No sooner said than done. Relinquishing his hat and gloves, Mr. Rokesmith sat down quietly at the table, arranged the open papers into an orderly heap, cast his eyes over each in succession, folded it, docketed it on the outside, laid it in a second heap, and, when that second heap was complete and the first gone, took from his pocket a piece of string and tied it together with a remarkably dexterous hand at a running curve and a loop.

"Good!" said Mr. Boffin. "Very good! Now let us hear what they're all about; will you be so good?"

John Rokesmith read his abstracts aloud. They were all about the new house. Decorator's estimate, so much. Furniture estimate, so much. Estimate for furniture of offices, so much. Coach-maker's estimate, so much. Horse-dealer's estimate, so much. Harness-maker's estimate so much. Goldsmith's estimate, so much. Total, so very much. Then came correspondence. Acceptance of Mr. Boffin's offer of such a date, and to such an effect. Rejection of Mr. Boffin's proposal of such a date and to such an effect. Concerning Mr. Boffin's scheme of such another date to such another effect. All compact and methodical.

"Apple-pie order!" said Mr. Boffin, after checking off each inscription with his hand, like a man beating time. "And whatever you do with your ink, I can't think, for you're as clean as a whistle after it. Now, as to a letter. Let's," said Mr. Boffin, rubbing his hands in his pleasantly childish admiration, "let's try a letter next."

"To whom shall it be addressed, Mr. Boffin?"

"Anyone. Yourself."

Mr. Rokesmith quickly wrote, and then read aloud:

"Mr. Boffin presents his compliments to Mr. John Rokesmith, and begs to say that he has decided on giving Mr. John Rokesmith a trial in the capacity he desires to fill. Mr. Boffin takes Mr. John Rokesmith at his word, in postponing to some indefinite period, the consideration of salary. It is quite understood that Mr. Boffin is in no way committed on that point. Mr. Boffin has merely to add, that he relies on Mr. John Rokesmith's assurance that he will be faithful and serviceable. Mr. John Rokesmith will please enter on his duties immediately."

"Well! Now, Noddy!" cried Mrs. Boffin, clapping her hands, "That *is* a good one!"

Mr. Boffin was no less delighted; indeed, in his own bosom, he regarded both the composition itself and the device that had given birth to it, as a very remarkable monument of human ingenuity.

"And I tell you, my deary," said Mrs. Boffin, "that if you don't close with Mr. Rokesmith now at once, and if you ever go a muddling yourself again with things never meant nor made for you, you'll have an apoplexy—besides iron-moulding your linen—and you'll break my heart."

Mr. Boffin embraced his spouse for these words of wisdom, and then, congratulating John Rokesmith on the brilliancy of his achievements, gave him his hand in pledge of their new relations. So did Mrs. Boffin.

"Now," said Mr. Boffin, who, in his frankness, felt that it did not become him to have a gentleman in his employment five minutes, without reposing some confidence in him, "you must be let a little more into our affairs, Rokesmith. I mentioned to you, when I made your acquaintance, or I might better say when you made mine, that Mrs. Boffin's inclinations was setting in the way of Fashion, but that I didn't know how fashionable we might or might not grow. Well! Mrs. Boffin has carried the day, and we're going in neck and crop for Fashion."

"I rather inferred that, sir," replied John Rokesmith, "from the scale on which your new establishment is to be maintained."

"Yes," said Mr. Boffin, "it's to be a Spanker. The fact is, my literary man named to me that a house with which he is, as I may say, connected—in which he has an interest—"

"As property?" inquired John Rokesmith.

"Why no," said Mr. Boffin, "not exactly that; a sort of a family tie."

"Association?" the Secretary suggested.

"Ah!" said Mr. Boffin. "Perhaps. Anyhow, he named to me that the house had a board up, 'This Eminent Aristocratic Mansion to be let or sold.' Me and Mrs. Boffin went to look at it, and finding it beyond a doubt Eminent Aristocratic (though a trifle high and dull, which after all may be part of the same thing) took it. My literary man was so friendly as to drop into a charming piece of poetry on that occasion, in which he complimented Mrs. Boffin on coming into possession of—how did it go, my dear?"

Mrs. Boffin replied:

"The gay, the gay and festive scene,
The halls, the halls of dazzling light."

"That's it! And it was made neater by there really being two halls

in the house, a front 'un and a back 'un, besides the servants'. He likewise dropped into a very pretty piece of poetry to be sure, respecting the extent to which he would be willing to put himself out of the way to bring Mrs. Boffin round, in case she should ever get low in her spirits in the house. Mrs. Boffin has a wonderful memory. Will you repeat it, my dear?"

Mrs. Boffin complied, by reciting the verses in which this obliging offer had been made, exactly as she had received them.

"I'll tell thee how the maiden wept, Mrs. Boffin,
 "When her true love was slain ma'am,
 "And how her broken spirit slept, Mrs. Boffin,
 "And never woke again ma'am.
 "I'll tell thee (if agreeable to Mr. Boffin) how the steed drew nigh,
 "And left his lord afar;
 "And if my tale (which I hope Mr. Boffin might excuse) should make
 you sigh,
 "I'll strike the light guitar."

"Correct to the letter!" said Mr. Boffin. "And I consider that the poetry brings us both in, in a beautiful manner."

The effect of the poem on the Secretary being evidently to astonish him, Mr. Boffin was confirmed in his high opinion of it, and was greatly pleased.

"Now, you see, Rokesmith," he went on, "a literary man—with a wooden leg—is liable to jealousy. I shall therefore cast about for comfortable ways and means of not calling up Wegg's jealousy, but of keeping you in your department, and keeping him in his."

"Lor!" cried Mrs. Boffin. "What I say is, the world's wide enough for all of us!"

"So it is, my dear," said Mr. Boffin, "when not literary. But when so, not so. And I am bound to bear in mind that I took Wegg on, at a time when I had no thought of being fashionable or of leaving the Bower. To let him feel himself anyways slighted now, would be to be guilty of a meanness, and to act like having one's head turned by the halls of dazzling light. Which Lord forbid! Rokesmith, what shall we say about your living in the house?"

"In this house?"

"No, no. I have got other plans for this house. In the new house?"

"That will be as you please, Mr. Boffin. I hold myself quite at your disposal. You know where I live at present."

"Well!" said Mr. Boffin, after considering the point; "suppose you keep as you are for the present, and we'll decide by-and-by. You'll begin to take charge at once, of all that's going on in the new house, will you?"

"Most willingly. I will begin this very day. Will you give me the address?"

Mr. Boffin repeated it, and the Secretary wrote it down in his pocket-book. Mrs. Boffin took the opportunity of his being so engaged, to get a better observation of his face than she had yet taken. It impressed her in his favour, for she nodded aside to Mr. Boffin, "I like him."

"I will see directly that everything is in train, Mr. Boffin."

"Thank'ee. Being here, would you care at all to look round the Bower?"

"I should greatly like it. I have heard so much of its story."

"Come!" said Mr. Boffin. And he and Mrs. Boffin led the way.

A gloomy house the Bower, with sordid signs on it of having been, through its long existence as Harmony Jail, in miserly holding. Bare of paint, bare of paper on the walls, bare of furniture, bare of experience of human life. Whatever is built by man for man's occupation, must, like natural creations, fulfil the intention of its existence, or soon perish. This old house had wasted more from desuetude than it would have wasted from use, twenty years for one.

A certain leanness falls upon houses not sufficiently imbued with life (as if they were nourished upon it), which was very noticeable here. The staircase, balustrades, and rails, had a spare look—an air of being denuded to the bone—which the panels of the walls and the jambs of the doors and windows also bore. The scanty moveables partook of it; save for the cleanliness of the place, the dust into which they were all resolving would have lain thick on the floors; and those, both in colour and in grain, were worn like old faces that had kept much alone.

The bedroom where the clutching old man had lost his grip on life, was left as he had left it. There was the old grisly four-post bedstead, without hangings, and with a jail-like upper rim of iron and spikes; and there was the old patch-work counterpane. There was the tight-clenched old bureau, receding atop like a bad and secret forehead; there was the cumbersome old table with twisted legs, at the bed-side; and there was the box upon it, in which the will had lain. A few old chairs with patch-work covers, under which the more precious stuff to be preserved had slowly lost its quality of colour without imparting pleasure to any eye, stood against the wall. A hard family likeness was on all these things.

"The room was kept like this, Rokesmith," said Mr. Boffin, "against the son's return. In short, everything in the house was kept exactly as it came to us, for him to see and approve. Even now, nothing is changed but our own room below-stairs that you have just left. When the son came home for the last time in his life, and for the last time in his life saw his father, it was most likely in this room that they met."

As the Secretary looked all round it, his eyes rested on a side door in a corner.

"Another staircase," said Mr. Boffin, unlocking the door, "leading down into the yard. We'll go down this way, as you may like to see the yard, and it's all in the road. When the son was a little child, it was up and down these stairs that he mostly came and went to his father. He was very timid of his father. I've seen him sit on these stairs, in his shy way, poor child, many a time. Me and Mrs. Boffin have comforted him, sitting with his little book on these stairs, often."

"Ah! And his poor sister too," said Mrs. Boffin. "And here's the sunny place on the white wall where they one day measured one another. Their own little hands wrote up their names here, only with a pencil; but the names are here still, and the poor dears gone for ever."

"We must take care of the names, old lady," said Mr. Boffin.

"We must take care of the names. They shan't be rubbed out in

our time, nor yet, if we can help it, in the time after us. Poor little children!"

"Ah, poor little children!" said Mrs. Boffin.

They had opened the door at the bottom of the staircase giving on the yard, and they stood in the sunlight, looking at the scrawl of the two unsteady childish hands two or three steps up the staircase. There was something in this simple memento of a blighted childhood, and in the tenderness of Mrs. Boffin, that touched the Secretary.

Mr. Boffin then showed his new man of business the Mounds, and his own particular Mound which had been left him as his legacy under the will before he acquired the whole estate.

"It would have been enough for us," said Mr. Boffin, "in case it had pleased God to spare the last of those two young lives and sorrowful deaths. We didn't want the rest."

At the treasures of the yard, and at the outside of the house, and at the detached building which Mr. Boffin pointed out as the residence of himself and his wife during the many years of their service, the Secretary looked with interest. It was not until Mr. Boffin had shown him every wonder of the Bower twice over, that he remembered his having duties to discharge elsewhere.

"You have no instructions to give me, Mr. Boffin, in reference to this place?"

"Not any, Rokesmith. No."

"Might I ask, without seeming impertinent, whether you have any intention of selling it?"

"Certainly not. In remembrance of our old master, our old master's children, and our old service, me and Mrs. Boffin mean to keep it up as it stands."

The Secretary's eyes glanced with so much meaning in them at the Mounds, that Mr. Boffin said, as if in answer to a remark:

"Ay, ay, that's another thing. I may sell *them*, though I should be sorry to see the neighbourhood deprived of 'em too. It'll look but a poor dead flat without the Mounds. Still I don't say that I'm going to keep 'em always there, for the sake of the beauty of the landscape. There's no hurry about it; that's all I say at present. I ain't a scholar in much, Rokesmith, but I'm a pretty fair scholar in dust. I can price the Mounds to a fraction, and I know how they can be best disposed of, and likewise that they take no harm by standing where they do. You'll look in to-morrow, will you be so kind?"

"Every day. And the sooner I can get you into your new house, complete, the better you will be pleased, sir?"

"Well, it ain't that I'm in a mortal hurry," said Mr. Boffin; "only when you *do* pay people for looking alive, it's as well to know that they *are* looking alive. Ain't that your opinion?"

"Quite!" replied the Secretary; and so withdrew.

"Now," said Mr. Boffin to himself, subsiding into his regular series of turns in the yard, "if I can make it comfortable with Wegg, my affairs will be going smooth."

The man of low cunning had, of course, acquired a mastery over the man of high simplicity. The mean man had, of course, got the better of the generous man. How long such conquests last, is another matter; that they are achieved, is every-day experience, not

even to be flourished away by Podsnappery itself. The undesigning Boffin had become so far immeshed by the wily Wegg that his mind misgave him he was a very designing man indeed in purposing to do more for Wegg. It seemed to him (so skilful was Wegg) that he was plotting darkly, when he was contriving to do the very thing that Wegg was plotting to get him to do. And thus, while he was mentally turning the kindest of kind faces on Wegg this morning, he was not absolutely sure but that he might somehow deserve the charge of turning his back on him.

For these reasons Mr. Boffin passed but anxious hours until evening came, and with it Mr. Wegg, stumping leisurely to the Roman Empire. At about this period Mr. Boffin had become profoundly interested in the fortunes of a great military leader known to him as Bully Sawyers, but perhaps better known to fame and easier of identification by the classical student, under the less Britanic name of Belisarius. Even this general's career paled in interest for Mr. Boffin before the clearing of his conscience with Wegg; and hence, when that literary gentleman had according to custom eaten and drunk until he was all a-glow, and when he took up his book with the usual chirping introduction, "And now, Mr. Boffin, sir, we'll decline and we'll fall!" Mr. Boffin stopped him.

"You remember, Wegg, when I first told you that I wanted to make a sort of offer to you?"

"Let me get on my considering cap, sir," replied that gentleman, turning the open book face downward. "When you first told me that you wanted to make a sort of offer to me? Now let me think." (as if there were the least necessity) "Yes, to be sure I do, Mr. Boffin. It was at my corner. To be sure it was! You had first asked me whether I liked your name, and Candour had compelled a reply in the negative case. I little thought then, sir, how familiar that name would come to be!"

"I hope it will be more familiar still, Wegg."

"Do you, Mr. Boffin? Much obliged to you, I'm sure. Is it your pleasure, sir, that we decline and we fall?" with a feint of taking up the book.

"Not just yet awhile, Wegg. In fact, I have got another offer to make you."

Mr. Wegg (who had had nothing else in his mind for several nights) took off his spectacles with an air of bland surprise.

"And I hope you'll like it, Wegg."

"Thank you, sir," returned that reticent individual. "I hope it may prove so. On all accounts, I am sure." (This, as a philanthropic aspiration.)

"What do you think," said Mr. Boffin, "of not keeping a stall, Wegg?"

"I think, sir," replied Wegg, "that I should like to be shown the gentleman prepared to make it worth my while!"

"Here he is," said Mr. Boffin.

Mr. Wegg was going to say, My Benefactor, and had said My Bene, when a grandiloquent change came over him.

"No, Mr. Boffin, not you, sir. Anybody but you. Do not fear, Mr. Boffin, that I shall contaminate the premises which your gold has bought, with my lowly pursuits. I am aware, sir, that it would

not become me to carry on my little traffic under the windows of your mansion. I have already thought of that, and taken my measures. No need to be bought out, sir. Would Stepney Fields be considered intrusive? If not remote enough, I can go remoter. In the words of the poet's song, which I do not quite remember :

Thrown on the wide world, doom'd to wander and roam,
Bereft of my parents, bereft of a home,
A stranger to something and what's his name joy,
Behold little Edmund the poor Peasant boy.

—And equally," said Mr. Wegg, repairing the want of direct application in the last line, "behold myself on a similar footing!"

"Now, Wegg, Wegg, Wegg," remonstrated the excellent Boffin.

"You are too sensitive."
"I know I am, sir," returned Wegg, with obstinate magnanimity. "I am acquainted with my faults. I always was, from a child, too sensitive."

"But listen," pursued the Golden Dustman; "hear me out, Wegg. You have taken it into your head that I mean to pension you off."

"True, sir," returned Wegg, still with an obstinate magnanimity. "I am acquainted with my faults. Far be it from me to deny them. I have taken it into my head."

"But I don't mean it."

The assurance seemed hardly as comforting to Mr. Wegg, as Mr. Boffin intended it to be. Indeed, an appreciable elongation of his visage might have been observed as he replied :

"Don't you, indeed, sir?"

"No," pursued Mr. Boffin; "because that would express, as I understand it, that you were not going to do anything to deserve your money. But you are; you are."

"That, sir," replied Mr. Wegg, cheering up bravely, "is quite another pair of shoes. Now, my independence as a man is again elevated. Now, I no longer

Weep for the hour,
When to Boffinses bower,
The Lord of the valley with offers came;
Neither does the moon hide her light
From the heavens to-night,
And weep behind her clouds o'er any individual in the present
Company's shame."

—Please to proceed, Mr. Boffin."

"Thank'ee, Wegg, both for your confidence in me and for your frequent dropping into poetry; both of which is friendly. Well, then; my idea is, that you should give up your stall, and that I should put you into the Bower here, to keep it for us. It's a pleasant spot; and a man with coals and candles and a pound a week might be in clover here."

"Hem! Would that man, sir—we will say that man, for the purposes of arguement;" Mr. Wegg made a smiling demonstration of great perspicuity here; "would that man, sir, be expected to throw any other capacity in, or would any other capacity be considered extra? Now let us (for the purposes of arguement) suppose that man to be engaged as a reader: say (for the purposes of arguement) in the evening. Would that man's pay as a reader in the evening, be added

to the other amount, which, adopting your language, we will call clover; or would it merge into that amount, or clover?"

"Well," said Mr. Boffin, "I suppose it would be added."

"I suppose it would, sir. You are right, sir. Exactly my own views, Mr. Boffin." Here Wegg rose, and balancing himself on his wooden leg, fluttered over his prey with extended hand. "Mr. Boffin, consider it done. Say no more, sir, not a word more. My stall and I are for ever parted. The collection of ballads will in future be reserved for private study, with the object of making poetry tributary"—Wegg was so proud of having found this word, that he said it again, with a capital letter—"Tributary, to friendship. Mr. Boffin, don't allow yourself to be made uncomfortable by the pang it gives me to part from my stock and stall. Similar emotion was undergone by my own father when promoted for his merits from his occupation as a waterman to a situation under Government. His Christian name was Thomas. His words at the time (I was then an infant, but so deep was their impression on me, that I committed them to memory) were :

Then farewell my trim-built wherry,
Oars and coat and badge farewell!
Never more at Chelsea Ferry,
Shall your Thomas take a spell!

—My father got over it, Mr. Boffin, and so shall I."

While delivering these valedictory observations, Wegg continually disappointed Mr. Boffin of his hand by flourishing it in the air. He now darted it at his patron, who took it, and felt his mind relieved of a great weight: observing that as they had arranged their joint affairs so satisfactorily, he would now be glad to look into those of Bully Sawyers. Which, indeed, had been left over-night in a very unpromising posture, and for whose impending expedition against the Persians the weather had been by no means favourable all day.

Mr. Wegg resumed his spectacles therefore. But Sawyers was not to be of the party that night; for, before Wegg had found his place, Mrs. Boffin's tread was heard upon the stairs, so unusually heavy and hurried, that Mr. Boffin would have started up at the sound, anticipating some occurrence much out of the common course, even though she had not also called to him in an agitated tone.

Mr. Boffin hurried out, and found her on the dark staircase, panting, with a lighted candle in her hand.

"What's the matter, my dear?"

"I don't know; I don't know; but I wish you'd come up-stairs."

Much surprised, Mr. Boffin went up stairs and accompanied Mrs. Boffin into their own room: a second large room on the same floor as the room in which the late proprietor had died. Mr. Boffin looked all round him, and saw nothing more unusual than various articles of folded linen on a large chest, which Mrs. Boffin had been sorting.

"What is it, my dear? Why, you're frightened! *You* frightened?"

"I am not one of that sort certainly," said Mrs. Boffin, as she sat down in a chair to recover herself, and took her husband's arm; "but it's very strange!"

"What is, my dear?"

"Noddy, the faces of the old man and the two children are all over the house to-night."

"My dear?" exclaimed Mr. Boffin. But not without a certain uncomfortable sensation gliding down his back.

"I know it must sound foolish, and yet it is so."

"Where did you think you saw them?"

"I don't know that I think I saw them anywhere. I felt them."

"Touched them?"

"No. Felt them in the air. I was sorting those things on the chest, and not thinking of the old man or the children, but singing to myself, when all in a moment I felt there was a face growing out of the dark."

"What face?" asked her husband, looking about him.

"For a moment it was the old man's, and then it got younger. For a moment it was both the children's, and then it got older. For a moment it was a strange face, and then it was all the faces."

"And then it was gone?"

"Yes; and then it was gone."

"Where were you then, old lady?"

"Here, at the chest. Well; I got the better of it, and went on sorting, and went on singing to myself. 'Lor!' I says, 'I'll think of something else—something comfortable—and put it out of my head.' So I thought of the new house and Miss Bella Wilfer, and was thinking at a great rate with that sheet there in my hand, when, all of a sudden, the faces seemed to be hidden in among the folds of it and I let it drop."

As it still lay on the floor where it had fallen, Mr. Boffin picked it up and laid it on the chest.

"And then you ran down stairs?"

"No. I thought I'd try another room, and shake it off. I says to myself, 'I'll go and walk slowly up and down the old man's room three times, from end to end, and then I shall have conquered it.' I went in with the candle in my hand, but the moment I came near the bed, the air got thick with them."

"With the faces?"

"Yes, and I even felt that they were in the dark behind the side-door, and on the little staircase, floating away into the yard. Then, I called you."

Mr. Boffin, lost in amazement, looked at Mrs. Boffin. Mrs. Boffin, lost in her own fluttered inability to make this out, looked at Mr. Boffin.

"I think, my dear," said the Golden Dustman, "I'll at once get rid of Wegg for the night, because he's coming to inhabit the Bower, and it might be put into his head or somebody else's, if he heard this and it got about, that the house is haunted. Whereas we know better. Don't we?"

"I never had the feeling in the house before," said Mrs. Boffin; "and I have been about it alone at all hours of the night. I have been in the house when Death was in it, and I have been in the house when Murder was a new part of its adventures, and I never had a fright in it yet."

"And won't again, my dear," said Mr. Boffin. "Depend upon it, it comes of thinking and dwelling on that dark spot."

"Yes; but why didn't it come before?" asked Mrs. Boffin.

This draft on Mr. Boffin's philosophy could only be met by that gentleman with the remark that everything that is at all, must begin at some time. Then, tucking his wife's arm under his own, that she might not be left by herself to be troubled again, he descended to release Wegg. Who, being something drowsy after his plentiful repast, and constitutionally of a shirking temperament, was well enough pleased to stump away, without doing what he had come to do, and was paid for doing.

Mr. Boffin then put on his hat, and Mrs. Boffin her shawl; and the pair, further provided with a bunch of keys and a lighted lantern, went all over the dismal house—dismal everywhere, but in their own two rooms—from cellar to cock-loft. Not resting satisfied with giving that much chace to Mrs. Boffin's fancies, they pursued them into the yard and outbuildings, and under the Mounds. And setting the lantern, when all was done, at the foot of one of the Mounds, they comfortably trotted to and fro for an evening walk, to the end that the murky cobwebs in Mrs. Boffin's brain might be blown away.

"There, my dear!" said Mr. Boffin when they came in to supper. "That was the treatment, you see. Completely worked round, haven't you?"

"Yes, deary," said Mrs. Boffin, laying aside her shawl. "I'm not nervous any more. I'm not a bit troubled now. I'd go anywhere about the house the same as ever. But——"

"Eh!" said Mr. Boffin.

"But I've only to shut my eyes."

"And what then?"

"Why then," said Mrs. Boffin, speaking with her eyes closed, and her left hand thoughtfully touching her brow, "then, there they are! The old man's face, and it gets younger. The two children's faces, and they get older. A face that I don't know. And then all the faces!"

Opening her eyes again, and seeing her husband's face across the table, she leaned forward to give it a pat on the cheek, and sat down to supper, declaring it to be the best face in the world.

CHAPTER XVI.

MINDERS AND RE-MINDERS.

THE Secretary lost no time in getting to work, and his vigilance and method soon set their mark on the Golden Dustman's affairs. His earnestness in determining to understand the length and breadth and depth of every piece of work submitted to him by his employer, was as special as his despatch in transacting it. He accepted no information or explanation at second hand, but made himself the master of everything confided to him.

One part of the Secretary's conduct, underlying all the rest, might have been mistrusted by a man with a better knowledge of men than the Golden Dustman had. The Secretary was as far from being inquisitive or intrusive as Secretary could be, but nothing less than a complete understanding of the whole of the affairs would con-

tent him. It soon became apparent (from the knowledge with which he set out) that he must have been to the office where the Harmon will was registered, and must have read the will. He anticipated Mr. Boffin's consideration whether he should be advised with on this or that topic, by showing that he already knew of it and understood it. He did this with no attempt at concealment, seeming to be satisfied that it was part of his duty to have prepared himself at all attainable points for its utmost discharge.

This might—let it be repeated—have awakened some little vague mistrust in a man more worldly-wise than the Golden Dustman. On the other hand, the Secretary was discerning, discreet, and silent, though as zealous as if the affairs had been his own. He showed no love of patronage or the command of money, but distinctly preferred resigning both to Mr. Boffin. If, in his limited sphere, he sought power, it was the power of knowledge; the power derivable from a perfect comprehension of his business.

As on the Secretary's face there was a nameless cloud, so on his manner there was a shadow equally indefinable. It was not that he was embarrassed, as on that first night with the Wilfer family; he was habitually unembarrassed now, and yet the something remained. It was not that his manner was bad, as on that occasion; it was now very good, as being modest, gracious, and ready. Yet the something never left it. It has been written of men who have undergone a cruel captivity, or who have passed through a terrible strait, or who in self-preservation have killed a defenceless fellow-creature, that the record thereof has never faded from their countenances until they died. Was there any such record here?

He established a temporary office for himself in the new house, and all went well under his hand, with one singular exception. He manifestly objected to communicate with Mr. Boffin's solicitor. Two or three times, when there was some slight occasion for his doing so, he transferred the task to Mr. Boffin; and his evasion of it soon became so curiously apparent, that Mr. Boffin spoke to him on the subject of his reluctance.

"It is so," the Secretary admitted. "I would rather not."

Had he any personal objection to Mr. Lightwood?

"I don't know him."

Had he suffered from law-suits?

"Not more than other men," was his short answer.

Was he prejudiced against the race of lawyers?

"No. But while I am in your employment, sir, I would rather be excused from going between the lawyer and the client. Of course if you press it, Mr. Boffin, I am ready to comply. But I should take it as a great favour if you would not press it without urgent occasion."

Now, it could not be said that there *was* urgent occasion, for Lightwood retained no other affairs in his hands than such as still lingered and languished about the undiscovered criminal, and such as arose out of the purchase of the house. Many other matters that might have travelled to him, now stopped short at the Secretary, under whose administration they were far more expeditiously and satisfactorily disposed of than they would have been if they had got into Young Blight's domain. This the Golden Dustman quite

understood. Even the matter immediately in hand was of very little moment as requiring personal appearance on the Secretary's part, for it amounted to no more than this:—The death of Hexam rendering the sweat of the honest man's brow unprofitable, the honest man had shufflingly declined to moisten his brow for nothing, with that severe exertion which is known in legal circles as swearing your way through a stone wall. Consequently, that new light had gone sputtering out. But, the airing of the old facts had led some one concerned to suggest that it would be well before they were re-consigned to their gloomy shelf—now probably for ever—to induce or compel that Mr. Julius Handford to reappear and be questioned. And all traces of Mr. Julius Handford being lost, Lightwood now referred to his client for authority to seek him through public advertisement.

"Does your objection go to writing to Lightwood, Rokesmith?"

"Not in the least, sir."

"Then perhaps you'll write him a line, and say he is free to do what he likes. I don't think it promises."

"I don't think it promises," said the Secretary.

"Still, he may do what he likes."

"I will write immediately. Let me thank you for so considerably yielding to my disinclination. It may seem less unreasonable, if I avow to you that although I don't know Mr. Lightwood, I have a disagreeable association connected with him. It is not his fault; he is not at all to blame for it, and does not even know my name."

Mr. Boffin dismissed the matter with a nod or two. The letter was written, and next day Mr. Julius Handford was advertised for. He was requested to place himself in communication with Mr. Mortimer Lightwood, as a possible means of furthering the ends of justice, and a reward was offered to any one acquainted with his whereabouts who would communicate the same to the said Mr. Mortimer Lightwood at his office in the Temple. Every day for six weeks this advertisement appeared at the head of all the newspapers, and every day for six weeks the Secretary, when he saw it, said to himself, in the tone in which he had said to his employer,—
"I don't think it promises!"

Among his first occupations the pursuit of that orphan wanted by Mrs. Boffin held a conspicuous place. From the earliest moment of his engagement he showed a particular desire to please her, and, knowing her to have this object at heart, he followed it up with unwearied alacrity and interest.

Mr. and Mrs. Milvey had found their search a difficult one. Either an eligible orphan was of the wrong sex (which almost always happened) or was too old, or too young, or too sickly, or too dirty, or too much accustomed to the streets, or too likely to run away; or, it was found impossible to complete the philanthropic transaction without buying the orphan. For, the instant it became known that anybody wanted the orphan, up started some affectionate relative of the orphan who put a price upon the orphan's head. The suddenness of an orphan's rise in the market was not to be paralleled by the maddest records of the Stock Exchange. He would be at five thousand per cent. discount out at nurse making a mud pie at nine in

the morning, and (being inquired for) would go up to five thousand per cent. premium before noon. The market was "rigged" in various artful ways. Counterfeit stock got into circulation. Parents boldly represented themselves as dead, and brought their orphans with them. Genuine orphan-stock was surreptitiously withdrawn from the market. It being announced, by emissaries posted for the purpose, that Mr. and Mrs. Milvey were coming down the court, orphan scrip would be instantly concealed, and production refused, save on a condition usually stated by the brokers as a "a gallon of beer." Likewise, fluctuations of a wild and South-Sea nature were occasioned, by orphan-holders keeping back, and then rushing into the market a dozen together. But, the uniform principle at the root of all these various operations was bargain and sale; and that principle could not be recognized by Mr. and Mrs. Milvey.

At length, tidings were received by the Reverend Frank of a charming orphan to be found at Brentford. One of the deceased parents (late his parishioners) had a poor widowed grandmother in that agreeable town, and she, Mrs. Betty Higden, had carried off the orphan with maternal care, but could not afford to keep him.

The Secretary proposed to Mrs. Boffin, either to go down himself and take a preliminary survey of this orphan, or to drive her down, that she might at once form her own opinion. Mrs. Boffin preferring the latter course, they set off one morning in a hired phaeton, conveying the hammer-headed young man behind them.

The abode of Mrs. Betty Higden was not easy to find, lying in such complicated back settlements of muddy Brentford that they left their equipage at the sign of the Three Magpies, and went in search of it on foot. After many inquiries and defeats, there was pointed out to them in a lane, a very small cottage residence, with a board across the open doorway, hooked on to which board by the armpits was a young gentleman of tender years, angling for mud with a headless wooden horse and line. In this young sportsman, distinguished by a crisply curling auburn head and a bluff countenance, the Secretary descried the orphan.

It unfortunately happened as they quickened their pace, that the orphan, lost to considerations of personal safety in the ardour of the moment, overbalanced himself and toppled into the street. Being an orphan of a chubby conformation, he then took to rolling, and had rolled into the gutter before they could come up. From the gutter he was rescued by John Rokesmith, and thus the first meeting with Mrs. Higden was inaugurated by the awkward circumstance of their being in possession—one would say at first sight unlawful possession—of the orphan, upside down and purple in the countenance. The board across the doorway too, acting as a trap equally for the feet of Mrs. Higden coming out, and the feet of Mrs. Boffin and John Rokesmith going in, greatly increased the difficulty of the situation: to which the cries of the orphan imparted a lugubrious and inhuman character.

At first, it was impossible to explain, on account of the orphan's "holding his breath:" a most terrific proceeding, super-inducing in the orphan, lead-colour rigidity and a deadly silence, compared with which his cries were music yielding the height of

enjoyment. But as he gradually recovered, Mrs. Boffin gradually introduced herself, and smiling peace was gradually wooed back to Mrs. Betty Higden's home.

It was then perceived to be a small home with a large mangle in it, at the handle of which machine stood a very long boy, with a very little head, and an open mouth of disproportionate capacity that seemed to assist his eyes in staring at the visitors. In a corner below the mangle, on a couple of stools, sat two very little children: a boy and a girl; and when the very long boy, in an interval of staring, took a turn at the mangle, it was alarming to see how it lunged itself at those two innocents, like a catapult designed for their destruction, harmlessly retiring when within an inch of their heads. The room was clean and neat. It had a brick floor, and a window of diamond panes, and a flounce hanging below the chimney-piece, and strings nailed from bottom to top outside the window on which scarlet-beans were to grow in the coming season if the Fates were propitious. However propitious they might have been in the seasons that were gone, to Betty Higden in the matter of beans, they had not been very favourable in the matter of coins; for it was easy to see that she was poor.

She was one of those old women, was Mrs. Betty Higden, who by dint of an indomitable purpose and a strong constitution fight out many years, though each year has come with its new knock-down blows fresh to the fight against her, wearied by it; an active old woman, with a bright dark eye and a resolute face, yet quite a tender creature too; not a logically-reasoning woman, but God is good, and hearts may count in Heaven as high as heads.

"Yes sure!" said she, when the business was opened, "Mrs. Milvey had the kindness to write to me, ma'am, and I got Sloppy to read it. It was a pretty letter. But she's an affable lady."

The visitors glanced at the long boy, who seemed to indicate by a broader stare of his mouth and eyes that in him Sloppy stood confessed.

"For I aint, you must know," said Betty, "much of a hand at reading writing-hand, though I can read my Bible and most print. And I do love a newspaper. You mightn't think it, but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices."

The visitors again considered it a point of politeness to look at Sloppy, who, looking at them, suddenly threw back his head, extended his mouth to its utmost width, and laughed loud and long. At this the two innocents, with their brains in that apparent danger, laughed, and Mrs. Higden laughed, and the orphan laughed, and then the visitors laughed. Which was more cheerful than intelligible.

Then Sloppy seeming to be seized with an industrious mania or fury, turned to at the mangle, and impelled it at the heads of the innocents with such a creaking and rumbling, that Mrs. Higden stopped him.

"The gentlefolks can't hear themselves speak, Sloppy. Bide a bit, bide a bit!"

"Is that the dear child in your lap?" said Mrs. Boffin.

"Yes, ma'am, this is Johnny."

"Johnny, too!" cried Mrs. Boffin, turning to the Secretary;

"already Johnny! Only one of the two names left to give him! He's a pretty boy."

With his chin tucked down in his shy childish manner, he was looking furtively at Mrs. Boffin out of his blue eyes, and reaching his fat dimpled hand up to the lips of the old woman, who was kissing it by times.

"Yes, ma'am, he's a pretty boy, he's a dear darling boy, he's the child of my own last left daughter's daughter. But she's gone the way of all the rest."

"Those are not his brother and sister?" said Mrs. Boffin.

"Oh, dear no, ma'am. Those are Minders."

"Minders?" the Secretary repeated,

"Left to be Minded, sir. I keep a Minding-School. I can take only three, on account of the Mangle. But I love children, and Four-pence a week is Four-pence. Come here, Toddles and Poddles."

Toddles was the pet-name of the boy; Poddles of the girl. At their little unsteady pace, they came across the floor, hand-in-hand, as if they were traversing an extremely difficult road intersected by brooks, and, when they had had their heads patted by Mrs. Betty Higden, made lunges at the orphan, dramatically representing an attempt to bear him, crowing, into captivity and slavery. All the three children enjoyed this to a delightful extent, and the sympathetic Sloppy again laughed long and loud. When it was discreet to stop the play, Betty Higden said "Go to your seats Toddles and Poddles," and they returned hand-in-hand across country, seeming to find the brooks rather swollen by late rains.

"And Master—or Mister—Sloppy?" said the Secretary, in doubt whether he was man, boy, or what.

"A love-child," returned Betty Higden, dropping her voice; "parents never known; found in the street. He was brought up in the ——" with a shiver of repugnance, "—— the House."

"The Poor-house?" said the Secretary.

Mrs. Higden set that resolute old face of hers, and darkly nodded yes.

"You dislike the mention of it."

"Dislike the mention of it?" answered the old woman. "Kill me sooner than take me there. Throw this pretty child under cart-horses' feet and a loaded waggon, sooner than take him there. Come to us and find us all a-dying, and set a light to us all where we lie, and let us all blaze away with the house into a heap of cinders, sooner than move a corpse of us there!"

A surprising spirit in this lonely woman after so many years of hard working, and hard living, my Lords and Gentlemen and Honorable Boards! What is it that we call it in our grandiose speeches? British independence, rather perverted? Is that, or something like it, the ring of the cant?

"Do I never read in the newspapers," said the dame, fondling the child—"God help me and the like of me!—how the worn-out people that do come down to that, get driven from post to pillar and pillar to post, a-purpose to tire them out! Do I never read how they are put off, put off, put off—how they are grudged, grudged, grudged, the shelter, or the doctor, or the drop of physic, or the bit of bread? Do I never read how they grow heartsick of it and give it

up, after having let themselves drop so low, and how they after all die out for want of help? Then I say, I hope I can die as well as another, and I'll die without that disgrace."

Absolutely impossible my Lords and Gentlemen and Honorable Boards, by any stretch of legislative wisdom to set these perverse people right in their logic?

"Johnny, my pretty," continued old Betty, caressing the child, and rather mourning over it than speaking to it, "your old Granny Betty is nigher fourscore year than threescore and ten. She never begged nor had a penny of the Union money in all her life. She paid scot and she paid lot when she had money to pay; she worked when she could, and she starved when she must. You pray that your Granny may have strength enough left her at the last (she's strong for an old one, Johnny), to get up from her bed and run and hide herself, and swown to death in a hole, sooner than fall into the hands of those Cruel Jacks we read of, that dodge and drive, and worry and weary, and scorn and shame, the decent poor."

A brilliant success, my Lords and Gentlemen and Honorable Boards to have brought it to this in the minds of the best of the poor! Under submission, might it be worth thinking of, at any odd time?

The fright and abhorrence that Mrs. Betty Higden smoothed out of her strong face as she ended this diversion, showed how seriously she had meant it.

"And does he work for you?" asked the Secretary, gently bringing the discourse back to Master or Mister Sloppy.

"Yes," said Betty with a good-humoured smile and nod of the head. "And well too."

"Does he live here?"

"He lives more here than anywhere. He was thought to be no better than a Natural, and first come to me as a Minder. I made interest with Mr. Blogg the Beadle to have him as a Minder, seeing him by chance up at church, and thinking I might do something with him. For he was a weak ricketty creature then."

"Is he called by his right name?"

"Why, you see, speaking quite correctly, he has no right name. I always understood he took his name from being found on a Sloppy night."

"He seems an amiable fellow."

"Bless you, sir, there's not a bit of him," returned Betty, "that's not amiable. So you may judge how amiable he is, by running your eye along his height."

Of an ungainly make was Sloppy. Too much of him longwise, too little of him broadwise, and too many sharp angles of him angle-wise. One of those shambling male human creatures, born to be indiscreetly candid in the revelation of buttons; every button he had about him glaring at the public to a quite preternatural extent. A considerable capital of knee and elbow and wrist and ankle, had Sloppy, and he didn't know how to dispose of it to the best advantage, but was always investing it in wrong securities, and so getting himself into embarrassed circumstances. Full-Private Number One in the Awkward Squad of the rank and file of life, was Sloppy, and yet had his glimmering notions of standing true to the Colours.

"And now," said Mrs. Boffin, "concerning Johnny."

As Johnny, with his chin tucked in and his lips pouting, reclined in Betty's lap, concentrating his blue eyes on the visitors and shading them from observation with a dimpled arm, old Betty took one of his fresh fat hands in her withered right, and fell to gently beating it on her withered left.

"Yes, ma'am. Concerning Johnny."

"If you trust the dear child to me," said Mrs. Boffin, with a face inviting trust, "he shall have the best of homes, the best of care, the best of education, the best of friends. Please God I will be a true good mother to him!"

"I am thankful to you, ma'am, and the dear child would be thankful if he was old enough to understand." Still lightly beating the little hand upon her own. "I wouldn't stand in the dear child's light, not if I had all my life before me instead of a very little of it. But I hope you won't take it ill that I cleave to the child closer than words can tell, for he's the last living thing left me."

"Take it ill, my dear soul? Is it likely? And you so tender of him as to bring him home here!"

"I have seen," said Betty, still with that light beat upon her hard rough hand, "so many of them on my lap. And they are all gone but this one! I am ashamed to seem so selfish, but I don't really mean it. It'll be the making of his fortune, and he'll be a gentleman when I am dead. I—I—don't know what comes over me. I—try against it. Don't notice me!" The light beat stopped, the resolute mouth gave way, and the fine strong old face broke up into weakness and tears.

Now, greatly to the relief of the visitors, the emotional Sloppy no sooner beheld his patroness in this condition, than, throwing back his head and throwing open his mouth, he lifted up his voice and bellowed. This alarming note of something wrong instantly terrified Toddles and Poddles, who were no sooner heard to roar surprisingly, than Johnny, curving himself the wrong way and striking out at Mrs. Boffin with a pair of indifferent shoes, became a prey to despair. The absurdity of the situation put its pathos to the rout. Mrs. Betty Higden was herself in a moment, and brought them all to order with that speed, that Sloppy, stopping short in a polysyllabic bellow, transferred his energy to the mangle, and had taken several penitential turns before he could be stopped.

"There, there, there!" said Mrs. Boffin, almost regarding her kind self as the most ruthless of women. "Nothing is going to be done. Nobody need be frightened. We're all comfortable; ain't we, Mrs. Higden?"

"Sure and certain we are," returned Betty.

"And there really is no hurry, you know," said Mrs. Boffin in a lower voice. "Take time to think of it, my good creature!"

"Don't you fear me no more, ma'am," said Betty; "I thought of it for good yesterday. I don't know what come over me just now, but it'll never come again."

"Well, then, Johnny shall have more time to think of it," returned Mrs. Boffin; "the pretty child shall have time to get used to it. And you'll get him more used to it, if you think well of it; won't you?"

Betty undertook that, cheerfully and readily.

"Lor," cried Mrs. Boffin, looking radiantly about her, "we want to make everybody happy, not dismal!—And perhaps you wouldn't mind letting me know how used to it you begin to get, and how it all goes on?"

"I'll send Sloppy," said Mrs. Higden.

"And this gentleman who has come with me will pay him for his trouble," said Mrs. Boffin. "And Mr. Sloppy, whenever you come to my house, be sure you never go away without having had a good dinner of meat, beer, vegetables, and pudding."

This still further brightened the face of affairs; for, the highly sympathetic Sloppy, first broadly staring and grinning, and then roaring with laughter, Toddles and Poddles followed suit, and Johnny trumped the trick. T and P considering these favorable circumstances for the resumption of that dramatic descent upon Johnny, again came across-country hand-in-hand upon a buccaneering expedition; and this having been fought out in the chimney corner behind Mrs. Higden's chair, with great valour on both sides, those desperate pirates returned hand-in-hand to their stools, across the dry bed of a mountain torrent.

"You must tell me what I can do for you, Betty my friend," said Mrs. Boffin confidentially, "if not to-day, next time."

"Thank you all the same, ma'am, but I want nothing for myself. I can work. I'm strong. I can walk twenty mile if I'm put to it." Old Betty was proud, and said it with a sparkle in her bright eyes.

"Yes, but there are some little comforts that you wouldn't be the worse for," returned Mrs. Boffin. "Bless ye, I wasn't born a lady any more than you."

"It seems to me," said Betty, smiling, "that you were born a lady, and a true one, or there never was a lady born. But I couldn't take anything from you, my dear. I never did take anything from any one. It ain't that I'm not grateful, but I love to earn it better."

"Well, well!" returned Mrs. Boffin. "I only spoke of little things, or I wouldn't have taken the liberty."

Betty put her visitor's hand to her lips, in acknowledgment of the delicate answer. Wonderfully upright her figure was, and wonderfully self-reliant her look, as, standing facing her visitor, she explained herself further.

"If I could have kept the dear child, without the dread that's always upon me of his coming to that fate I have spoken of, I could never have parted with him, even to you. For I love him, I love him, I love him! I love my husband long dead and gone, in him; I love my children dead and gone, in him; I love my young and hopeful days dead and gone, in him. I couldn't sell that love, and look you in your bright kind face. It's a free gift. I am in want of nothing. When my strength fails me, if I can but die out quick and quiet, I shall be quite content. I have stood between my dead and that shame I have spoken of, and it has been kept off from every one of them. Sewed into my gown," with her hand upon her breast, "is just enough to lay me in the grave. Only see that it's rightly spent, so as I may rest free to the last from that cruelty and disgrace, and you'll have done much more than a little thing for me, and all that in this present world my heart is set upon."

Mrs. Betty Higden's visitor pressed her hand. There was no more breaking up of the strong old face into weakness. My Lords and Gentlemen and Honorable Boards, it really was as composed as our own faces, and almost as dignified.

And now, Johnny was to be inveigled into occupying a temporary position on Mrs. Boffin's lap. It was not until he had been piqued into competition with the two diminutive Minders, by seeing them successively raised to that post and retire from it without injury, that he could be by any means induced to leave Mrs. Betty Higden's skirts; towards which he exhibited, even when in Mrs. Boffin's embrace, strong yearnings, spiritual and bodily; the former expressed in a very gloomy visage, the latter in extended arms. However, a general description of the toy-wonders lurking in Mrs. Boffin's house, so far conciliated this worldly-minded orphan as to induce him to stare at her frowningly, with a fist in his mouth, and even at length to chuckle when a richly-caparisoned horse on wheels, with a miraculous gift of cantering to cake-shops, was mentioned. This sound being taken up by the Minders, swelled into a rapturous trio which gave general satisfaction.

So, the interview was considered very successful, and Mrs. Boffin was pleased, and all were satisfied. Not least of all, Sloppy, who undertook to conduct the visitors back by the best way to the Three Magpies, and whom the hammer-headed young man much despised.

This piece of business thus put in train, the Secretary drove Mrs. Boffin back to the Bower, and found employment for himself at the new house until evening. Whether, when evening came, he took a way to his lodgings that led through fields, with any design of finding Miss Bella Wilfer in those fields, is not so certain as that she regularly walked there at that hour.

And, moreover, it is certain that there she was.

No longer in mourning, Miss Bella was dressed in as pretty colours as she could muster. There is no denying that she was as pretty as they, and that she and the colours went very prettily together. She was reading as she walked, and of course it is to be inferred, from her showing no knowledge of Mr. Rokesmith's approach, that she did not know he was approaching.

"Eh?" said Miss Bella, raising her eyes from her book, when he stopped before her. "Oh! It's you."

"Only I. A fine evening!"

"Is it?" said Bella, looking coldly round. "I suppose it is, now you mention it. I have not been thinking of the evening."

"So intent upon your book?"

"Ye-e-es," replied Bella, with a drawl of indifference.

"A love story, Miss Wilfer?"

"Oh dear no, or I shouldn't be reading it. It's more about money than anything else."

"And does it say that money is better than anything?"

"Upon my word," returned Bella, "I forget what it says, but you can find out for yourself, if you like, Mr. Rokesmith. I don't want it any more."

The Secretary took the book—she had fluttered the leaves as if it were a fan—and walked beside her

"I am charged with a message for you, Miss Wilfer."

"Impossible, I think!" said Bella, with another drawl.

"From Mrs. Boffin. She desired me to assure you of the pleasure she has in finding that she will be ready to receive you in another week or two at furthest."

Bella turned her head towards him, with her prettily-insolent eyebrows raised, and her eyelids drooping. As much as to say, "How did you come by the message, pray?"

"I have been waiting for an opportunity of telling you that I am Mr. Boffin's Secretary."

"I am as wise as ever," said Miss Bella, loftily, "for I don't know what a Secretary is. Not that it signifies."

"Not at all."

A covert glance at her face, as he walked beside her, showed him that she had not expected his ready assent to that proposition.

"Then are you going to be always there, Mr. Rokesmith?" she inquired, as if that would be a drawback.

"Always? No. Very much there? Yes."

"Dear me!" drawled Bella, in a tone of mortification.

"But my position there as Secretary, will be very different from yours as guest. You will know little or nothing about me. I shall transact the business: you will transact the pleasure. I shall have my salary to earn; you will have nothing to do but to enjoy and attract."

"Attract, sir?" said Bella, again with her eyebrows raised, and her eyelids drooping. "I don't understand you."

Without replying on this point, Mr. Rokesmith went on.

"Excuse me; when I first saw you in your black dress——"

("There!" was Miss Bella's mental exclamation. "What did I say to them at home? Everybody noticed that ridiculous mourning.")

"When I first saw you in your black dress, I was at a loss to account for that distinction between yourself and your family. I hope it was not impertinent to speculate upon it?"

"I hope not, I am sure," said Miss Bella, haughtily. "But you ought to know best how you speculated upon it."

Mr. Rokesmith inclined his head in a deprecatory manner, and went on.

"Since I have been entrusted with Mr. Boffin's affairs, I have necessarily come to understand the little mystery. I venture to remark that I feel persuaded that much of your loss may be repaired. I speak, of course, merely of wealth, Miss Wilfer. The loss of a perfect stranger, whose worth, or worthlessness, I cannot estimate—nor you either—is beside the question. But this excellent gentleman and lady are so full of simplicity, so full of generosity, so inclined towards you, and so desirous to—how shall I express it?—to make amends for their good fortune, that you have only to respond."

As he watched her with another covert look, he saw a certain ambitious triumph in her face which no assumed coldness could conceal.

"As we have been brought under one roof by an accidental combination of circumstances, which oddly extends itself to the new relations before us, I have taken the liberty of saying these few words. You

don't consider them intrusive I hope?" said the Secretary with deference.

"Really, Mr. Rokesmith, I can't say what I consider them," returned the young lady. "They are perfectly new to me, and may be founded altogether on your own imagination."

"You will see."

These same fields were opposite the Wilfer premises. The discreet Mrs. Wilfer now looking out of window and beholding her daughter in conference with her lodger, instantly tied up her head and came out for a casual walk.

"I have been telling Miss Wilfer," said John Rokesmith, as the majestic lady came stalking up, "that I have become, by a curious chance, Mr. Boffin's Secretary or man of business."

"I have not," returned Mrs. Wilfer, waving her gloves in her chronic state of dignity, and vague ill-usage, "the honor of any intimate acquaintance with Mr. Boffin, and it is not for me to congratulate that gentleman on the acquisition he has made."

"A poor one enough," said Rokesmith.

"Pardon me," returned Mrs. Wilfer, "the merits of Mr. Boffin may be highly distinguished—may be more distinguished than the countenance of Mrs. Boffin would imply—but it were the insanity of humility to deem him worthy of a better assistant."

"You are very good. I have also been telling Miss Wilfer that she is expected very shortly at the new residence in town."

"Having tacitly consented," said Mrs. Wilfer, with a grand shrug of her shoulders, and another wave of her gloves, "to my child's acceptance of the proffered attentions of Mrs. Boffin, I interpose no objection."

Here Miss Bella offered the remonstrance: "Don't talk nonsense, ma, please."

"Peace!" said Mrs. Wilfer.

"No, ma, I am not going to be made so absurd. Interposing objections!"

"I say," repeated Mrs. Wilfer, with a vast access of grandeur, "that I am *not* going to interpose objections. If Mrs. Boffin (to whose countenance no disciple of Lavater could possibly for a single moment subscribe)," with a shiver, "seeks to illuminate her new residence in town with the attractions of a child of mine, I am content that she should be favoured by the company of a child of mine."

"You use the word, ma'am, I have myself used," said Rokesmith, with a glance at Bella, "when you speak of Miss Wilfer's attractions there."

"Pardon me," returned Mrs. Wilfer, with dreadful solemnity, "but I had not finished."

"Pray excuse me."

"I was about to say," pursued Mrs. Wilfer, who clearly had not had the faintest idea of saying anything more: "that when I use the term attractions, I do so with the qualification that I do not mean it in any way whatever."

The excellent lady delivered this luminous elucidation of her views with an air of greatly obliging her hearers, and greatly dis-

tinguishing herself. Whereat Miss Bella laughed a scornful little laugh and said:

"Quite enough about this, I am sure, on all sides. Have the goodness, Mr. Rokesmith, to give my love to Mrs. Boffin——"

"Pardon me!" cried Mrs. Wilfer. "Compliments."

"Love!" repeated Bella, with a little stamp of her foot.

"No!" said Mrs. Wilfer, monotonously. "Compliments."

("Say Miss Wilfer's love, and Mrs. Wilfer's compliments," the Secretary proposed, as a compromise.)

"And I shall be very glad to come when she is ready for me. The sooner, the better."

"One last word, Bella," said Mrs. Wilfer, "before descending to the family apartment. I trust that as a child of mine you will ever be sensible that it will be graceful in you, when associating with Mr. and Mrs. Boffin upon equal terms, to remember that the Secretary, Mr. Rokesmith, as your father's lodger, has a claim on your good word."

The condescension with which Mrs. Wilfer delivered this proclamation of patronage, was as wonderful as the swiftness with which the lodger had lost caste in the Secretary. He smiled as the mother retired down stairs; but his face fell, as the daughter followed.

"So insolent, so trivial, so capricious, so mercenary, so careless, so hard to touch, so hard to turn!" he said, bitterly.

And added as he went upstairs. "And yet so pretty, so pretty!"

And added presently, as he walked to and fro in his room. "And if she knew!"

She knew that he was shaking the house by his walking to and fro; and she declared it another of the miseries of being poor, that you couldn't get rid of a haunting Secretary, stump—stump—stumping overhead in the dark, like a Ghost.

CHAPTER XVII.

A DISMAL SWAMP.

AND now, in the blooming summer days, behold Mr. and Mrs. Boffin established in the eminently aristocratic family mansion, and behold all manner of crawling, creeping, fluttering, and buzzing creatures, attracted by the gold dust of the Golden Dustman!

Foremost among those leaving cards at the eminently aristocratic door before it is quite painted, are the Veneerings: out of breath, one might imagine, from the impetuosity of their rush to the eminently aristocratic steps. One copper-plate Mrs. Veneering, two copper-plate Mr. Veneerings, and a connubial copper-plate Mr. and Mrs. Veneering, requesting the honour of Mr. and Mrs. Boffin's company at dinner with the utmost Analytical solemnities. The enchanting Lady Tippins leaves a card. Twemlow leaves cards. A tall custard-coloured phaeton tooling up in a solemn manner leaves four cards, to wit, a couple of Mr. Podsnaps, a Mrs. Podsnap, and a Miss Podsnap. All the world and his wife and daughter leave cards. Sometimes the world's wife has so many daughters, that her card

reads rather like a Miscellaneous Lot at an Auction; comprising Mrs. Tapkins, Miss Tapkins, Miss Frederica Tapkins, Miss Antonina Tapkins, Miss Malvina Tapkins, and Miss Euphemia Tapkins; at the same time, the same lady leaves the card of Mrs. Henry George Alfred Swoshle, *née* Tapkins; also, a card, Mrs. Tapkins at Home, Wednesdays, Music, Portland Place.

Miss Bella Wilfer becomes an inmate, for an indefinite period, of the eminently aristocratic dwelling. Mrs. Boffin bears Miss Bella away to her Milliner's and Dressmaker's, and she gets beautifully dressed. The Veneerings find with swift remorse that they have omitted to invite Miss Bella Wilfer. One Mrs. Veneering and one Mr. and Mrs. Veneering requesting that additional honor, instantly do penance in white cardboard on the hall table. Mrs. Tapkins likewise discovers her omission, and with promptitude repairs it; for herself, for Miss Tapkins, for Miss Frederica Tapkins, for Miss Antonina Tapkins, for Miss Malvina Tapkins, and for Miss Euphemia Tapkins. Likewise, for Mrs. Henry George Alfred Swoshle *née* Tapkins. Likewise, for Mrs. Tapkins at Home, Wednesdays, Music, Portland Place.

Tradesmen's books hunger, and tradesmen's mouths water, for the gold dust of the Golden Dustman. As Mrs. Boffin and Miss Wilfer drive out, or as Mr. Boffin walks out at his jog-trot pace, the fish-monger pulls off his hat with an air of reverence founded on conviction. His men cleanse their fingers on their woollen aprons before presuming to touch their foreheads to Mr. Boffin or Lady. The gaping salmon and the golden mullet lying on the slab seem to turn up their eyes sideways, as they would turn up their hands if they had any, in worshipping admiration. The butcher, though a portly and a prosperous man, doesn't know what to do with himself, so anxious is he to express humility when discovered by the passing Boffins taking the air in a mutton grove. Presents are made to the Boffin servants, and bland strangers with business-cards meeting said servants in the street, offer hypothetical corruption. As, "Supposing I was to be favored with an order from Mr. Boffin, my dear friend, it would be worth my while"—to do a certain thing that I hope might not prove wholly disagreeable to your feelings.

But no one knows so well as the Secretary, who opens and reads the letters, what a set is made at the man marked by a stroke of notoriety. Oh the varieties of dust for ocular use, offered in exchange for the gold dust of the Golden Dustman! Fifty-seven churches to be erected with half-crowns, forty-two parsonage houses to be repaired with shillings, seven-and-twenty organs to be built with halfpence, twelve hundred children to be brought up on postage stamps. Not that a half-crown, shilling, halfpenny, or postage stamp, would be particularly acceptable from Mr. Boffin, but that it is so obvious he is the man to make up the deficiency. And then the charities, my Christian brother! And mostly in difficulties, yet mostly lavish, too, in the expensive articles of print and paper. Large fat private double letter, sealed with ducal coronet. "Nicodemus Boffin, Esquire. My Dear Sir,—Having consented to preside at the forthcoming Annual Dinner of the Family Party Fund, and feeling deeply impressed with the immense useful-

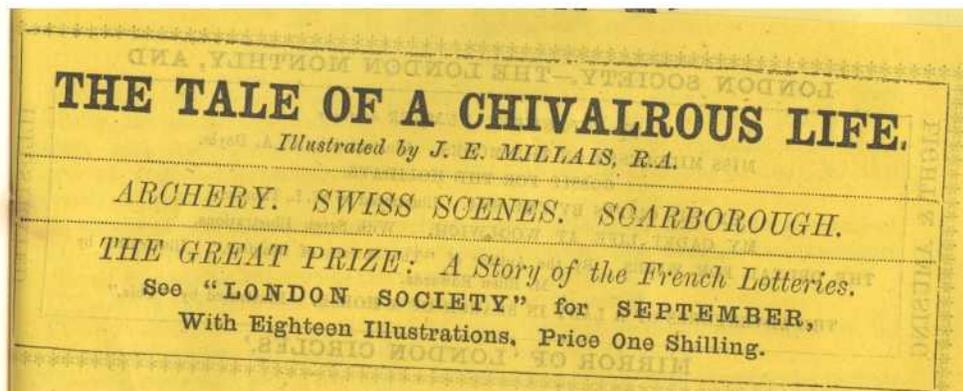
ness of that noble Institution and the great importance of its being supported by a List of Stewards that shall prove to the public the interest taken in it by popular and distinguished men, I have undertaken to ask you to become a Steward on that occasion. Soliciting your favorable reply before the 14th instant, I am, My Dear Sir, Your faithful Servant, LINSSEED. P.S. The Steward's fee is limited to three Guineas." Friendly this, on the part of the Duke of Linseed (and thoughtful in the postscript), only lithographed by the hundred and presenting but a pale individuality of address to Nicodemus Boffin, Esquire, in quite another hand. It takes two noble Earls and a Viscount, combined, to inform Nicodemus Boffin, Esquire, in an equally flattering manner, that an estimable lady in the West of England has offered to present a purse containing twenty pounds, to the Society for Granting Annuities to Unassuming Members of the Middle Classes, if twenty individuals will previously present purses of one hundred pounds each. And those benevolent noblemen very kindly point out that if Nicodemus Boffin, Esquire, should wish to present two or more purses, it will not be inconsistent with the design of the estimable lady in the West of England, provided each purse be coupled with the name of some member of his honored and respected family.

These are the corporate beggars. But there are, besides, the individual beggars; and how does the heart of the Secretary fail him when he has to cope with *them*! And they must be coped with to some extent, because they all enclose documents (they call their scraps documents; but they are, as to papers deserving the name, what minced veal is to a calf), the non-return of which would be their ruin. That is say, they are utterly ruined now, but they would be more utterly ruined then. Among these correspondents are several daughters of general officers, long accustomed to every luxury of life (except spelling), who little thought, when their gallant fathers waged war in the Peninsula, that they would ever have to appeal to those whom Providence, in its inscrutable wisdom, has blessed with untold gold, and from among whom they select the name of Nicodemus Boffin, Esquire, for a maiden effort in this wise, understanding that he has such a heart as never was. The Secretary learns, too, that confidence between man and wife would seem to obtain but rarely when virtue is in distress, so numerous are the wives who take up their pens to ask Mr. Boffin for money without the knowledge of their devoted husbands, who would never permit it; while, on the other hand, so numerous are the husbands who take up their pens to ask Mr. Boffin for money without the knowledge of their devoted wives, who would instantly go out of their senses if they had the least suspicion of the circumstance. There are the inspired beggars, too. These were sitting, only yesterday evening, musing over a fragment of candle which must soon go out and leave them in the dark for the rest of their nights, when surely some Angel whispered the name of Nicodemus Boffin, Esquire, to their souls, imparting rays of hope, nay confidence, to which they had long been strangers! Akin to these are the suggestively-befriended beggars. They were partaking of a cold potato and water by the flickering and gloomy light of a lucifer-match, in their lodgings (rent considerably in arrear, and

heartless landlady threatening expulsion "like a dog" into the streets), when a gifted friend happening to look in, said, "Write immediately to Nicodemus Boffin, Esquire," and would take no denial. There are the nobly independent beggars too. These, in the days of their abundance, ever regarded gold as dross, and have not yet got over that only impediment in the way of their amassing wealth, but they want no dross from Nicodemus Boffin, Esquire; No, Mr. Boffin; the world may term it pride, paltry pride if you will, but they wouldn't take it if you offered it; a loan, sir—for fourteen weeks to the day, interest calculated at the rate of five per cent per annum, to be bestowed upon any charitable institution you may name—is all they want of you, and if you have the meanness to refuse it, count on being despised by these great spirits. There are the beggars of punctual business-habits too. These will make an end of themselves at a quarter to one P.M. on Tuesday, if no Post-office order is in the interim received from Nicodemus Boffin, Esquire; arriving after a quarter to one P.M. on Tuesday, it need not be sent, as they will then (having made an exact memorandum of the heartless circumstances) be "cold in death." There are the beggars on horseback too, in another sense from the sense of the proverb. These are mounted and ready to start on the highway to affluence. The goal is before them, the road is in the best condition, their spurs are on, the steed is willing, but, at the last moment, for want of some special thing—a clock, a violin, an astronomical telescope, an electrifying machine—they must dismount for ever, unless they receive its equivalent in money from Nicodemus Boffin, Esquire. Less given to detail are the beggars who make sporting ventures. These, usually to be addressed in reply under initials at a country post-office, inquire in feminine hands, Dare one who cannot disclose herself to Nicodemus Boffin, Esquire, but whose name might startle him were it revealed, solicit the immediate advance of two hundred pounds from unexpected riches exercising their noblest privilege in the trust of a common humanity?

In such a Dismal Swamp does the new house stand, and through it does the Secretary daily struggle breast-high. Not to mention all the people alive who have made inventions that won't act, and all the jobbers who job in all the jobberies jobbed; though these may be regarded as the Alligators of the Dismal Swamp, and are always lying by to drag the Golden Dustman under.

But the old house. There are no designs against the Golden Dustman there? There are no fish of the shark tribe in the Bower waters? Perhaps not. Still, Wegg is established there, and would seem, judged by his secret proceedings, to cherish a notion of making a discovery. For, when a man with a wooden leg lies prone on his stomach to peep under bedsteads; and hops up ladders, like some extinct bird, to survey the tops of presses and cupboards; and provides himself an iron rod which he is always poking and prodding into dust-mounds; the probability is that he expects to find something.



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