Our Mutual Friend

OUR MUTUAL FRIEND

[ILLUSTRATED]

BY

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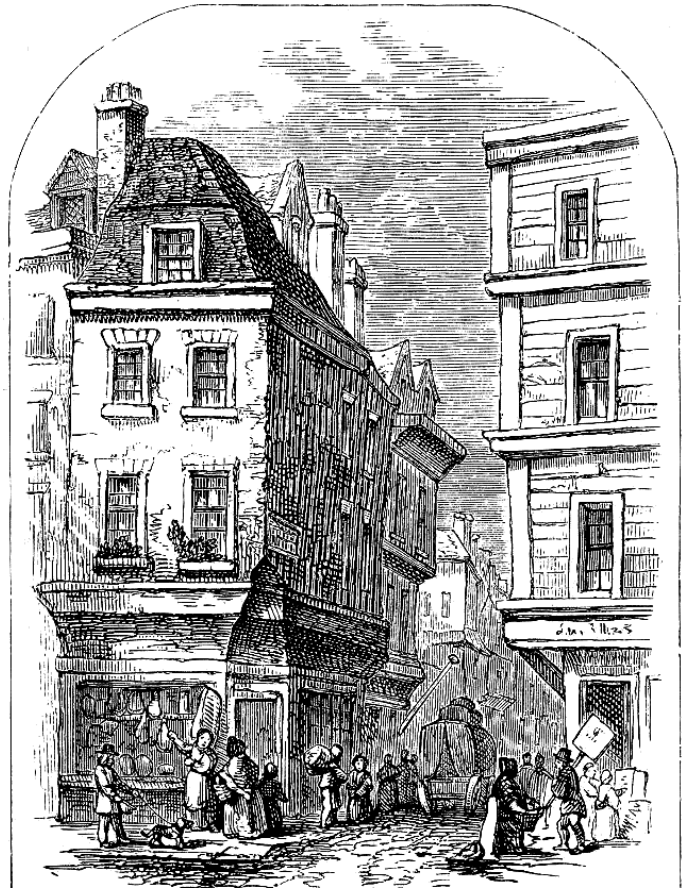


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Book the First — The Cup and the Lip

Chapter 1: On the Look Out



In these times of ours, though concerning the exact year there is no need to be precise, a boat of dirty and disreputable appearance, with two figures in it, floated on the Thames, between Southwark bridge which is of iron, and London Bridge which is of stone, as an autumn evening was closing in.

The figures in this boat were those of a strong man with ragged grizzled hair and a sun-browned face, and a dark girl of nineteen or twenty, sufficiently like him to be recognizable as his daughter. The girl rowed, pulling a pair of sculls very easily; the man, with the rudder-lines slack

in his hands, and his hands loose in his waistband, kept an eager look out. He had no net, hook, or line, and he could not be a fisherman; his boat had no cushion for a sitter, no paint, no inscription, no appliance beyond a rusty boathook and a coil of rope, and he could not be a waterman; his boat was too crazy and too small to take in cargo for delivery, and he could not be a lighterman or river-carrier; there was no clue to what he looked for, but he looked for something, with a most intent and searching gaze. The tide, which had turned an hour before, was running down, and his eyes watched every little race and eddy in its broad sweep, as the boat made slight head-way against it, or drove stern foremost before it, according as he directed his daughter by a movement of his head. She watched his face as earnestly as he watched the river. But, in the intensity of her look there was a touch of dread or horror.

Allied to the bottom of the river rather than the surface, by reason of the slime and ooze with which it was covered, and its sodden state, this boat and the two figures in it obviously were doing something that they often did, and were seeking what they often sought. Half savage as the man showed, with no covering on his matted head, with his brown arms bare to between the elbow and the shoulder, with the loose knot of a looser kerchief lying low on his bare breast in a wilderness of beard and whisker, with such dress as he wore seeming to be made out of the mud that begrimed his boat, still there was a business-like usage in his steady gaze. So with every lithe action of the girl, with every turn of her wrist, perhaps most of all with her look of dread or horror; they were things of usage.

'Keep her out, Lizzie. Tide runs strong here. Keep her well afore the sweep of it.'

Trusting to the girl's skill and making no use of the rudder, he eyed the coming tide with an absorbed attention. So the girl eyed him. But, it happened now, that a slant of light from the setting sun glanced into the bottom of the boat, and, touching a rotten stain there which bore some resemblance to the outline of a muffled human form, coloured it as though with diluted blood. This caught the girl's eye, and she shivered.

'What ails you?' said the man, immediately aware of it, though so intent on the advancing waters; 'I see nothing afloat.'

The red light was gone, the shudder was gone, and his gaze, which had come back to the boat for a moment, travelled away again. Wheresoever the strong tide met with an impediment, his gaze paused for an instant. At every mooring-chain and rope, at every stationery boat or barge that split the current into a broad-arrowhead, at the offsets from the piers of Southwark Bridge, at the paddles of the river steamboats as they beat the filthy water, at the floating logs of timber lashed together lying off certain wharves, his shining eyes darted a hungry look. After a darkening hour or so, suddenly the rudder-lines tightened in his hold, and he steered hard towards the Surrey shore.

Always watching his face, the girl instantly answered to the action in her sculling; presently the boat swung round, quivered as from a sudden jerk, and the upper half of the man was stretched out over the stern.

The girl pulled the hood of a cloak she wore, over her head and over her face, and, looking backward so that the front folds of this hood were turned down the river, kept the boat in that direction going before the tide. Until now, the boat had barely held her own, and had hovered about one spot; but now, the banks changed swiftly, and the deepening shadows and the kindling lights of London Bridge were passed, and the tiers of shipping lay on either hand.

It was not until now that the upper half of the man came back into the boat. His arms were wet and dirty, and he washed them over the side. In his right hand he held something, and he washed that in the river too. It was money. He chinked it once, and he blew upon it once, and he spat upon it once,—'for luck,' he hoarsely said—before he put it in his pocket.

'Lizzie!'

The girl turned her face towards him with a start, and rowed in silence. Her face was very pale. He was a hook-nosed man, and with that and his bright eyes and his ruffled head, bore a certain likeness to a roused bird of prey.

'Take that thing off your face.'

She put it back.

'Here! and give me hold of the sculls. I'll take the rest of the spell.'

'No, no, father! No! I can't indeed. Father!—I cannot sit so near it!'

He was moving towards her to change places, but her terrified expostulation stopped him and he resumed his seat.

'What hurt can it do you?'

'None, none. But I cannot bear it.'

'It's my belief you hate the sight of the very river.'

'I—I do not like it, father.'

'As if it wasn't your living! As if it wasn't meat and drink to you!'

At these latter words the girl shivered again, and for a moment paused in her rowing, seeming to turn deadly faint. It escaped his attention, for he was glancing over the stern at something the boat had in tow.

'How can you be so thankless to your best friend, Lizzie? The very fire that warmed you when you were a babby, was picked out of the river alongside the coal barges. The very basket that you slept in, the tide washed ashore. The very rockers that I put it upon to make a cradle of it, I cut out of a piece of wood that drifted from some ship or another.'

Lizzie took her right hand from the scull it held, and touched her lips with it, and for a moment held it out lovingly towards him: then, without speaking, she resumed her rowing, as another boat of similar appearance, though in rather better trim, came out from a dark place and dropped softly alongside.

'In luck again, Gaffer?' said a man with a squinting leer, who sculled her and who was alone, 'I know'd you was in luck again, by your wake as you come down.'

'Ah!' replied the other, drily. 'So you're out, are you?'

'Yes, pardner.'

There was now a tender yellow moonlight on the river, and the new comer, keeping half his boat's length astern of the other boat looked hard at its track.

'I says to myself,' he went on, 'directly you hove in view, yonder's Gaffer, and in luck again, by George if he ain't! Scull it is, pardner—don't fret yourself—I didn't touch him.' This was in answer to a quick impatient movement on the part of Gaffer: the speaker at the same time unshipping his scull on that side, and laying his hand on the gunwale of Gaffer's boat and holding to it.

'He's had touches enough not to want no more, as well as I make him out, Gaffer! Been a knocking about with a pretty many tides, ain't he pardner? Such is my out-of-luck ways, you see! He must have passed me when he went up last time, for I was on the lookout below bridge here. I a'most think you're like the wulturs, pardner, and scent 'em out.'

He spoke in a dropped voice, and with more than one glance at Lizzie who had pulled on her hood again. Both men then looked with a weird unholy interest in the wake of Gaffer's boat.

'Easy does it, betwixt us. Shall I take him aboard, pardner?'

'No,' said the other. In so surly a tone that the man, after a blank stare, acknowledged it with the retort:

'—Arn't been eating nothing as has disagreed with you, have you, pardner?'

'Why, yes, I have,' said Gaffer. 'I have been swallowing too much of that word, Pardner. I am no pardner of yours.'

'Since when was you no pardner of mine, Gaffer Hexam Esquire?'

'Since you was accused of robbing a man. Accused of robbing a live man!' said Gaffer, with great indignation.

'And what if I had been accused of robbing a dead man, Gaffer?'

'You COULDN'T do it.'

'Couldn't you, Gaffer?'

'No. Has a dead man any use for money? Is it possible for a dead man to have money? What world does a dead man belong to? 'Tother world. What world does money belong to? This world. How can money be a corpse's? Can a corpse own it, want it, spend it, claim it, miss it? Don't try to go confounding the rights and wrongs of things in that way. But it's worthy of the sneaking spirit that robs a live man.'

'I'll tell you what it is—.'

'No you won't. I'll tell you what it is. You got off with a short time of it for putting your hand in the pocket of a sailor, a live sailor. Make the most of it and think yourself lucky, but don't think after that to come over ME with your pardners. We have worked together in time past, but we work together no more in time present nor yet future. Let go. Cast off!'

'Gaffer! If you think to get rid of me this way—.'

'If I don't get rid of you this way, I'll try another, and chop you over the fingers with the stretcher, or take a pick at your head with the boat-hook. Cast off! Pull you, Lizzie. Pull home, since you won't let your father pull.'

Lizzie shot ahead, and the other boat fell astern. Lizzie's father, composing himself into the easy attitude of one who had asserted the high moralities and taken an unassailable position, slowly lighted a pipe, and smoked, and took a survey of what he had in tow. What he had in tow, lunged itself at him sometimes in an awful manner when the boat was checked, and sometimes seemed to try to wrench itself away, though for the most part it followed submissively. A neophyte might have fancied that the ripples passing over it were dreadfully like faint changes of expression on a sightless face; but Gaffer was no neophyte and had no fancies.

Chapter 2: The Man from Somewhere



Mr and Mrs Veneering were bran-new people in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London. Everything about the Veneerings was spick and span new. All their furniture was new, all their friends were new, all their servants were new, their plate was new, their carriage was new, their harness was new, their horses were new, their pictures were new, they themselves were new, they were as newly married as was lawfully compatible with their having a bran-new baby, and if they had set up a great-grandfather, he would have come home in matting from the Pantechnicon, without a scratch upon him, French polished to the crown of his head.

For, in the Veneering establishment, from the hall-chairs with the new coat of arms, to the grand pianoforte with the new action, and upstairs again to the new fire-escape, all things were in a state of high varnish and polish. And what was observable in the furniture, was observable in the Veneerings—the surface smelt a little too much of the workshop and was a trifle sticky.

There was an innocent piece of dinner-furniture that went upon easy castors and was kept over a livery stable-yard in Duke Street, Saint James's, when not in use, to whom the Veneerings were a source of blind confusion. The name of this article was Twemlow. Being first cousin to Lord Snigsworth, he was in frequent requisition, and at many houses might be said to represent the dining-table in its normal state. Mr and Mrs Veneering, for example, arranging a dinner, habitually started with Twemlow, and then put leaves in him, or added guests to him. Sometimes, the table consisted of Twemlow and half a dozen leaves; sometimes, of Twemlow and a dozen leaves; sometimes, Twemlow was pulled out to his utmost extent of twenty leaves. Mr and Mrs Veneering on occasions of ceremony faced each other in the centre of the board, and thus the parallel still held; for, it always happened that the more Twemlow was pulled out, the further he found himself from the center, and nearer to the sideboard at one end of the room, or the window-curtains at the other.

But, it was not this which steeped the feeble soul of Twemlow in confusion. This he was used to, and could take soundings of. The abyss to which he could find no bottom, and from which started forth the engrossing and ever-swelling difficulty of his life, was the insoluble question whether he was Veneering's oldest friend, or newest friend. To the excogitation of this problem, the harmless gentleman had devoted many anxious hours, both in his lodgings over the livery stable-yard, and in the cold gloom, favourable to meditation, of Saint James's Square. Thus. Twemlow had first known Veneering at his club, where Veneering then knew nobody but the man who made them known to one another, who seemed to be the most intimate friend he had in the world, and whom he had known two days—the bond of union between their souls, the nefarious conduct of the committee respecting the cookery of a fillet of veal, having been accidentally cemented at that date. Immediately upon this, Twemlow received an invitation to dine with Veneering, and dined: the man being of the party. Immediately upon that, Twemlow received an invitation to dine with the man, and dined: Veneering being of the party. At the man's were a Member, an Engineer, a Payer-off of the National Debt, a Poem on Shakespeare, a Grievance, and a Public Office, who all seem to be utter strangers to Veneering. And yet immediately after that, Twemlow received an invitation to dine at Veneerings, expressly to meet the Member, the Engineer, the Payer-off of the National Debt, the Poem on Shakespeare, the Grievance, and the Public Office, and, dining, discovered that all of them were the most intimate friends Veneering had in the world, and that the wives of all of them (who were all there) were the objects of Mrs Veneering's most devoted affection and tender confidence.

Thus it had come about, that Mr Twemlow had said to himself in his lodgings, with his hand to his forehead: 'I must not think of this. This is enough to soften any man's brain,'—and yet was always thinking of it, and could never form a conclusion.

This evening the Veneerings give a banquet. Eleven leaves in the Twemlow; fourteen in company all told. Four pigeon-breasted retainers in plain clothes stand in line in the hall. A fifth retainer, proceeding up the staircase with a mournful air—as who should say, 'Here is another wretched creature come to dinner; such is life!'—announces, 'Mis-ter Twemlow!'

Mrs Veneering welcomes her sweet Mr Twemlow. Mr Veneering welcomes his dear Twemlow. Mrs Veneering does not expect that Mr Twemlow can in nature care much for such insipid things as babies, but so old a friend must please to look at baby. 'Ah! You will know the friend of your family better, Tootleums,' says Mr Veneering, nodding emotionally at that new article, 'when you begin to take notice.' He then begs to make his dear Twemlow known to his two friends, Mr Boots and Mr Brewer—and clearly has no distinct idea which is which.

But now a fearful circumstance occurs.

'Mis-ter and Mis-sus Podsnap!'

'My dear,' says Mr Veneering to Mrs Veneering, with an air of much friendly interest, while the door stands open, 'the Podsnaps.'

A too, too smiling large man, with a fatal freshness on him, appearing with his wife, instantly deserts his wife and darts at Twemlow with:

'How do you do? So glad to know you. Charming house you have here. I hope we are not late. So glad of the opportunity, I am sure!'

When the first shock fell upon him, Twemlow twice skipped back in his neat little shoes and his neat little silk stockings of a bygone fashion, as if impelled to leap over a sofa behind him; but the large man closed with him and proved too strong.

'Let me,' says the large man, trying to attract the attention of his wife in the distance, 'have the pleasure of presenting Mrs Podsnap to her host. She will be,' in his fatal freshness he seems to find perpetual verdure and eternal youth in the phrase, 'she will be so glad of the opportunity, I am sure!'

In the meantime, Mrs Podsnap, unable to originate a mistake on her own account, because Mrs Veneering is the only other lady there, does her best in the way of handsomely supporting her husband's, by looking towards Mr Twemlow with a plaintive countenance and remarking to Mrs Veneering in a feeling manner, firstly, that she fears he has been rather bilious of late, and, secondly, that the baby is already very like him.

It is questionable whether any man quite relishes being mistaken for any other man; but, Mr Veneering having this very evening set up the shirt-front of the young Antinous in new worked cambric just come home, is not at all complimented by being supposed to be Twemlow, who is dry

and weazen and some thirty years older. Mrs Veneering equally resents the imputation of being the wife of Twemlow. As to Twemlow, he is so sensible of being a much better bred man than Veneering, that he considers the large man an offensive ass.

In this complicated dilemma, Mr Veneering approaches the large man with extended hand and, smilingly assures that incorrigible personage that he is delighted to see him: who in his fatal freshness instantly replies:

'Thank you. I am ashamed to say that I cannot at this moment recall where we met, but I am so glad of this opportunity, I am sure!'

Then pouncing upon Twemlow, who holds back with all his feeble might, he is haling him off to present him, as Veneering, to Mrs Podsnap, when the arrival of more guests unravels the mistake. Whereupon, having re-shaken hands with Veneering as Veneering, he re-shakes hands with Twemlow as Twemlow, and winds it all up to his own perfect satisfaction by saying to the last-named, 'Ridiculous opportunity—but so glad of it, I am sure!'

Now, Twemlow having undergone this terrific experience, having likewise noted the fusion of Boots in Brewer and Brewer in Boots, and having further observed that of the remaining seven guests four discrete characters enter with wandering eyes and wholly declined to commit themselves as to which is Veneering, until Veneering has them in his grasp;—Twemlow having profited by these studies, finds his brain wholesomely hardening as he approaches the conclusion that he really is Veneering's oldest friend, when his brain softens again and all is lost, through his eyes encountering Veneering and the large man linked together as twin brothers in the back drawing-room near the conservatory door, and through his ears informing him in the tones of Mrs Veneering that the same large man is to be baby's godfather.

'Dinner is on the table!'

Thus the melancholy retainer, as who should say, 'Come down and be poisoned, ye unhappy children of men!'

Twemlow, having no lady assigned him, goes down in the rear, with his hand to his forehead. Boots and Brewer, thinking him indisposed, whisper, 'Man faint. Had no lunch.' But he is only stunned by the unvanquishable difficulty of his existence.

Revived by soup, Twemlow discourses mildly of the Court Circular with Boots and Brewer. Is appealed to, at the fish stage of the banquet, by Veneering, on the disputed question whether his cousin Lord Snigsworth is in or out of town? Gives it that his cousin is out of town. 'At Snigsworthy Park?' Veneering inquires. 'At Snigsworthy,' Twemlow rejoins. Boots and Brewer regard this as a man to be cultivated; and Veneering is clear that he is a remunerative article.

Meantime the retainer goes round, like a gloomy Analytical Chemist: always seeming to say, after 'Chablis, sir?'—'You wouldn't if you knew what it's made of.'

The great looking-glass above the sideboard, reflects the table and the company. Reflects the new Veneering crest, in gold and eke in silver, frosted and also thawed, a camel of all work. The Heralds' College found out a Crusading ancestor for Veneering who bore a camel on his shield (or might have done it if he had thought of it), and a caravan of camels take charge of the fruits and flowers and candles, and kneel down be loaded with the salt. Reflects Veneering; forty, wavy-haired, dark, tending to corpulence, sly, mysterious, filmy—a kind of sufficiently well-looking veiled-prophet, not prophesying. Reflects Mrs Veneering; fair, aquiline-nosed and fingered, not so much light hair as she might have, gorgeous in raiment and jewels, enthusiastic, propitiatory, conscious that a corner of her husband's veil is over herself. Reflects Podsnap; prosperously feeding, two little light-coloured wiry wings, one on either side of his else bald head, looking as like his hairbrushes as his hair, dissolving view of red beads on his forehead, large allowance of crumpled shirt-collar up behind. Reflects Mrs Podsnap; fine woman for Professor Owen, quantity of bone, neck and nostrils like a rocking-horse, hard features, majestic head-dress in which Podsnap has hung golden offerings. Reflects Twemlow; grey, dry, polite, susceptible to east wind, First-Gentleman-in-Europe collar and cravat, cheeks drawn in as if he had made a great effort to retire into himself some years ago, and had got so far and had never got any farther. Reflects mature young lady; raven locks, and complexion that lights up well when well powdered—as it is—carrying on considerably in the captivation of mature young gentleman; with too much nose in his face, too much ginger in his whiskers, too much torso in his waistcoat, too much sparkle in his studs, his eyes, his buttons, his talk, and his teeth. Reflects charming old Lady Tippins on Veneering's right; with an immense obtuse drab oblong face, like a face in a tablespoon, and a dyed Long Walk up the top of her head, as a convenient public approach to the bunch of false hair behind, pleased to patronize Mrs Veneering opposite, who is pleased to be patronized. Reflects a certain 'Mortimer', another of Veneering's oldest friends; who never was in the house before, and appears not to want to come again, who sits disconsolate on Mrs Veneering's left, and who was inveigled by Lady Tippins (a friend of his boyhood) to come to these people's and talk, and who won't talk. Reflects Eugene, friend of Mortimer; buried alive in the back of his chair, behind a shoulder—with a powder-epaulette on it—of the mature young lady, and gloomily resorting to the champagne chalice whenever proffered by the Analytical Chemist. Lastly, the looking-glass reflects Boots and Brewer, and two other stuffed Buffers interposed between the rest of the company and possible accidents.

The Veneering dinners are excellent dinners—or new people wouldn't come—and all goes well. Notably, Lady Tippins has made a series of experiments on her digestive functions, so extremely complicated and daring, that if they could be published with their results it might benefit

the human race. Having taken in provisions from all parts of the world, this hardy old cruiser has last touched at the North Pole, when, as the ice-plates are being removed, the following words fall from her:

'I assure you, my dear Veneering—'

(Poor Twemlow's hand approaches his forehead, for it would seem now, that Lady Tippins is going to be the oldest friend.)

'I assure you, my dear Veneering, that it is the oddest affair! Like the advertising people, I don't ask you to trust me, without offering a respectable reference. Mortimer there, is my reference, and knows all about it.'

Mortimer raises his drooping eyelids, and slightly opens his mouth. But a faint smile, expressive of 'What's the use!' passes over his face, and he drops his eyelids and shuts his mouth.

'Now, Mortimer,' says Lady Tippins, rapping the sticks of her closed green fan upon the knuckles of her left hand—which is particularly rich in knuckles, 'I insist upon your telling all that is to be told about the man from Jamaica.'

'Give you my honour I never heard of any man from Jamaica, except the man who was a brother,' replies Mortimer.

'Tobago, then.'

'Nor yet from Tobago.'

'Except,' Eugene strikes in: so unexpectedly that the mature young lady, who has forgotten all about him, with a start takes the epaulette out of his way: 'except our friend who long lived on rice-pudding and isinglass, till at length to his something or other, his physician said something else, and a leg of mutton somehow ended in daygo.'

A reviving impression goes round the table that Eugene is coming out. An unfulfilled impression, for he goes in again.

'Now, my dear Mrs Veneering,' quoth Lady Tippins, I appeal to you whether this is not the basest conduct ever known in this world? I carry my lovers about, two or three at a time, on condition that they are very obedient and devoted; and here is my oldest lover-in-chief, the head of all my slaves, throwing off his allegiance before company! And here is another of my lovers, a rough Cymon at present certainly, but of whom I had most hopeful expectations as to his turning out well in course of time, pretending that he can't remember his nursery rhymes! On purpose to annoy me, for he knows how I doat upon them!'

A grisly little fiction concerning her lovers is Lady Tippins's point. She is always attended by a lover or two, and she keeps a little list of her lovers, and she is always booking a new lover, or striking out an old lover, or putting a lover in her black list, or promoting a lover to her blue list, or adding up her lovers, or otherwise posting her book. Mrs Veneering is charmed by the humour, and so is Veneering. Perhaps it is enhanced by a certain yellow play in Lady Tippins's throat, like the legs of scratching poultry.

'I banish the false wretch from this moment, and I strike him out of my Cupidon (my name for my Ledger, my dear,) this very night. But I am resolved to have the account of the man from Somewhere, and I beg you to elicit it for me, my love,' to Mrs Veneering, 'as I have lost my own influence. Oh, you perjured man!' This to Mortimer, with a rattle of her fan.

'We are all very much interested in the man from Somewhere,' Veneering observes.

Then the four Buffers, taking heart of grace all four at once, say:

'Deeply interested!'

'Quite excited!'

'Dramatic!'

'Man from Nowhere, perhaps!'

And then Mrs Veneering—for the Lady Tippins's winning wiles are contagious—folds her hands in the manner of a supplicating child, turns to her left neighbour, and says, 'Tease! Pay! Man from Tumwhere!' At which the four Buffers, again mysteriously moved all four at once, explain, 'You can't resist!'

'Upon my life,' says Mortimer languidly, 'I find it immensely embarrassing to have the eyes of Europe upon me to this extent, and my only consolation is that you will all of you execrate Lady Tippins in your secret hearts when you find, as you inevitably will, the man from Somewhere a bore. Sorry to destroy romance by fixing him with a local habitation, but he comes from the place, the name of which escapes me, but will suggest itself to everybody else here, where they make the wine.'

Eugene suggests 'Day and Martin's.'

'No, not that place,' returns the unmoved Mortimer, 'that's where they make the Port. My man comes from the country where they make the Cape Wine. But look here, old fellow; its not at all statistical and it's rather odd.'

It is always noticeable at the table of the Veneerings, that no man troubles himself much about the Veneerings themselves, and that any one who has anything to tell, generally tells it to anybody else in preference.

'The man,' Mortimer goes on, addressing Eugene, 'whose name is Harmon, was only son of a tremendous old rascal who made his money by Dust.'

'Red velveteens and a bell?' the gloomy Eugene inquires.

'And a ladder and basket if you like. By which means, or by others, he grew rich as a Dust Contractor, and lived in a hollow in a hilly country entirely composed of Dust. On his own small estate the growling old vagabond threw up his own mountain range, like an old volcano, and its geological formation was Dust. Coal-dust, vegetable-dust, bone-dust, crockery dust, rough dust and sifted dust,—all manner of Dust.'

A passing remembrance of Mrs Veneering, here induces Mortimer to address his next half-dozen words to her; after which he wanders away again, tries Twemlow and finds he doesn't answer, ultimately takes up with the Buffers who receive him enthusiastically.

'The moral being—I believe that's the right expression—of this exemplary person, derived its highest gratification from anathematizing his nearest relations and turning them out of doors. Having begun (as was natural) by rendering these attentions to the wife of his bosom, he next found himself at leisure to bestow a similar recognition on the claims of his daughter. He chose a husband for her, entirely to his own satisfaction and not in the least to hers, and proceeded to settle upon her, as her marriage portion, I don't know how much Dust, but something immense. At this stage of the affair the poor girl respectfully intimated that she was secretly engaged to that popular character whom the novelists and versifiers call Another, and that such a marriage would make Dust of her heart and Dust of her life—in short, would set her up, on a very extensive scale, in her father's business. Immediately, the venerable parent—on a cold winter's night, it is said—anathematized and turned her out.'

Here, the Analytical Chemist (who has evidently formed a very low opinion of Mortimer's story) concedes a little claret to the Buffers; who, again mysteriously moved all four at once, screw it slowly into themselves with a peculiar twist of enjoyment, as they cry in chorus, 'Pray go on.'

'The pecuniary resources of Another were, as they usually are, of a very limited nature. I believe I am not using too strong an expression when I say that Another was hard up. However, he married the young lady, and they lived in a humble dwelling, probably possessing a porch ornamented with honeysuckle and woodbine twining, until she died. I must refer you to the Registrar of the District in which the humble dwelling was situated, for the certified cause of death; but early sorrow and anxiety may have had to do with it, though they may not appear in the

ruled pages and printed forms. Indisputably this was the case with Another, for he was so cut up by the loss of his young wife that if he outlived her a year it was as much as he did.'

There is that in the indolent Mortimer, which seems to hint that if good society might on any account allow itself to be impressible, he, one of good society, might have the weakness to be impressed by what he here relates. It is hidden with great pains, but it is in him. The gloomy Eugene too, is not without some kindred touch; for, when that appalling Lady Tippins declares that if Another had survived, he should have gone down at the head of her list of lovers—and also when the mature young lady shrugs her epaulettes, and laughs at some private and confidential comment from the mature young gentleman—his gloom deepens to that degree that he trifles quite ferociously with his dessert-knife.

Mortimer proceeds.

'We must now return, as novelists say, and as we all wish they wouldn't, to the man from Somewhere. Being a boy of fourteen, cheaply educated at Brussels when his sister's expulsion befell, it was some little time before he heard of it—probably from herself, for the mother was dead; but that I don't know. Instantly, he absconded, and came over here. He must have been a boy of spirit and resource, to get here on a stopped allowance of five sous a week; but he did it somehow, and he burst in on his father, and pleaded his sister's cause. Venerable parent promptly resorts to anathematization, and turns him out. Shocked and terrified boy takes flight, seeks his fortune, gets aboard ship, ultimately turns up on dry land among the Cape wine: small proprietor, farmer, grower—whatever you like to call it.'

At this juncture, shuffling is heard in the hall, and tapping is heard at the dining-room door. Analytical Chemist goes to the door, confers angrily with unseen tapper, appears to become mollified by descrying reason in the tapping, and goes out.

'So he was discovered, only the other day, after having been expatriated about fourteen years.'

A Buffer, suddenly astounding the other three, by detaching himself, and asserting individuality, inquires: 'How discovered, and why?'

'Ah! To be sure. Thank you for reminding me. Venerable parent dies.'

Same Buffer, emboldened by success, says: 'When?'

'The other day. Ten or twelve months ago.'

Same Buffer inquires with smartness, 'What of?' But herein perishes a melancholy example; being regarded by the three other Buffers with a stony stare, and attracting no further attention from any mortal.

'Venerable parent,' Mortimer repeats with a passing remembrance that there is a Veneering at table, and for the first time addressing him—'dies.'

The gratified Veneering repeats, gravely, 'dies'; and folds his arms, and composes his brow to hear it out in a judicial manner, when he finds himself again deserted in the bleak world.

'His will is found,' said Mortimer, catching Mrs Podsnap's rocking-horse's eye. 'It is dated very soon after the son's flight. It leaves the lowest of the range of dust-mountains, with some sort of a dwelling-house at its foot, to an old servant who is sole executor, and all the rest of the property—which is very considerable—to the son. He directs himself to be buried with certain eccentric ceremonies and precautions against his coming to life, with which I need not bore you, and that's all—except—' and this ends the story.

The Analytical Chemist returning, everybody looks at him. Not because anybody wants to see him, but because of that subtle influence in nature which impels humanity to embrace the slightest opportunity of looking at anything, rather than the person who addresses it.

'—Except that the son's inheriting is made conditional on his marrying a girl, who at the date of the will, was a child of four or five years old, and who is now a marriageable young woman. Advertisement and inquiry discovered the son in the man from Somewhere, and at the present moment, he is on his way home from there—no doubt, in a state of great astonishment—to succeed to a very large fortune, and to take a wife.'

Mrs Podsnap inquires whether the young person is a young person of personal charms? Mortimer is unable to report.

Mr Podsnap inquires what would become of the very large fortune, in the event of the marriage condition not being fulfilled? Mortimer replies, that by special testamentary clause it would then go to the old servant above mentioned, passing over and excluding the son; also, that if the son had not been living, the same old servant would have been sole residuary legatee.

Mrs Veneering has just succeeded in waking Lady Tippins from a snore, by dexterously shunting a train of plates and dishes at her knuckles across the table; when everybody but Mortimer himself becomes aware that the Analytical Chemist is, in a ghostly manner, offering him a folded paper. Curiosity detains Mrs Veneering a few moments.

Mortimer, in spite of all the arts of the chemist, placidly refreshes himself with a glass of Madeira, and remains unconscious of the Document which engrosses the general attention, until Lady Tippins (who has a habit of waking totally insensible), having remembered where she is, and recovered a perception of surrounding objects, says: 'Falser man than Don Juan; why don't you take the note from the commendatore?' Upon which, the chemist advances it under the nose of Mortimer, who looks round at him, and says:

'What's this?'

Analytical Chemist bends and whispers.

'WHO?' Says Mortimer.

Analytical Chemist again bends and whispers.

Mortimer stares at him, and unfolds the paper. Reads it, reads it twice, turns it over to look at the blank outside, reads it a third time.

'This arrives in an extraordinarily opportune manner,' says Mortimer then, looking with an altered face round the table: 'this is the conclusion of the story of the identical man.'

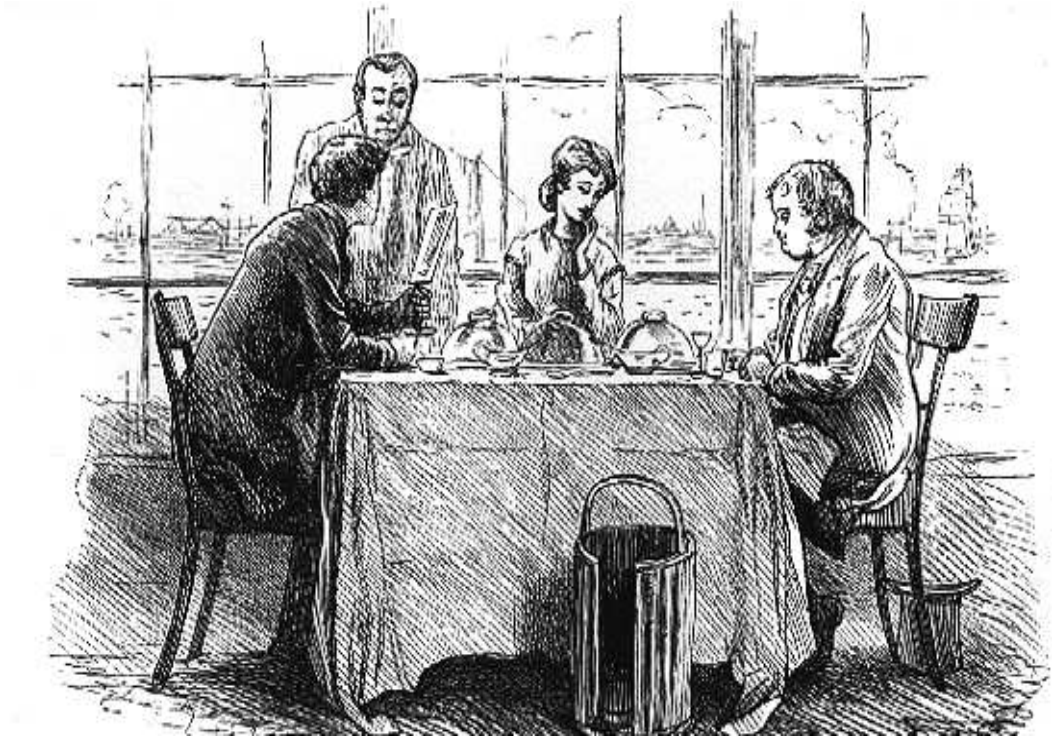
'Already married?' one guesses.

'Declines to marry?' another guesses.

'Codicil among the dust?' another guesses.

'Why, no,' says Mortimer; 'remarkable thing, you are all wrong. The story is completer and rather more exciting than I supposed. Man's drowned!'

Chapter 3: Another Man



As the disappearing skirts of the ladies ascended the Veneering staircase, Mortimer, following them forth from the dining-room, turned into a library of bran-new books, in bran-new bindings liberally gilded, and requested to see the messenger who had brought the paper. He was a boy of about fifteen. Mortimer looked at the boy, and the boy looked at the bran-new pilgrims on the wall, going to Canterbury in more gold frame than procession, and more carving than country.

'Whose writing is this?'

'Mine, sir.'

'Who told you to write it?'

'My father, Jesse Hexam.'

'Is it he who found the body?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What is your father?'

The boy hesitated, looked reproachfully at the pilgrims as if they had involved him in a little difficulty, then said, folding a plait in the right leg of his trousers, 'He gets his living along-shore.'

'Is it far?'

'Is which far?' asked the boy, upon his guard, and again upon the road to Canterbury.

'To your father's?'

'It's a goodish stretch, sir. I come up in a cab, and the cab's waiting to be paid. We could go back in it before you paid it, if you liked. I went first to your office, according to the direction of the papers found in the pockets, and there I see nobody but a chap of about my age who sent me on here.'

There was a curious mixture in the boy, of uncompleted savagery, and uncompleted civilization. His voice was hoarse and coarse, and his face was coarse, and his stunted figure was coarse; but he was cleaner than other boys of his type; and his writing, though large and round, was good; and he glanced at the backs of the books, with an awakened curiosity that went below the binding. No one who can read, ever looks at a book, even unopened on a shelf, like one who cannot.

'Were any means taken, do you know, boy, to ascertain if it was possible to restore life?' Mortimer inquired, as he sought for his hat.

'You wouldn't ask, sir, if you knew his state. Pharaoh's multitude that were drowned in the Red Sea, ain't more beyond restoring to life. If Lazarus was only half as far gone, that was the greatest of all the miracles.'

'Halloa!' cried Mortimer, turning round with his hat upon his head, 'you seem to be at home in the Red Sea, my young friend?'

'Read of it with teacher at the school,' said the boy.

'And Lazarus?'

'Yes, and him too. But don't you tell my father! We should have no peace in our place, if that got touched upon. It's my sister's contriving.'

'You seem to have a good sister.'

'She ain't half bad,' said the boy; 'but if she knows her letters it's the most she does—and them I learned her.'

The gloomy Eugene, with his hands in his pockets, had strolled in and assisted at the latter part of the dialogue; when the boy spoke these words slightingly of his sister, he took him roughly enough by the chin, and turned up his face to look at it.

'Well, I'm sure, sir!' said the boy, resisting; 'I hope you'll know me again.'

Eugene vouchsafed no answer; but made the proposal to Mortimer, 'I'll go with you, if you like?' So, they all three went away together in the vehicle that had brought the boy; the two friends (once boys together at a public school) inside, smoking cigars; the messenger on the box beside the driver.

'Let me see,' said Mortimer, as they went along; 'I have been, Eugene, upon the honourable roll of solicitors of the High Court of Chancery, and attorneys at Common Law, five years; and—except gratuitously taking instructions, on an average once a fortnight, for the will of Lady Tippins who has nothing to leave—I have had no scrap of business but this romantic business.'

'And I,' said Eugene, 'have been "called" seven years, and have had no business at all, and never shall have any. And if I had, I shouldn't know how to do it.'

'I am far from being clear as to the last particular,' returned Mortimer, with great composure, 'that I have much advantage over you.'

'I hate,' said Eugene, putting his legs up on the opposite seat, 'I hate my profession.'

'Shall I incommode you, if I put mine up too?' returned Mortimer. 'Thank you. I hate mine.'

'It was forced upon me,' said the gloomy Eugene, 'because it was understood that we wanted a barrister in the family. We have got a precious one.'

'It was forced upon me,' said Mortimer, 'because it was understood that we wanted a solicitor in the family. And we have got a precious one.'

'There are four of us, with our names painted on a door-post in right of one black hole called a set of chambers,' said Eugene; 'and each of us has the fourth of a clerk—Cassim Baba, in the robber's cave—and Cassim is the only respectable member of the party.'

'I am one by myself, one,' said Mortimer, 'high up an awful staircase commanding a burial-ground, and I have a whole clerk to myself, and he has nothing to do but look at the burial-ground, and what he will turn out when arrived at maturity, I cannot conceive. Whether, in that shabby rook's nest, he is always plotting wisdom, or plotting murder; whether he will grow up, after so much solitary brooding, to enlighten his fellow-creatures, or to poison them; is the only speck of interest that presents itself to my professional view. Will you give me a light? Thank you.'

'Then idiots talk,' said Eugene, leaning back, folding his arms, smoking with his eyes shut, and speaking slightly through his nose, 'of Energy. If there is a word in the dictionary under any letter from A to Z that I abominate, it is energy. It is such a conventional superstition, such parrot gabble! What the deuce! Am I to rush out into the street, collar the first man of a wealthy appearance that I meet, shake him, and say, "Go to law upon the spot, you dog, and retain me, or I'll be the death of you"? Yet that would be energy.'

'Precisely my view of the case, Eugene. But show me a good opportunity, show me something really worth being energetic about, and I'll show you energy.'

'And so will I,' said Eugene.

And it is likely enough that ten thousand other young men, within the limits of the London Post-office town delivery, made the same hopeful remark in the course of the same evening.

The wheels rolled on, and rolled down by the Monument and by the Tower, and by the Docks; down by Ratcliffe, and by Rotherhithe; down by where accumulated scum of humanity seemed to be washed from higher grounds, like so much moral sewage, and to be pausing until its own weight forced it over the bank and sunk it in the river. In and out among vessels that seemed to have got ashore, and houses that seemed to have got afloat—among bow-splits staring into windows, and windows staring into ships—the wheels rolled on, until they stopped at a dark corner, river-washed and otherwise not washed at all, where the boy alighted and opened the door.

'You must walk the rest, sir; it's not many yards.' He spoke in the singular number, to the express exclusion of Eugene.

'This is a confoundedly out-of-the-way place,' said Mortimer, slipping over the stones and refuse on the shore, as the boy turned the corner sharp.

'Here's my father's, sir; where the light is.'

The low building had the look of having once been a mill. There was a rotten wart of wood upon its forehead that seemed to indicate where the sails had been, but the whole was very indistinctly seen in the obscurity of the night. The boy lifted the latch of the door, and they passed at once into a low circular room, where a man stood before a red fire, looking down into it, and a girl sat engaged in needlework. The fire was in a rusty brazier, not fitted to the hearth; and a common lamp, shaped like a hyacinth-root, smoked and flared in the neck of a stone bottle on the table. There was a wooden bunk or berth in a corner, and in another corner a wooden stair leading above—so clumsy and steep that it was little better than a ladder. Two or three old sculls and oars stood against the wall, and against another part of the wall was a small dresser, making a spare show of the commonest articles of crockery and cooking-vessels. The roof of the room was not plastered, but was formed of the flooring of the room above. This, being very old, knotted, seamed, and beamed, gave a lowering aspect to the chamber; and roof, and walls, and floor, alike abounding in old smears of flour, red-lead (or some such stain which it had probably acquired in warehousing), and damp, alike had a look of decomposition.

'The gentleman, father.'

The figure at the red fire turned, raised its ruffled head, and looked like a bird of prey.

'You're Mortimer Lightwood Esquire; are you, sir?'

'Mortimer Lightwood is my name. What you found,' said Mortimer, glancing rather shrinkingly towards the bunk; 'is it here?'

"Tain't not to say here, but it's close by. I do everything reg'lar. I've giv' notice of the circumstarnce to the police, and the police have took possession of it. No time ain't been lost, on any hand. The police have put into print already, and here's what the print says of it.'

Taking up the bottle with the lamp in it, he held it near a paper on the wall, with the police heading, BODY FOUND. The two friends read the handbill as it stuck against the wall, and Gaffer read them as he held the light.

'Only papers on the unfortunate man, I see,' said Lightwood, glancing from the description of what was found, to the finder.

'Only papers.'

Here the girl arose with her work in her hand, and went out at the door.

'No money,' pursued Mortimer; 'but threepence in one of the skirt-pockets.'

'Three. Penny. Pieces,' said Gaffer Hexam, in as many sentences.

'The trousers pockets empty, and turned inside out.'

Gaffer Hexam nodded. 'But that's common. Whether it's the wash of the tide or no, I can't say. Now, here,' moving the light to another similar placard, 'HIS pockets was found empty, and turned inside out. And here,' moving the light to another, 'HER pocket was found empty, and turned inside out. And so was this one's. And so was that one's. I can't read, nor I don't want to it, for I know 'em by their places on the wall. This one was a sailor, with two anchors and a flag and G. F. T. on his arm. Look and see if he warn't.'

'Quite right.'

'This one was the young woman in grey boots, and her linen marked with a cross. Look and see if she warn't.'

'Quite right.'

'This is him as had a nasty cut over the eye. This is them two young sisters what tied themselves together with a handkecher. This the drunken old chap, in a pair of list slippers and a nightcap, wot had offered—it afterwards come out—to make a hole in the water for a quartern of rum stood aforehand, and kept to his word for the first and last time in his life. They pretty well papers the room, you see; but I know 'em all. I'm scholar enough!'

He waved the light over the whole, as if to typify the light of his scholarly intelligence, and then put it down on the table and stood behind it looking intently at his visitors. He had the special peculiarity of some birds of prey, that when he knitted his brow, his ruffled crest stood highest.

'You did not find all these yourself; did you?' asked Eugene.

To which the bird of prey slowly rejoined, 'And what might YOUR name be, now?'

'This is my friend,' Mortimer Lightwood interposed; 'Mr Eugene Wrayburn.'

'Mr Eugene Wrayburn, is it? And what might Mr Eugene Wrayburn have asked of me?'

'I asked you, simply, if you found all these yourself?'

'I answer you, simply, most on 'em.'

'Do you suppose there has been much violence and robbery, beforehand, among these cases?'

'I don't suppose at all about it,' returned Gaffer. 'I ain't one of the supposing sort. If you'd got your living to haul out of the river every day of your life, you mightn't be much given to supposing. Am I to show the way?'

As he opened the door, in pursuance of a nod from Lightwood, an extremely pale and disturbed face appeared in the doorway—the face of a man much agitated.

'A body missing?' asked Gaffer Hexam, stopping short; 'or a body found? Which?'

'I am lost!' replied the man, in a hurried and an eager manner.

'Lost?'

'I—I—am a stranger, and don't know the way. I—I—want to find the place where I can see what is described here. It is possible I may know it.' He was panting, and could hardly speak; but, he showed a copy of the newly-printed bill that was still wet upon the wall. Perhaps its newness, or perhaps the accuracy of his observation of its general look, guided Gaffer to a ready conclusion.

'This gentleman, Mr Lightwood, is on that business.'

'Mr Lightwood?'

During a pause, Mortimer and the stranger confronted each other. Neither knew the other.

'I think, sir,' said Mortimer, breaking the awkward silence with his airy self-possession, 'that you did me the honour to mention my name?'

'I repeated it, after this man.'

'You said you were a stranger in London?'

'An utter stranger.'

'Are you seeking a Mr Harmon?'

'No.'

'Then I believe I can assure you that you are on a fruitless errand, and will not find what you fear to find. Will you come with us?'

A little winding through some muddy alleys that might have been deposited by the last ill-savoured tide, brought them to the wicket-gate and bright lamp of a Police Station; where they found the Night-Inspector, with a pen and ink, and ruler, posting up his books in a whitewashed office, as studiously as if he were in a monastery on top of a mountain, and no howling fury of a drunken woman were banging herself against a cell-door in the back-yard at his elbow. With the same air of a recluse much given to study, he desisted from his books to bestow a distrustful nod of recognition upon Gaffer, plainly importing, 'Ah! we know all about YOU, and you'll overdo it some day;' and to inform Mr Mortimer Lightwood and friends, that he would attend them immediately. Then, he finished ruling the work he had in hand (it might have been illuminating a missal, he was so calm), in a very neat and methodical manner, showing not the slightest consciousness of the woman who was banging herself with increased violence, and shrieking most terrifically for some other woman's liver.

'A bull's-eye,' said the Night-Inspector, taking up his keys. Which a deferential satellite produced. 'Now, gentlemen.'

With one of his keys, he opened a cool grot at the end of the yard, and they all went in. They quickly came out again, no one speaking but Eugene: who remarked to Mortimer, in a whisper, 'Not MUCH worse than Lady Tippins.'

So, back to the whitewashed library of the monastery—with that liver still in shrieking requisition, as it had been loudly, while they looked at the silent sight they came to see—and there through the merits of the case as summed up by the Abbot. No clue to how body came into river. Very often was no clue. Too late to know for certain, whether injuries received before or after death; one excellent surgical opinion said, before; other excellent surgical opinion said, after. Steward of ship in which gentleman came home passenger, had been round to view, and could swear to identity. Likewise could swear to clothes. And then, you see, you had the papers, too. How was it he had totally disappeared on leaving ship, 'till found in river? Well! Probably had been upon some little game. Probably thought it a harmless game, wasn't up to things, and it turned out a fatal game. Inquest to-morrow, and no doubt open verdict.

'It appears to have knocked your friend over—knocked him completely off his legs,' Mr Inspector remarked, when he had finished his summing up. 'It has given him a bad turn to be sure!'

This was said in a very low voice, and with a searching look (not the first he had cast) at the stranger.

Mr Lightwood explained that it was no friend of his.

'Indeed?' said Mr Inspector, with an attentive ear; 'where did you pick him up?'

Mr Lightwood explained further.

Mr Inspector had delivered his summing up, and had added these words, with his elbows leaning on his desk, and the fingers and thumb of his right hand, fitting themselves to the fingers and thumb of his left. Mr Inspector moved nothing but his eyes, as he now added, raising his voice:

'Turned you faint, sir! Seems you're not accustomed to this kind of work?'

The stranger, who was leaning against the chimneypiece with drooping head, looked round and answered, 'No. It's a horrible sight!'

'You expected to identify, I am told, sir?'

'Yes.'

'HAVE you identified?'

'No. It's a horrible sight. O! a horrible, horrible sight!'

'Who did you think it might have been?' asked Mr Inspector. 'Give us a description, sir. Perhaps we can help you.'

'No, no,' said the stranger; 'it would be quite useless. Good-night.'

Mr Inspector had not moved, and had given no order; but, the satellite slipped his back against the wicket, and laid his left arm along the top of it, and with his right hand turned the bull's-eye he had taken from his chief—in quite a casual manner—towards the stranger.

'You missed a friend, you know; or you missed a foe, you know; or you wouldn't have come here, you know. Well, then; ain't it reasonable to ask, who was it?' Thus, Mr Inspector.

'You must excuse my telling you. No class of man can understand better than you, that families may not choose to publish their disagreements and misfortunes, except on the last necessity. I do not dispute that you discharge your duty in asking me the question; you will not dispute my right to withhold the answer. Good-night.'

Again he turned towards the wicket, where the satellite, with his eye upon his chief, remained a dumb statue.

'At least,' said Mr Inspector, 'you will not object to leave me your card, sir?'

'I should not object, if I had one; but I have not.' He reddened and was much confused as he gave the answer.

'At least,' said Mr Inspector, with no change of voice or manner, 'you will not object to write down your name and address?'

'Not at all.'

Mr Inspector dipped a pen in his inkstand, and deftly laid it on a piece of paper close beside him; then resumed his former attitude. The stranger stepped up to the desk, and wrote in a rather tremulous hand—Mr Inspector taking sidelong note of every hair of his head when it was bent down for the purpose—'Mr Julius Handford, Exchequer Coffee House, Palace Yard, Westminster.'

'Staying there, I presume, sir?'

'Staying there.'

'Consequently, from the country?'

'Eh? Yes—from the country.'

'Good-night, sir.'

The satellite removed his arm and opened the wicket, and Mr Julius Handford went out.

'Reserve!' said Mr Inspector. 'Take care of this piece of paper, keep him in view without giving offence, ascertain that he IS staying there, and find out anything you can about him.'

The satellite was gone; and Mr Inspector, becoming once again the quiet Abbot of that Monastery, dipped his pen in his ink and resumed his books. The two friends who had watched him, more amused by the professional manner than suspicious of Mr Julius Handford, inquired before taking their departure too whether he believed there was anything that really looked bad here?

The Abbot replied with reticence, couldn't say. If a murder, anybody might have done it. Burglary or pocket-picking wanted 'prenticeship. Not so, murder. We were all of us up to that. Had seen scores of people come to identify, and never saw one person struck in that particular way. Might, however, have been Stomach and not Mind. If so, rum stomach. But to be sure there were rum everythings. Pity there was not a word of truth in that superstition about bodies bleeding when touched by the hand of the right person; you never got a sign out of bodies. You got row enough out of such as her—she was good for all night now (referring here to the banging demands for the liver), 'but you got nothing out of bodies if it was ever so.'

There being nothing more to be done until the Inquest was held next day, the friends went away together, and Gaffer Hexam and his son went their separate way. But, arriving at the last corner,

Gaffer bade his boy go home while he turned into a red-curtained tavern, that stood dropsically bulging over the causeway, 'for a half-a-pint.'

The boy lifted the latch he had lifted before, and found his sister again seated before the fire at her work. Who raised her head upon his coming in and asking:

'Where did you go, Liz?'

'I went out in the dark.'

'There was no necessity for that. It was all right enough.'

'One of the gentlemen, the one who didn't speak while I was there, looked hard at me. And I was afraid he might know what my face meant. But there! Don't mind me, Charley! I was all in a tremble of another sort when you owned to father you could write a little.'

'Ah! But I made believe I wrote so badly, as that it was odds if any one could read it. And when I wrote slowest and smeared but with my finger most, father was best pleased, as he stood looking over me.'

The girl put aside her work, and drawing her seat close to his seat by the fire, laid her arm gently on his shoulder.

'You'll make the most of your time, Charley; won't you?'

'Won't I? Come! I like that. Don't I?'

'Yes, Charley, yes. You work hard at your learning, I know. And I work a little, Charley, and plan and contrive a little (wake out of my sleep contriving sometimes), how to get together a shilling now, and a shilling then, that shall make father believe you are beginning to earn a stray living along shore.'

'You are father's favourite, and can make him believe anything.'

'I wish I could, Charley! For if I could make him believe that learning was a good thing, and that we might lead better lives, I should be a'most content to die.'

'Don't talk stuff about dying, Liz.'

She placed her hands in one another on his shoulder, and laying her rich brown cheek against them as she looked down at the fire, went on thoughtfully:

'Of an evening, Charley, when you are at the school, and father's—'

'At the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters,' the boy struck in, with a backward nod of his head towards the public-house.

'Yes. Then as I sit a-looking at the fire, I seem to see in the burning coal—like where that glow is now—'

'That's gas, that is,' said the boy, 'coming out of a bit of a forest that's been under the mud that was under the water in the days of Noah's Ark. Look here! When I take the poker—so—and give it a dig—'

'Don't disturb it, Charley, or it'll be all in a blaze. It's that dull glow near it, coming and going, that I mean. When I look at it of an evening, it comes like pictures to me, Charley.'

'Show us a picture,' said the boy. 'Tell us where to look.'

'Ah! It wants my eyes, Charley.'

'Cut away then, and tell us what your eyes make of it.'

'Why, there are you and me, Charley, when you were quite a baby that never knew a mother—'

'Don't go saying I never knew a mother,' interposed the boy, 'for I knew a little sister that was sister and mother both.'

The girl laughed delightedly, and her eyes filled with pleasant tears, as he put both his arms round her waist and so held her.

'There are you and me, Charley, when father was away at work and locked us out, for fear we should set ourselves afire or fall out of window, sitting on the door-sill, sitting on other door-steps, sitting on the bank of the river, wandering about to get through the time. You are rather heavy to carry, Charley, and I am often obliged to rest. Sometimes we are sleepy and fall asleep together in a corner, sometimes we are very hungry, sometimes we are a little frightened, but what is oftenest hard upon us is the cold. You remember, Charley?'

'I remember,' said the boy, pressing her to him twice or thrice, 'that I snuggled under a little shawl, and it was warm there.'

'Sometimes it rains, and we creep under a boat or the like of that: sometimes it's dark, and we get among the gaslights, sitting watching the people as they go along the streets. At last, up comes father and takes us home. And home seems such a shelter after out of doors! And father pulls my shoes off, and dries my feet at the fire, and has me to sit by him while he smokes his pipe long after you are abed, and I notice that father's is a large hand but never a heavy one when it touches me, and that father's is a rough voice but never an angry one when it speaks to me. So, I grow up, and little by little father trusts me, and makes me his companion, and, let him be put out as he may, never once strikes me.'

The listening boy gave a grunt here, as much as to say 'But he strikes ME though!'

'Those are some of the pictures of what is past, Charley.'

'Cut away again,' said the boy, 'and give us a fortune-telling one; a future one.'

'Well! There am I, continuing with father and holding to father, because father loves me and I love father. I can't so much as read a book, because, if I had learned, father would have thought I was deserting him, and I should have lost my influence. I have not the influence I want to have, I cannot stop some dreadful things I try to stop, but I go on in the hope and trust that the time will come. In the meanwhile I know that I am in some things a stay to father, and that if I was not faithful to him he would—in revenge-like, or in disappointment, or both—go wild and bad.'

'Give us a touch of the fortune-telling pictures about me.'

'I was passing on to them, Charley,' said the girl, who had not changed her attitude since she began, and who now mournfully shook her head; 'the others were all leading up. There are you—'

'Where am I, Liz?'

'Still in the hollow down by the flare.'

'There seems to be the deuce-and-all in the hollow down by the flare,' said the boy, glancing from her eyes to the brazier, which had a grisly skeleton look on its long thin legs.

'There are you, Charley, working your way, in secret from father, at the school; and you get prizes; and you go on better and better; and you come to be a—what was it you called it when you told me about that?'

'Ha, ha! Fortune-telling not know the name!' cried the boy, seeming to be rather relieved by this default on the part of the hollow down by the flare. 'Pupil-teacher.'

'You come to be a pupil-teacher, and you still go on better and better, and you rise to be a master full of learning and respect. But the secret has come to father's knowledge long before, and it has divided you from father, and from me.'

'No it hasn't!'

'Yes it has, Charley. I see, as plain as plain can be, that your way is not ours, and that even if father could be got to forgive your taking it (which he never could be), that way of yours would be darkened by our way. But I see too, Charley—'

'Still as plain as plain can be, Liz?' asked the boy playfully.

'Ah! Still. That it is a great work to have cut you away from father's life, and to have made a new and good beginning. So there am I, Charley, left alone with father, keeping him as straight as I can, watching for more influence than I have, and hoping that through some fortunate chance, or when he is ill, or when—I don't know what—I may turn him to wish to do better things.'

'You said you couldn't read a book, Lizzie. Your library of books is the hollow down by the flare, I think.'

'I should be very glad to be able to read real books. I feel my want of learning very much, Charley. But I should feel it much more, if I didn't know it to be a tie between me and father.—Hark! Father's tread!'

It being now past midnight, the bird of prey went straight to roost. At mid-day following he reappeared at the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters, in the character, not new to him, of a witness before a Coroner's Jury.

Mr Mortimer Lightwood, besides sustaining the character of one of the witnesses, doubled the part with that of the eminent solicitor who watched the proceedings on behalf of the representatives of the deceased, as was duly recorded in the newspapers. Mr Inspector watched the proceedings too, and kept his watching closely to himself. Mr Julius Handford having given his right address, and being reported in solvent circumstances as to his bill, though nothing more was known of him at his hotel except that his way of life was very retired, had no summons to appear, and was merely present in the shades of Mr Inspector's mind.

The case was made interesting to the public, by Mr Mortimer Lightwood's evidence touching the circumstances under which the deceased, Mr John Harmon, had returned to England; exclusive private proprietorship in which circumstances was set up at dinner-tables for several days, by Veneering, Twemlow, Podsnap, and all the Buffers: who all related them irreconcilably with one another, and contradicted themselves. It was also made interesting by the testimony of Job Potterson, the ship's steward, and one Mr Jacob Kibble, a fellow-passenger, that the deceased Mr John Harmon did bring over, in a hand-valise with which he did disembark, the sum realized by the forced sale of his little landed property, and that the sum exceeded, in ready money, seven hundred pounds. It was further made interesting, by the remarkable experiences of Jesse Hexam in having rescued from the Thames so many dead bodies, and for whose behoof a rapturous admirer subscribing himself 'A friend to Burial' (perhaps an undertaker), sent eighteen postage stamps, and five 'Now Sir's to the editor of the Times.

Upon the evidence adduced before them, the Jury found, That the body of Mr John Harmon had been discovered floating in the Thames, in an advanced state of decay, and much injured; and that the said Mr John Harmon had come by his death under highly suspicious circumstances, though by whose act or in what precise manner there was no evidence before this Jury to show. And they appended to their verdict, a recommendation to the Home Office (which Mr Inspector appeared to think highly sensible), to offer a reward for the solution of the mystery. Within eight-and-forty hours, a reward of One Hundred Pounds was proclaimed, together with a free pardon to any person or persons not the actual perpetrator or perpetrators, and so forth in due form.

This Proclamation rendered Mr Inspector additionally studious, and caused him to stand meditating on river-stairs and causeways, and to go lurking about in boats, putting this and that together. But, according to the success with which you put this and that together, you get a woman and a fish apart, or a Mermaid in combination. And Mr Inspector could turn out nothing better than a Mermaid, which no Judge and Jury would believe in.

Thus, like the tides on which it had been borne to the knowledge of men, the Harmon Murder—as it came to be popularly called—went up and down, and ebbed and flowed, now in the town, now in the country, now among palaces, now among hovels, now among lords and ladies and gentlefolks, now among labourers and hammerers and ballast-heavers, until at last, after a long interval of slack water it got out to sea and drifted away.

Chapter 4: The R. Wilfer Family



Reginald Wilfer is a name with rather a grand sound, suggesting on first acquaintance brasses in country churches, scrolls in stained-glass windows, and generally the De Wilfers who came over with the Conqueror. For, it is a remarkable fact in genealogy that no De Any ones ever came over with Anybody else.

But, the Reginald Wilfer family were of such commonplace extraction and pursuits that their forefathers had for generations modestly subsisted on the Docks, the Excise Office, and the Custom House, and the existing R. Wilfer was a poor clerk. So poor a clerk, though having a limited salary and an unlimited family, that he had never yet attained the modest object of his ambition: which was, to wear a complete new suit of clothes, hat and boots included, at one time. His black hat was brown before he could afford a coat, his pantaloons were white at the seams and knees before he could buy a pair of boots, his boots had worn out before he could treat himself to new pantaloons, and, by the time he worked round to the hat again, that shining modern article roofed-in an ancient ruin of various periods.

If the conventional Cherub could ever grow up and be clothed, he might be photographed as a portrait of Wilfer. His chubby, smooth, innocent appearance was a reason for his being always treated with condescension when he was not put down. A stranger entering his own poor house at about ten o'clock P.M. might have been surprised to find him sitting up to supper. So boyish was he in his curves and proportions, that his old schoolmaster meeting him in Cheapside, might have

been unable to withstand the temptation of caning him on the spot. In short, he was the conventional cherub, after the supposititious shoot just mentioned, rather grey, with signs of care on his expression, and in decidedly insolvent circumstances.

He was shy, and unwilling to own to the name of Reginald, as being too aspiring and self-assertive a name. In his signature he used only the initial R., and imparted what it really stood for, to none but chosen friends, under the seal of confidence. Out of this, the facetious habit had arisen in the neighbourhood surrounding Mincing Lane of making christian names for him of adjectives and participles beginning with R. Some of these were more or less appropriate: as Rusty, Retiring, Ruddy, Round, Ripe, Ridiculous, Ruminative; others, derived their point from their want of application: as Raging, Rattling, Roaring, Raffish. But, his popular name was Rumty, which in a moment of inspiration had been bestowed upon him by a gentleman of convivial habits connected with the drug-markets, as the beginning of a social chorus, his leading part in the execution of which had led this gentleman to the Temple of Fame, and of which the whole expressive burden ran:

'Rumty iddity, row dow dow,

Sing toodlely, teedlely, bow wow wow.'

Thus he was constantly addressed, even in minor notes on business, as 'Dear Rumty'; in answer to which, he sedately signed himself, 'Yours truly, R. Wilfer.'

He was clerk in the drug-house of Chicksey, Veneering, and Stobbles. Chicksey and Stobbles, his former masters, had both become absorbed in Veneering, once their traveller or commission agent: who had signalized his accession to supreme power by bringing into the business a quantity of plate-glass window and French-polished mahogany partition, and a gleaming and enormous doorplate.

R. Wilfer locked up his desk one evening, and, putting his bunch of keys in his pocket much as if it were his peg-top, made for home. His home was in the Holloway region north of London, and then divided from it by fields and trees. Between Battle Bridge and that part of the Holloway district in which he dwelt, was a tract of suburban Sahara, where tiles and bricks were burnt, bones were boiled, carpets were beat, rubbish was shot, dogs were fought, and dust was heaped by contractors. Skirting the border of this desert, by the way he took, when the light of its kiln-fires made lurid smears on the fog, R. Wilfer sighed and shook his head.

'Ah me!' said he, 'what might have been is not what is!'

With which commentary on human life, indicating an experience of it not exclusively his own, he made the best of his way to the end of his journey.

Mrs Wilfer was, of course, a tall woman and an angular. Her lord being cherubic, she was necessarily majestic, according to the principle which matrimonially unites contrasts. She was much given to tying up her head in a pocket-handkerchief, knotted under the chin. This head-gear, in conjunction with a pair of gloves worn within doors, she seemed to consider as at once a kind of armour against misfortune (invariably assuming it when in low spirits or difficulties), and as a species of full dress. It was therefore with some sinking of the spirit that her husband beheld her thus heroically attired, putting down her candle in the little hall, and coming down the doorsteps through the little front court to open the gate for him.

Something had gone wrong with the house-door, for R. Wilfer stopped on the steps, staring at it, and cried:

'Hal-loa?'

'Yes,' said Mrs Wilfer, 'the man came himself with a pair of pincers, and took it off, and took it away. He said that as he had no expectation of ever being paid for it, and as he had an order for another LADIES' SCHOOL door-plate, it was better (burnished up) for the interests of all parties.'

'Perhaps it was, my dear; what do you think?'

'You are master here, R. W.,' returned his wife. 'It is as you think; not as I do. Perhaps it might have been better if the man had taken the door too?'

'My dear, we couldn't have done without the door.'

'Couldn't we?'

'Why, my dear! Could we?'

'It is as you think, R. W.; not as I do.' With those submissive words, the dutiful wife preceded him down a few stairs to a little basement front room, half kitchen, half parlour, where a girl of about nineteen, with an exceedingly pretty figure and face, but with an impatient and petulant expression both in her face and in her shoulders (which in her sex and at her age are very expressive of discontent), sat playing draughts with a younger girl, who was the youngest of the House of Wilfer. Not to encumber this page by telling off the Wilfers in detail and casting them up in the gross, it is enough for the present that the rest were what is called 'out in the world,' in various ways, and that they were Many. So many, that when one of his dutiful children called in to see him, R. Wilfer generally seemed to say to himself, after a little mental arithmetic, 'Oh! here's another of 'em!' before adding aloud, 'How de do, John,' or Susan, as the case might be.

'Well Piggywiggies,' said R. W., 'how de do to-night? What I was thinking of, my dear,' to Mrs Wilfer already seated in a corner with folded gloves, 'was, that as we have let our first floor so well, and as we have now no place in which you could teach pupils even if pupils—'

'The milkman said he knew of two young ladies of the highest respectability who were in search of a suitable establishment, and he took a card,' interposed Mrs Wilfer, with severe monotony, as if she were reading an Act of Parliament aloud. 'Tell your father whether it was last Monday, Bella.'

'But we never heard any more of it, ma,' said Bella, the elder girl.

'In addition to which, my dear,' her husband urged, 'if you have no place to put two young persons into—'

'Pardon me,' Mrs Wilfer again interposed; 'they were not young persons. Two young ladies of the highest respectability. Tell your father, Bella, whether the milkman said so.'

'My dear, it is the same thing.'

'No it is not,' said Mrs Wilfer, with the same impressive monotony. 'Pardon me!'

'I mean, my dear, it is the same thing as to space. As to space. If you have no space in which to put two youthful fellow-creatures, however eminently respectable, which I do not doubt, where are those youthful fellow-creatures to be accommodated? I carry it no further than that. And solely looking at it,' said her husband, making the stipulation at once in a conciliatory, complimentary, and argumentative tone—'as I am sure you will agree, my love—from a fellow-creature point of view, my dear.'

'I have nothing more to say,' returned Mrs Wilfer, with a meek renunciatory action of her gloves. 'It is as you think, R. W.; not as I do.'

Here, the huffing of Miss Bella and the loss of three of her men at a swoop, aggravated by the coronation of an opponent, led to that young lady's jerking the draught-board and pieces off the table: which her sister went down on her knees to pick up.

'Poor Bella!' said Mrs Wilfer.

'And poor Lavinia, perhaps, my dear?' suggested R. W.

'Pardon me,' said Mrs Wilfer, 'no!'

It was one of the worthy woman's specialities that she had an amazing power of gratifying her splenetic or worldly-minded humours by extolling her own family: which she thus proceeded, in the present case, to do.

'No, R. W. Lavinia has not known the trial that Bella has known. The trial that your daughter Bella has undergone, is, perhaps, without a parallel, and has been borne, I will say, Nobly. When you see your daughter Bella in her black dress, which she alone of all the family wears, and when you remember the circumstances which have led to her wearing it, and when you know how those

circumstances have been sustained, then, R. W., lay your head upon your pillow and say, "Poor Lavinia!"'

Here, Miss Lavinia, from her kneeling situation under the table, put in that she didn't want to be 'poored by pa', or anybody else.

'I am sure you do not, my dear,' returned her mother, 'for you have a fine brave spirit. And your sister Cecilia has a fine brave spirit of another kind, a spirit of pure devotion, a beau-ti-ful spirit! The self-sacrifice of Cecilia reveals a pure and womanly character, very seldom equalled, never surpassed. I have now in my pocket a letter from your sister Cecilia, received this morning—received three months after her marriage, poor child!—in which she tells me that her husband must unexpectedly shelter under their roof his reduced aunt. "But I will be true to him, mamma," she touchingly writes, "I will not leave him, I must not forget that he is my husband. Let his aunt come!" If this is not pathetic, if this is not woman's devotion—!' The good lady waved her gloves in a sense of the impossibility of saying more, and tied the pocket-handkerchief over her head in a tighter knot under her chin.

Bella, who was now seated on the rug to warm herself, with her brown eyes on the fire and a handful of her brown curls in her mouth, laughed at this, and then pouted and half cried.

'I am sure,' said she, 'though you have no feeling for me, pa, I am one of the most unfortunate girls that ever lived. You know how poor we are' (it is probable he did, having some reason to know it!), 'and what a glimpse of wealth I had, and how it melted away, and how I am here in this ridiculous mourning—which I hate!—a kind of a widow who never was married. And yet you don't feel for me.—Yes you do, yes you do.'

This abrupt change was occasioned by her father's face. She stopped to pull him down from his chair in an attitude highly favourable to strangulation, and to give him a kiss and a pat or two on the cheek.

'But you ought to feel for me, you know, pa.'

'My dear, I do.'

'Yes, and I say you ought to. If they had only left me alone and told me nothing about it, it would have mattered much less. But that nasty Mr Lightwood feels it his duty, as he says, to write and tell me what is in reserve for me, and then I am obliged to get rid of George Sampson.'

Here, Lavinia, rising to the surface with the last draughtman rescued, interposed, 'You never cared for George Sampson, Bella.'

'And did I say I did, miss?' Then, pouting again, with the curls in her mouth; 'George Sampson was very fond of me, and admired me very much, and put up with everything I did to him.'

'You were rude enough to him,' Lavinia again interposed.

'And did I say I wasn't, miss? I am not setting up to be sentimental about George Sampson. I only say George Sampson was better than nothing.'

'You didn't show him that you thought even that,' Lavinia again interposed.

'You are a chit and a little idiot,' returned Bella, 'or you wouldn't make such a dolly speech. What did you expect me to do? Wait till you are a woman, and don't talk about what you don't understand. You only show your ignorance!' Then, whimpering again, and at intervals biting the curls, and stopping to look how much was bitten off, 'It's a shame! There never was such a hard case! I shouldn't care so much if it wasn't so ridiculous. It was ridiculous enough to have a stranger coming over to marry me, whether he liked it or not. It was ridiculous enough to know what an embarrassing meeting it would be, and how we never could pretend to have an inclination of our own, either of us. It was ridiculous enough to know I shouldn't like him—how COULD I like him, left to him in a will, like a dozen of spoons, with everything cut and dried beforehand, like orange chips. Talk of orange flowers indeed! I declare again it's a shame! Those ridiculous points would have been smoothed away by the money, for I love money, and want money—want it dreadfully. I hate to be poor, and we are degradingly poor, offensively poor, miserably poor, beastly poor. But here I am, left with all the ridiculous parts of the situation remaining, and, added to them all, this ridiculous dress! And if the truth was known, when the Harmon murder was all over the town, and people were speculating on its being suicide, I dare say those impudent wretches at the clubs and places made jokes about the miserable creature's having preferred a watery grave to me. It's likely enough they took such liberties; I shouldn't wonder! I declare it's a very hard case indeed, and I am a most unfortunate girl. The idea of being a kind of a widow, and never having been married! And the idea of being as poor as ever after all, and going into black, besides, for a man I never saw, and should have hated—as far as HE was concerned—if I had seen!'

The young lady's lamentations were checked at this point by a knuckle, knocking at the half-open door of the room. The knuckle had knocked two or three times already, but had not been heard.

'Who is it?' said Mrs Wilfer, in her Act-of-Parliament manner. 'Enter!'

A gentleman coming in, Miss Bella, with a short and sharp exclamation, scrambled off the hearth-rug and massed the bitten curls together in their right place on her neck.

'The servant girl had her key in the door as I came up, and directed me to this room, telling me I was expected. I am afraid I should have asked her to announce me.'

'Pardon me,' returned Mrs Wilfer. 'Not at all. Two of my daughters. R. W., this is the gentleman who has taken your first-floor. He was so good as to make an appointment for to-night, when you would be at home.'

A dark gentleman. Thirty at the utmost. An expressive, one might say handsome, face. A very bad manner. In the last degree constrained, reserved, diffident, troubled. His eyes were on Miss Bella for an instant, and then looked at the ground as he addressed the master of the house.

'Seeing that I am quite satisfied, Mr Wilfer, with the rooms, and with their situation, and with their price, I suppose a memorandum between us of two or three lines, and a payment down, will bind the bargain? I wish to send in furniture without delay.'

Two or three times during this short address, the cherub addressed had made chubby motions towards a chair. The gentleman now took it, laying a hesitating hand on a corner of the table, and with another hesitating hand lifting the crown of his hat to his lips, and drawing it before his mouth.

'The gentleman, R. W.,' said Mrs Wilfer, 'proposes to take your apartments by the quarter. A quarter's notice on either side.'

'Shall I mention, sir,' insinuated the landlord, expecting it to be received as a matter of course, 'the form of a reference?'

'I think,' returned the gentleman, after a pause, 'that a reference is not necessary; neither, to say the truth, is it convenient, for I am a stranger in London. I require no reference from you, and perhaps, therefore, you will require none from me. That will be fair on both sides. Indeed, I show the greater confidence of the two, for I will pay in advance whatever you please, and I am going to trust my furniture here. Whereas, if you were in embarrassed circumstances—this is merely supposititious—'

Conscience causing R. Wilfer to colour, Mrs Wilfer, from a corner (she always got into stately corners) came to the rescue with a deep-toned 'Per-fectly.'

'—Why then I—might lose it.'

'Well!' observed R. Wilfer, cheerfully, 'money and goods are certainly the best of references.'

'Do you think they ARE the best, pa?' asked Miss Bella, in a low voice, and without looking over her shoulder as she warmed her foot on the fender.

'Among the best, my dear.'

'I should have thought, myself, it was so easy to add the usual kind of one,' said Bella, with a toss of her curls.

The gentleman listened to her, with a face of marked attention, though he neither looked up nor changed his attitude. He sat, still and silent, until his future landlord accepted his proposals, and brought writing materials to complete the business. He sat, still and silent, while the landlord wrote.

When the agreement was ready in duplicate (the landlord having worked at it like some cherubic scribe, in what is conventionally called a doubtful, which means a not at all doubtful, Old Master), it was signed by the contracting parties, Bella looking on as scornful witness. The contracting parties were R. Wilfer, and John Rokesmith Esquire.

When it came to Bella's turn to sign her name, Mr Rokesmith, who was standing, as he had sat, with a hesitating hand upon the table, looked at her stealthily, but narrowly. He looked at the pretty figure bending down over the paper and saying, 'Where am I to go, pa? Here, in this corner?' He looked at the beautiful brown hair, shading the coquettish face; he looked at the free dash of the signature, which was a bold one for a woman's; and then they looked at one another.

'Much obliged to you, Miss Wilfer.'

'Obliged?'

'I have given you so much trouble.'

'Signing my name? Yes, certainly. But I am your landlord's daughter, sir.'

As there was nothing more to do but pay eight sovereigns in earnest of the bargain, pocket the agreement, appoint a time for the arrival of his furniture and himself, and go, Mr Rokesmith did that as awkwardly as it might be done, and was escorted by his landlord to the outer air. When R. Wilfer returned, candlestick in hand, to the bosom of his family, he found the bosom agitated.

'Pa,' said Bella, 'we have got a Murderer for a tenant.'

'Pa,' said Lavinia, 'we have got a Robber.'

'To see him unable for his life to look anybody in the face!' said Bella. 'There never was such an exhibition.'

'My dears,' said their father, 'he is a diffident gentleman, and I should say particularly so in the society of girls of your age.'

'Nonsense, our age!' cried Bella, impatiently. 'What's that got to do with him?'

'Besides, we are not of the same age:—which age?' demanded Lavinia.

'Never YOU mind, Lavvy,' retorted Bella; 'you wait till you are of an age to ask such questions. Pa, mark my words! Between Mr Rokesmith and me, there is a natural antipathy and a deep distrust; and something will come of it!'

'My dear, and girls,' said the cherub-patriarch, 'between Mr Rokesmith and me, there is a matter of eight sovereigns, and something for supper shall come of it, if you'll agree upon the article.'

This was a neat and happy turn to give the subject, treats being rare in the Wilfer household, where a monotonous appearance of Dutch-cheese at ten o'clock in the evening had been rather frequently commented on by the dimpled shoulders of Miss Bella. Indeed, the modest Dutchman himself seemed conscious of his want of variety, and generally came before the family in a state of apologetic perspiration. After some discussion on the relative merits of veal-cutlet, sweetbread, and lobster, a decision was pronounced in favour of veal-cutlet. Mrs Wilfer then solemnly divested herself of her handkerchief and gloves, as a preliminary sacrifice to preparing the frying-pan, and R. W. himself went out to purchase the viand. He soon returned, bearing the same in a fresh cabbage-leaf, where it coyly embraced a rasher of ham. Melodious sounds were not long in rising from the frying-pan on the fire, or in seeming, as the firelight danced in the mellow halls of a couple of full bottles on the table, to play appropriate dance-music.

The cloth was laid by Lavvy. Bella, as the acknowledged ornament of the family, employed both her hands in giving her hair an additional wave while sitting in the easiest chair, and occasionally threw in a direction touching the supper: as, 'Very brown, ma;' or, to her sister, 'Put the saltcellar straight, miss, and don't be a dowdy little puss.'

Meantime her father, chinking Mr Rokesmith's gold as he sat expectant between his knife and fork, remarked that six of those sovereigns came just in time for their landlord, and stood them in a little pile on the white tablecloth to look at.

'I hate our landlord!' said Bella.

But, observing a fall in her father's face, she went and sat down by him at the table, and began touching up his hair with the handle of a fork. It was one of the girl's spoilt ways to be always arranging the family's hair—perhaps because her own was so pretty, and occupied so much of her attention.

'You deserve to have a house of your own; don't you, poor pa?'

'I don't deserve it better than another, my dear.'

'At any rate I, for one, want it more than another,' said Bella, holding him by the chin, as she stuck his flaxen hair on end, 'and I grudge this money going to the Monster that swallows up so much, when we all want—Everything. And if you say (as you want to say; I know you want to say so, pa) "that's neither reasonable nor honest, Bella," then I answer, "Maybe not, pa—very likely—but it's one of the consequences of being poor, and of thoroughly hating and detesting to be poor, and that's my case." Now, you look lovely, pa; why don't you always wear your hair like that? And

here's the cutlet! If it isn't very brown, ma, I can't eat it, and must have a bit put back to be done expressly.'

However, as it was brown, even to Bella's taste, the young lady graciously partook of it without reconsignment to the frying-pan, and also, in due course, of the contents of the two bottles: whereof one held Scotch ale and the other rum. The latter perfume, with the fostering aid of boiling water and lemon-peel, diffused itself throughout the room, and became so highly concentrated around the warm fireside, that the wind passing over the house roof must have rushed off charged with a delicious whiff of it, after buzzing like a great bee at that particular chimneypot.

'Pa,' said Bella, sipping the fragrant mixture and warming her favourite ankle; 'when old Mr Harmon made such a fool of me (not to mention himself, as he is dead), what do you suppose he did it for?'

'Impossible to say, my dear. As I have told you time out of number since his will was brought to light, I doubt if I ever exchanged a hundred words with the old gentleman. If it was his whim to surprise us, his whim succeeded. For he certainly did it.'

'And I was stamping my foot and screaming, when he first took notice of me; was I?' said Bella, contemplating the ankle before mentioned.

'You were stamping your little foot, my dear, and screaming with your little voice, and laying into me with your little bonnet, which you had snatched off for the purpose,' returned her father, as if the remembrance gave a relish to the rum; 'you were doing this one Sunday morning when I took you out, because I didn't go the exact way you wanted, when the old gentleman, sitting on a seat near, said, "That's a nice girl; that's a VERY nice girl; a promising girl!" And so you were, my dear.'

'And then he asked my name, did he, pa?'

'Then he asked your name, my dear, and mine; and on other Sunday mornings, when we walked his way, we saw him again, and—and really that's all.'

As that was all the rum and water too, or, in other words, as R. W. delicately signified that his glass was empty, by throwing back his head and standing the glass upside down on his nose and upper lip, it might have been charitable in Mrs Wilfer to suggest replenishment. But that heroine briefly suggesting 'Bedtime' instead, the bottles were put away, and the family retired; she cherubically escorted, like some severe saint in a painting, or merely human matron allegorically treated.

'And by this time to-morrow,' said Lavinia when the two girls were alone in their room, 'we shall have Mr Rokesmith here, and shall be expecting to have our throats cut.'

'You needn't stand between me and the candle for all that,' retorted Bella. 'This is another of the consequences of being poor! The idea of a girl with a really fine head of hair, having to do it by one flat candle and a few inches of looking-glass!'

'You caught George Sampson with it, Bella, bad as your means of dressing it are.'

'You low little thing. Caught George Sampson with it! Don't talk about catching people, miss, till your own time for catching—as you call it—comes.'

'Perhaps it has come,' muttered Lavvy, with a toss of her head.

'What did you say?' asked Bella, very sharply. 'What did you say, miss?'

Lavvy declining equally to repeat or to explain, Bella gradually lapsed over her hair-dressing into a soliloquy on the miseries of being poor, as exemplified in having nothing to put on, nothing to go out in, nothing to dress by, only a nasty box to dress at instead of a commodious dressing-table, and being obliged to take in suspicious lodgers. On the last grievance as her climax, she laid great stress—and might have laid greater, had she known that if Mr Julius Handford had a twin brother upon earth, Mr John Rokesmith was the man.

Chapter 5: Boffin's Bower



Over against a London house, a corner house not far from Cavendish Square, a man with a wooden leg had sat for some years, with his remaining foot in a basket in cold weather, picking up a living on this wise:—Every morning at eight o'clock, he stumped to the corner, carrying a chair, a clothes-horse, a pair of trestles, a board, a basket, and an umbrella, all strapped together. Separating these, the board and trestles became a counter, the basket supplied the few small lots of fruit and sweets that he offered for sale upon it and became a foot-warmer, the unfolded clothes-horse displayed a choice collection of halfpenny ballads and became a screen, and the stool planted within it became his post for the rest of the day. All weathers saw the man at the post. This is to be accepted in a double sense, for he contrived a back to his wooden stool, by placing it against the lamp-post. When the weather was wet, he put up his umbrella over his stock in trade, not over himself; when the weather was dry, he furled that faded article, tied it round with a piece

of yarn, and laid it cross-wise under the trestles: where it looked like an unwholesomely-forced lettuce that had lost in colour and crispness what it had gained in size.

He had established his right to the corner, by imperceptible prescription. He had never varied his ground an inch, but had in the beginning diffidently taken the corner upon which the side of the house gave. A howling corner in the winter time, a dusty corner in the summer time, an undesirable corner at the best of times. Shelterless fragments of straw and paper got up revolving storms there, when the main street was at peace; and the water-cart, as if it were drunk or short-sighted, came blundering and jolting round it, making it muddy when all else was clean.

On the front of his sale-board hung a little placard, like a kettle-holder, bearing the inscription in his own small text:

Errands gone

On with fi

Delity By

Ladies and Gentlemen

I remain

Your humble Servt:

Silas Wegg

He had not only settled it with himself in course of time, that he was errand-goer by appointment to the house at the corner (though he received such commissions not half a dozen times in a year, and then only as some servant's deputy), but also that he was one of the house's retainers and owed vassalage to it and was bound to leal and loyal interest in it. For this reason, he always spoke of it as 'Our House,' and, though his knowledge of its affairs was mostly speculative and all wrong, claimed to be in its confidence. On similar grounds he never beheld an inmate at any one of its windows but he touched his hat. Yet, he knew so little about the inmates that he gave them names of his own invention: as 'Miss Elizabeth', 'Master George', 'Aunt Jane', 'Uncle Parker '—having no authority whatever for any such designations, but particularly the last—to which, as a natural consequence, he stuck with great obstinacy.

Over the house itself, he exercised the same imaginary power as over its inhabitants and their affairs. He had never been in it, the length of a piece of fat black water-pipe which trailed itself over the area-door into a damp stone passage, and had rather the air of a leech on the house that had 'taken' wonderfully; but this was no impediment to his arranging it according to a plan of his own. It was a great dingy house with a quantity of dim side window and blank back premises, and it cost his mind a world of trouble so to lay it out as to account for everything in its external

appearance. But, this once done, was quite satisfactory, and he rested persuaded, that he knew his way about the house blindfold: from the barred garrets in the high roof, to the two iron extinguishers before the main door—which seemed to request all lively visitors to have the kindness to put themselves out, before entering.

Assuredly, this stall of Silas Wegg's was the hardest little stall of all the sterile little stalls in London. It gave you the face-ache to look at his apples, the stomach-ache to look at his oranges, the tooth-ache to look at his nuts. Of the latter commodity he had always a grim little heap, on which lay a little wooden measure which had no discernible inside, and was considered to represent the penn'orth appointed by Magna Charta. Whether from too much east wind or no—it was an easterly corner—the stall, the stock, and the keeper, were all as dry as the Desert. Wegg was a knotty man, and a close-grained, with a face carved out of very hard material, that had just as much play of expression as a watchman's rattle. When he laughed, certain jerks occurred in it, and the rattle sprung. Sooth to say, he was so wooden a man that he seemed to have taken his wooden leg naturally, and rather suggested to the fanciful observer, that he might be expected—if his development received no untimely check—to be completely set up with a pair of wooden legs in about six months.

Mr Wegg was an observant person, or, as he himself said, 'took a powerful sight of notice'. He saluted all his regular passers-by every day, as he sat on his stool backed up by the lamp-post; and on the adaptable character of these salutes he greatly plumed himself. Thus, to the rector, he addressed a bow, compounded of lay deference, and a slight touch of the shady preliminary meditation at church; to the doctor, a confidential bow, as to a gentleman whose acquaintance with his inside he begged respectfully to acknowledge; before the Quality he delighted to abase himself; and for Uncle Parker, who was in the army (at least, so he had settled it), he put his open hand to the side of his hat, in a military manner which that angry-eyed buttoned-up inflammatory-faced old gentleman appeared but imperfectly to appreciate.

The only article in which Silas dealt, that was not hard, was gingerbread. On a certain day, some wretched infant having purchased the damp gingerbread-horse (fearfully out of condition), and the adhesive bird-cage, which had been exposed for the day's sale, he had taken a tin box from under his stool to produce a relay of those dreadful specimens, and was going to look in at the lid, when he said to himself, pausing: 'Oh! Here you are again!'

The words referred to a broad, round-shouldered, one-sided old fellow in mourning, coming comically ambling towards the corner, dressed in a pea over-coat, and carrying a large stick. He wore thick shoes, and thick leather gaiters, and thick gloves like a hedger's. Both as to his dress and to himself, he was of an overlapping rhinoceros build, with folds in his cheeks, and his forehead, and his eyelids, and his lips, and his ears; but with bright, eager, childishly-inquiring,

grey eyes, under his ragged eyebrows, and broad-brimmed hat. A very odd-looking old fellow altogether.

'Here you are again,' repeated Mr Wegg, musing. 'And what are you now? Are you in the Funns, or where are you? Have you lately come to settle in this neighbourhood, or do you own to another neighbourhood? Are you in independent circumstances, or is it wasting the motions of a bow on you? Come! I'll speculate! I'll invest a bow in you.'

Which Mr Wegg, having replaced his tin box, accordingly did, as he rose to bait his gingerbread-trap for some other devoted infant. The salute was acknowledged with:

'Morning, sir! Morning! Morning!'

('Calls me Sir!' said Mr Wegg, to himself; 'HE won't answer. A bow gone!')

'Morning, morning, morning!'

'Appears to be rather a 'arty old cock, too,' said Mr Wegg, as before; 'Good morning to YOU, sir.'

'Do you remember me, then?' asked his new acquaintance, stopping in his amble, one-sided, before the stall, and speaking in a pounding way, though with great good-humour.

'I have noticed you go past our house, sir, several times in the course of the last week or so.'

'Our house,' repeated the other. 'Meaning—?'

'Yes,' said Mr Wegg, nodding, as the other pointed the clumsy forefinger of his right glove at the corner house.

'Oh! Now, what,' pursued the old fellow, in an inquisitive manner, carrying his knotted stick in his left arm as if it were a baby, 'what do they allow you now?'

'It's job work that I do for our house,' returned Silas, drily, and with reticence; 'it's not yet brought to an exact allowance.'

'Oh! It's not yet brought to an exact allowance? No! It's not yet brought to an exact allowance. Oh!—Morning, morning, morning!'

'Appears to be rather a cracked old cock,' thought Silas, qualifying his former good opinion, as the other ambled off. But, in a moment he was back again with the question:

'How did you get your wooden leg?'

Mr Wegg replied, (tartly to this personal inquiry), 'In an accident.'

'Do you like it?'

'Well! I haven't got to keep it warm,' Mr Wegg made answer, in a sort of desperation occasioned by the singularity of the question.

'He hasn't,' repeated the other to his knotted stick, as he gave it a hug; 'he hasn't got—ha!—ha!—to keep it warm! Did you ever hear of the name of Boffin?'

'No,' said Mr Wegg, who was growing restive under this examination. 'I never did hear of the name of Boffin.'

'Do you like it?'

'Why, no,' retorted Mr Wegg, again approaching desperation; 'I can't say I do.'

'Why don't you like it?'

'I don't know why I don't,' retorted Mr Wegg, approaching frenzy, 'but I don't at all.'

'Now, I'll tell you something that'll make you sorry for that,' said the stranger, smiling. 'My name's Boffin.'

'I can't help it!' returned Mr Wegg. Implying in his manner the offensive addition, 'and if I could, I wouldn't.'

'But there's another chance for you,' said Mr Boffin, smiling still, 'Do you like the name of Nicodemus? Think it over. Nick, or Noddy.'

'It is not, sir,' Mr Wegg rejoined, as he sat down on his stool, with an air of gentle resignation, combined with melancholy candour; 'it is not a name as I could wish any one that I had a respect for, to call ME by; but there may be persons that would not view it with the same objections.—I don't know why,' Mr Wegg added, anticipating another question.

'Noddy Boffin,' said that gentleman. 'Noddy. That's my name. Noddy—or Nick—Boffin. What's your name?'

'Silas Wegg.—I don't,' said Mr Wegg, bestirring himself to take the same precaution as before, 'I don't know why Silas, and I don't know why Wegg.'

'Now, Wegg,' said Mr Boffin, hugging his stick closer, 'I want to make a sort of offer to you. Do you remember when you first see me?'

The wooden Wegg looked at him with a meditative eye, and also with a softened air as descrying possibility of profit. 'Let me think. I ain't quite sure, and yet I generally take a powerful sight of notice, too. Was it on a Monday morning, when the butcher-boy had been to our house for orders, and bought a ballad of me, which, being unacquainted with the tune, I run it over to him?'

'Right, Wegg, right! But he bought more than one.'

'Yes, to be sure, sir; he bought several; and wishing to lay out his money to the best, he took my opinion to guide his choice, and we went over the collection together. To be sure we did. Here was him as it might be, and here was myself as it might be, and there was you, Mr Boffin, as you identically are, with your self-same stick under your very same arm, and your very same back towards us. To—be—sure!' added Mr Wegg, looking a little round Mr Boffin, to take him in the rear, and identify this last extraordinary coincidence, 'your wery self-same back!'

'What do you think I was doing, Wegg?'

'I should judge, sir, that you might be glancing your eye down the street.'

'No, Wegg. I was a listening.'

'Was you, indeed?' said Mr Wegg, dubiously.

'Not in a dishonourable way, Wegg, because you was singing to the butcher; and you wouldn't sing secrets to a butcher in the street, you know.'

'It never happened that I did so yet, to the best of my remembrance,' said Mr Wegg, cautiously. 'But I might do it. A man can't say what he might wish to do some day or another.' (This, not to release any little advantage he might derive from Mr Boffin's avowal.)

'Well,' repeated Boffin, 'I was a listening to you and to him. And what do you—you haven't got another stool, have you? I'm rather thick in my breath.'

'I haven't got another, but you're welcome to this,' said Wegg, resigning it. 'It's a treat to me to stand.'

'Lard!' exclaimed Mr Boffin, in a tone of great enjoyment, as he settled himself down, still nursing his stick like a baby, 'it's a pleasant place, this! And then to be shut in on each side, with these ballads, like so many book-leaf blinkers! Why, its delightful!'

'If I am not mistaken, sir,' Mr Wegg delicately hinted, resting a hand on his stall, and bending over the discursive Boffin, 'you alluded to some offer or another that was in your mind?'

'I'm coming to it! All right. I'm coming to it! I was going to say that when I listened that morning, I listened with hadmiration amounting to haw. I thought to myself, "Here's a man with a wooden leg—a literary man with—"'

'N—not exactly so, sir,' said Mr Wegg.

'Why, you know every one of these songs by name and by tune, and if you want to read or to sing any one on 'em off straight, you've only to whip on your spectacles and do it!' cried Mr Boffin. 'I see you at it!'

'Well, sir,' returned Mr Wegg, with a conscious inclination of the head; 'we'll say literary, then.'

'"A literary man—WITH a wooden leg—and all Print is open to him!" That's what I thought to myself, that morning,' pursued Mr Boffin, leaning forward to describe, uncramped by the clotheshorse, as large an arc as his right arm could make; '"all Print is open to him!" And it is, ain't it?'

'Why, truly, sir,' Mr Wegg admitted, with modesty; 'I believe you couldn't show me the piece of English print, that I wouldn't be equal to collaring and throwing.'

'On the spot?' said Mr Boffin.

'On the spot.'

'I know'd it! Then consider this. Here am I, a man without a wooden leg, and yet all print is shut to me.'

'Indeed, sir?' Mr Wegg returned with increasing self-complacency. 'Education neglected?'

'Neg—lected!' repeated Boffin, with emphasis. 'That ain't no word for it. I don't mean to say but what if you showed me a B, I could so far give you change for it, as to answer Boffin.'

'Come, come, sir,' said Mr Wegg, throwing in a little encouragement, 'that's something, too.'

'It's something,' answered Mr Boffin, 'but I'll take my oath it ain't much.'

'Perhaps it's not as much as could be wished by an inquiring mind, sir,' Mr Wegg admitted.

'Now, look here. I'm retired from business. Me and Mrs Boffin—Henerietty Boffin—which her father's name was Henery, and her mother's name was Hetty, and so you get it—we live on a compittance, under the will of a diseased governor.'

'Gentleman dead, sir?'

'Man alive, don't I tell you? A diseased governor? Now, it's too late for me to begin shovelling and sifting at alphabeds and grammar-books. I'm getting to be a old bird, and I want to take it easy. But I want some reading—some fine bold reading, some splendid book in a gorging Lord-Mayor's-Show of wollumes' (probably meaning gorgeous, but misled by association of ideas); 'as'll reach right down your pint of view, and take time to go by you. How can I get that reading, Wegg? By,' tapping him on the breast with the head of his thick stick, 'paying a man truly qualified to do it, so much an hour (say twopence) to come and do it.'

'Hem! Flattered, sir, I am sure,' said Wegg, beginning to regard himself in quite a new light. 'Hew! This is the offer you mentioned, sir?'

'Yes. Do you like it?'

'I am considering of it, Mr Boffin.'

'I don't,' said Boffin, in a free-handed manner, 'want to tie a literary man—WITH a wooden leg—down too tight. A halfpenny an hour shan't part us. The hours are your own to choose, after you've done for the day with your house here. I live over Maiden-Lane way—out Holloway direction—and you've only got to go East-and-by-North when you've finished here, and you're there. Twopence halfpenny an hour,' said Boffin, taking a piece of chalk from his pocket and getting off the stool to work the sum on the top of it in his own way; 'two long'uns and a short'un—twopence halfpenny; two short'uns is a long'un and two two long'uns is four long'uns—making five long'uns; six nights a week at five long'uns a night,' scoring them all down separately, 'and you mount up to thirty long'uns. A round'un! Half a crown!'

Pointing to this result as a large and satisfactory one, Mr Boffin smeared it out with his moistened glove, and sat down on the remains.

'Half a crown,' said Wegg, meditating. 'Yes. (It ain't much, sir.) Half a crown.'

'Per week, you know.'

'Per week. Yes. As to the amount of strain upon the intellect now. Was you thinking at all of poetry?' Mr Wegg inquired, musing.

'Would it come dearer?' Mr Boffin asked.

'It would come dearer,' Mr Wegg returned. 'For when a person comes to grind off poetry night after night, it is but right he should expect to be paid for its weakening effect on his mind.'

'To tell you the truth Wegg,' said Boffin, 'I wasn't thinking of poetry, except in so fur as this:—If you was to happen now and then to feel yourself in the mind to tip me and Mrs Boffin one of your ballads, why then we should drop into poetry.'

'I follow you, sir,' said Wegg. 'But not being a regular musical professional, I should be loath to engage myself for that; and therefore when I dropped into poetry, I should ask to be considered so fur, in the light of a friend.'

At this, Mr Boffin's eyes sparkled, and he shook Silas earnestly by the hand: protesting that it was more than he could have asked, and that he took it very kindly indeed.

'What do you think of the terms, Wegg?' Mr Boffin then demanded, with unconcealed anxiety.

Silas, who had stimulated this anxiety by his hard reserve of manner, and who had begun to understand his man very well, replied with an air; as if he were saying something extraordinarily generous and great:

'Mr Boffin, I never bargain.'

'So I should have thought of you!' said Mr Boffin, admiringly. 'No, sir. I never did 'aggle and I never will 'aggle. Consequently I meet you at once, free and fair, with—Done, for double the money!'

Mr Boffin seemed a little unprepared for this conclusion, but assented, with the remark, 'You know better what it ought to be than I do, Wegg,' and again shook hands with him upon it.

'Could you begin to night, Wegg?' he then demanded.

'Yes, sir,' said Mr Wegg, careful to leave all the eagerness to him. 'I see no difficulty if you wish it. You are provided with the needful implement—a book, sir?'

'Bought him at a sale,' said Mr Boffin. 'Eight wollumes. Red and gold. Purple ribbon in every wollume, to keep the place where you leave off. Do you know him?'

'The book's name, sir?' inquired Silas.

'I thought you might have know'd him without it,' said Mr Boffin slightly disappointed. 'His name is Decline-And-Fall-Off-The-Rooshan-Empire.' (Mr Boffin went over these stones slowly and with much caution.)

'Ay indeed!' said Mr Wegg, nodding his head with an air of friendly recognition.

'You know him, Wegg?'

'I haven't been not to say right slap through him, very lately,' Mr Wegg made answer, 'having been otherways employed, Mr Boffin. But know him? Old familiar declining and falling off the Rooshan? Rather, sir! Ever since I was not so high as your stick. Ever since my eldest brother left our cottage to enlist into the army. On which occasion, as the ballad that was made about it describes:

'Beside that cottage door, Mr Boffin,

A girl was on her knees;

She held aloft a snowy scarf, Sir,

Which (my eldest brother noticed) fluttered in the breeze.

She breathed a prayer for him, Mr Boffin;

A prayer he coold not hear.

And my eldest brother lean'd upon his sword, Mr Boffin,

And wiped away a tear.'

Much impressed by this family circumstance, and also by the friendly disposition of Mr Wegg, as exemplified in his so soon dropping into poetry, Mr Boffin again shook hands with that ligneous sharper, and besought him to name his hour. Mr Wegg named eight.

'Where I live,' said Mr Boffin, 'is called The Bower. Boffin's Bower is the name Mrs Boffin christened it when we come into it as a property. If you should meet with anybody that don't know it by that name (which hardly anybody does), when you've got nigh upon about a odd mile, or say and a quarter if you like, up Maiden Lane, Battle Bridge, ask for Harmony Jail, and you'll be put right. I shall expect you, Wegg,' said Mr Boffin, clapping him on the shoulder with the greatest enthusiasm, 'most joyfully. I shall have no peace or patience till you come. Print is now opening ahead of me. This night, a literary man—WITH a wooden leg—' he bestowed an admiring look upon that decoration, as if it greatly enhanced the relish of Mr Wegg's attainments—'will begin to lead me a new life! My fist again, Wegg. Morning, morning, morning!'

Left alone at his stall as the other ambled off, Mr Wegg subsided into his screen, produced a small pocket-handkerchief of a penitentially-scrubbing character, and took himself by the nose with a thoughtful aspect. Also, while he still grasped that feature, he directed several thoughtful looks down the street, after the retiring figure of Mr Boffin. But, profound gravity sat enthroned on Wegg's countenance. For, while he considered within himself that this was an old fellow of rare simplicity, that this was an opportunity to be improved, and that here might be money to be got beyond present calculation, still he compromised himself by no admission that his new engagement was at all out of his way, or involved the least element of the ridiculous. Mr Wegg would even have picked a handsome quarrel with any one who should have challenged his deep acquaintance with those aforesaid eight volumes of Decline and Fall. His gravity was unusual, portentous, and immeasurable, not because he admitted any doubt of himself but because he perceived it necessary to forestall any doubt of himself in others. And herein he ranged with that very numerous class of impostors, who are quite as determined to keep up appearances to themselves, as to their neighbours.

A certain loftiness, likewise, took possession of Mr Wegg; a condescending sense of being in request as an official expounder of mysteries. It did not move him to commercial greatness, but rather to littleness, insomuch that if it had been within the possibilities of things for the wooden measure to hold fewer nuts than usual, it would have done so that day. But, when night came, and with her veiled eyes beheld him stumping towards Boffin's Bower, he was elated too.

The Bower was as difficult to find, as Fair Rosamond's without the clue. Mr Wegg, having reached the quarter indicated, inquired for the Bower half a dozen times without the least success, until he remembered to ask for Harmony Jail. This occasioned a quick change in the spirits of a hoarse gentleman and a donkey, whom he had much perplexed.

'Why, yer mean Old Harmon's, do yer?' said the hoarse gentleman, who was driving his donkey in a truck, with a carrot for a whip. 'Why didn't yer niver say so? Eddard and me is a goin' by HIM! Jump in.'

Mr Wegg complied, and the hoarse gentleman invited his attention to the third person in company, thus;

'Now, you look at Eddard's ears. What was it as you named, agin? Whisper.'

Mr Wegg whispered, 'Boffin's Bower.'

'Eddard! (keep yer hi on his ears) cut away to Boffin's Bower!'

Edward, with his ears lying back, remained immoveable.

'Eddard! (keep yer hi on his ears) cut away to Old Harmon's.' Edward instantly pricked up his ears to their utmost, and rattled off at such a pace that Mr Wegg's conversation was jolted out of him in a most dislocated state.

'Was-it-Ev-verajail?' asked Mr Wegg, holding on.

'Not a proper jail, wot you and me would get committed to,' returned his escort; 'they giv' it the name, on accounts of Old Harmon living solitary there.'

'And-why-did-they-callitharm-Ony?' asked Wegg.

'On accounts of his never agreeing with nobody. Like a speeches of chaff. Harmon's Jail; Harmony Jail. Working it round like.'

'Doyouknow-Mist-Erboff-in?' asked Wegg.

'I should think so! Everybody do about here. Eddard knows him. (Keep yer hi on his ears.) Noddy Boffin, Eddard!'

The effect of the name was so very alarming, in respect of causing a temporary disappearance of Edward's head, casting his hind hoofs in the air, greatly accelerating the pace and increasing the jolting, that Mr Wegg was fain to devote his attention exclusively to holding on, and to relinquish his desire of ascertaining whether this homage to Boffin was to be considered complimentary or the reverse.

Presently, Edward stopped at a gateway, and Wegg discreetly lost no time in slipping out at the back of the truck. The moment he was landed, his late driver with a wave of the carrot, said 'Supper, Eddard!' and he, the hind hoofs, the truck, and Edward, all seemed to fly into the air together, in a kind of apotheosis.

Pushing the gate, which stood ajar, Wegg looked into an enclosed space where certain tall dark mounds rose high against the sky, and where the pathway to the Bower was indicated, as the moonlight showed, between two lines of broken crockery set in ashes. A white figure advancing along this path, proved to be nothing more ghostly than Mr Boffin, easily attired for the pursuit of knowledge, in an undress garment of short white smock-frock. Having received his literary friend with great cordiality, he conducted him to the interior of the Bower and there presented him to Mrs Boffin:—a stout lady of a rubicund and cheerful aspect, dressed (to Mr Wegg's consternation) in a low evening-dress of sable satin, and a large black velvet hat and feathers.

'Mrs Boffin, Wegg,' said Boffin, 'is a highflyer at Fashion. And her make is such, that she does it credit. As to myself I ain't yet as Fash'nable as I may come to be. Henerietty, old lady, this is the gentleman that's a going to decline and fall off the Rooshan Empire.'

'And I am sure I hope it'll do you both good,' said Mrs Boffin.

It was the queerest of rooms, fitted and furnished more like a luxurious amateur tap-room than anything else within the ken of Silas Wegg. There were two wooden settles by the fire, one on either side of it, with a corresponding table before each. On one of these tables, the eight volumes were ranged flat, in a row, like a galvanic battery; on the other, certain squat case-bottles of inviting appearance seemed to stand on tiptoe to exchange glances with Mr Wegg over a front row of tumblers and a basin of white sugar. On the hob, a kettle steamed; on the hearth, a cat reposed. Facing the fire between the settles, a sofa, a footstool, and a little table, formed a centrepiece devoted to Mrs Boffin. They were garish in taste and colour, but were expensive articles of drawing-room furniture that had a very odd look beside the settles and the flaring gaslight pendent from the ceiling. There was a flowery carpet on the floor; but, instead of reaching to the fireside, its glowing vegetation stopped short at Mrs Boffin's footstool, and gave place to a region of sand and sawdust. Mr Wegg also noticed, with admiring eyes, that, while the flowery land displayed such hollow ornamentation as stuffed birds and waxen fruits under glass-shades, there were, in the territory where vegetation ceased, compensatory shelves on which the best part of a large pie and likewise of a cold joint were plainly discernible among other solids. The room itself was large, though low; and the heavy frames of its old-fashioned windows, and the heavy beams in its crooked ceiling, seemed to indicate that it had once been a house of some mark standing alone in the country.

'Do you like it, Wegg?' asked Mr Boffin, in his pouncing manner.

'I admire it greatly, sir,' said Wegg. 'Peculiar comfort at this fireside, sir.'

'Do you understand it, Wegg?'

'Why, in a general way, sir,' Mr Wegg was beginning slowly and knowingly, with his head stuck on one side, as evasive people do begin, when the other cut him short:

'You DON'T understand it, Wegg, and I'll explain it. These arrangements is made by mutual consent between Mrs Boffin and me. Mrs Boffin, as I've mentioned, is a highflyer at Fashion; at present I'm not. I don't go higher than comfort, and comfort of the sort that I'm equal to the enjoyment of. Well then. Where would be the good of Mrs Boffin and me quarrelling over it? We never did quarrel, before we come into Boffin's Bower as a property; why quarrel when we HAVE come into Boffin's Bower as a property? So Mrs Boffin, she keeps up her part of the room, in her way; I keep up my part of the room in mine. In consequence of which we have at once, Sociability (I should go melancholy mad without Mrs Boffin), Fashion, and Comfort. If I get by degrees to be a higher-flyer at Fashion, then Mrs Boffin will by degrees come for'arder. If Mrs Boffin should ever be less of a dab at Fashion than she is at the present time, then Mrs Boffin's carpet would go back'arder. If we should both continny as we are, why then HERE we are, and give us a kiss, old lady.'

Mrs Boffin who, perpetually smiling, had approached and drawn her plump arm through her lord's, most willingly complied. Fashion, in the form of her black velvet hat and feathers, tried to prevent it; but got deservedly crushed in the endeavour.

'So now, Wegg,' said Mr Boffin, wiping his mouth with an air of much refreshment, 'you begin to know us as we are. This is a charming spot, is the Bower, but you must get to apprechiate it by degrees. It's a spot to find out the merits of; little by little, and a new'un every day. There's a serpentining walk up each of the mounds, that gives you the yard and neighbourhood changing every moment. When you get to the top, there's a view of the neighbouring premises, not to be surpassed. The premises of Mrs Boffin's late father (Canine Provision Trade), you look down into, as if they was your own. And the top of the High Mound is crowned with a lattice-work Arbour, in which, if you don't read out loud many a book in the summer, ay, and as a friend, drop many a time into poetry too, it shan't be my fault. Now, what'll you read on?'

'Thank you, sir,' returned Wegg, as if there were nothing new in his reading at all. 'I generally do it on gin and water.'

'Keeps the organ moist, does it, Wegg?' asked Mr Boffin, with innocent eagerness.

'N-no, sir,' replied Wegg, coolly, 'I should hardly describe it so, sir. I should say, mellers it. Mellers it, is the word I should employ, Mr Boffin.'

His wooden conceit and craft kept exact pace with the delighted expectation of his victim. The visions rising before his mercenary mind, of the many ways in which this connexion was to be

turned to account, never obscured the foremost idea natural to a dull overreaching man, that he must not make himself too cheap.

Mrs Boffin's Fashion, as a less inexorable deity than the idol usually worshipped under that name, did not forbid her mixing for her literary guest, or asking if he found the result to his liking. On his returning a gracious answer and taking his place at the literary settle, Mr Boffin began to compose himself as a listener, at the opposite settle, with exultant eyes.

'Sorry to deprive you of a pipe, Wegg,' he said, filling his own, 'but you can't do both together. Oh! and another thing I forgot to name! When you come in here of an evening, and look round you, and notice anything on a shelf that happens to catch your fancy, mention it.'

Wegg, who had been going to put on his spectacles, immediately laid them down, with the sprightly observation:

'You read my thoughts, sir. DO my eyes deceive me, or is that object up there a—a pie? It can't be a pie.'

'Yes, it's a pie, Wegg,' replied Mr Boffin, with a glance of some little discomfiture at the Decline and Fall.

'HAVE I lost my smell for fruits, or is it a apple pie, sir?' asked Wegg.

'It's a veal and ham pie,' said Mr Boffin.

'Is it indeed, sir? And it would be hard, sir, to name the pie that is a better pie than a weal and hammer,' said Mr Wegg, nodding his head emotionally.

'Have some, Wegg?'

'Thank you, Mr Boffin, I think I will, at your invitation. I wouldn't at any other party's, at the present juncture; but at yours, sir!—And meaty jelly too, especially when a little salt, which is the case where there's ham, is mellering to the organ, is very mellering to the organ.' Mr Wegg did not say what organ, but spoke with a cheerful generality.

So, the pie was brought down, and the worthy Mr Boffin exercised his patience until Wegg, in the exercise of his knife and fork, had finished the dish: only profiting by the opportunity to inform Wegg that although it was not strictly Fashionable to keep the contents of a larder thus exposed to view, he (Mr Boffin) considered it hospitable; for the reason, that instead of saying, in a comparatively unmeaning manner, to a visitor, 'There are such and such edibles down stairs; will you have anything up?' you took the bold practical course of saying, 'Cast your eye along the shelves, and, if you see anything you like there, have it down.'

And now, Mr Wegg at length pushed away his plate and put on his spectacles, and Mr Boffin lighted his pipe and looked with beaming eyes into the opening world before him, and Mrs Boffin reclined in a fashionable manner on her sofa: as one who would be part of the audience if she found she could, and would go to sleep if she found she couldn't.

'Hem!' began Wegg, 'This, Mr Boffin and Lady, is the first chapter of the first wollume of the Decline and Fall off—' here he looked hard at the book, and stopped.

'What's the matter, Wegg?'

'Why, it comes into my mind, do you know, sir,' said Wegg with an air of insinuating frankness (having first again looked hard at the book), 'that you made a little mistake this morning, which I had meant to set you right in, only something put it out of my head. I think you said Rooshan Empire, sir?'

'It is Rooshan; ain't it, Wegg?'

'No, sir. Roman. Roman.'

'What's the difference, Wegg?'

'The difference, sir?' Mr Wegg was faltering and in danger of breaking down, when a bright thought flashed upon him. 'The difference, sir? There you place me in a difficulty, Mr Boffin. Suffice it to observe, that the difference is best postponed to some other occasion when Mrs Boffin does not honour us with her company. In Mrs Boffin's presence, sir, we had better drop it.'

Mr Wegg thus came out of his disadvantage with quite a chivalrous air, and not only that, but by dint of repeating with a manly delicacy, 'In Mrs Boffin's presence, sir, we had better drop it!' turned the disadvantage on Boffin, who felt that he had committed himself in a very painful manner.

Then, Mr Wegg, in a dry unflinching way, entered on his task; going straight across country at everything that came before him; taking all the hard words, biographical and geographical; getting rather shaken by Hadrian, Trajan, and the Antonines; stumbling at Polybius (pronounced Polly Beeious, and supposed by Mr Boffin to be a Roman virgin, and by Mrs Boffin to be responsible for that necessity of dropping it); heavily unseated by Titus Antoninus Pius; up again and galloping smoothly with Augustus; finally, getting over the ground well with Commodus: who, under the appellation of Commodious, was held by Mr Boffin to have been quite unworthy of his English origin, and 'not to have acted up to his name' in his government of the Roman people. With the death of this personage, Mr Wegg terminated his first reading; long before which consummation several total eclipses of Mrs Boffin's candle behind her black velvet disc, would have been very alarming, but for being regularly accompanied by a potent smell of burnt pens when her feathers took fire, which acted as a restorative and woke her. Mr Wegg, having read on

by rote and attached as few ideas as possible to the text, came out of the encounter fresh; but, Mr Boffin, who had soon laid down his unfinished pipe, and had ever since sat intently staring with his eyes and mind at the confounding enormities of the Romans, was so severely punished that he could hardly wish his literary friend Good-night, and articulate 'Tomorrow.'

'Commodious,' gasped Mr Boffin, staring at the moon, after letting Wegg out at the gate and fastening it: 'Commodious fights in that wild-beast-show, seven hundred and thirty-five times, in one character only! As if that wasn't stunning enough, a hundred lions is turned into the same wild-beast-show all at once! As if that wasn't stunning enough, Commodious, in another character, kills 'em all off in a hundred goes! As if that wasn't stunning enough, Vittle-us (and well named too) eats six millions' worth, English money, in seven months! Wegg takes it easy, but upon-my-soul to a old bird like myself these are scarers. And even now that Commodious is strangled, I don't see a way to our bettering ourselves.' Mr Boffin added as he turned his pensive steps towards the Bower and shook his head, 'I didn't think this morning there was half so many Scarers in Print. But I'm in for it now!'

Chapter 6: Cut Adrift



The Six Jolly Fellowship Porters, already mentioned as a tavern of a dropsical appearance, had long settled down into a state of hale infirmity. In its whole constitution it had not a straight floor, and hardly a straight line; but it had outlasted, and clearly would yet outlast, many a better-trimmed building, many a sprucer public-house. Externally, it was a narrow lopsided wooden jumble of corpulent windows heaped one upon another as you might heap as many toppling oranges, with a crazy wooden verandah impending over the water; indeed the whole house, inclusive of the complaining flag-staff on the roof, impended over the water, but seemed to have got into the condition of a faint-hearted diver who has paused so long on the brink that he will never go in at all.

This description applies to the river-frontage of the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters. The back of the establishment, though the chief entrance was there, so contracted that it merely represented in its connexion with the front, the handle of a flat iron set upright on its broadest end. This handle stood at the bottom of a wilderness of court and alley: which wilderness pressed so hard and close

upon the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters as to leave the hostelry not an inch of ground beyond its door. For this reason, in combination with the fact that the house was all but afloat at high water, when the Porters had a family wash the linen subjected to that operation might usually be seen drying on lines stretched across the reception-rooms and bed-chambers.

The wood forming the chimney-pieces, beams, partitions, floors and doors, of the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters, seemed in its old age fraught with confused memories of its youth. In many places it had become gnarled and riven, according to the manner of old trees; knots started out of it; and here and there it seemed to twist itself into some likeness of boughs. In this state of second childhood, it had an air of being in its own way garrulous about its early life. Not without reason was it often asserted by the regular frequenters of the Porters, that when the light shone full upon the grain of certain panels, and particularly upon an old corner cupboard of walnut-wood in the bar, you might trace little forests there, and tiny trees like the parent tree, in full umbrageous leaf.

The bar of the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters was a bar to soften the human breast. The available space in it was not much larger than a hackney-coach; but no one could have wished the bar bigger, that space was so girt in by corpulent little casks, and by cordial-bottles radiant with fictitious grapes in bunches, and by lemons in nets, and by biscuits in baskets, and by the polite beer-pulls that made low bows when customers were served with beer, and by the cheese in a snug corner, and by the landlady's own small table in a snugger corner near the fire, with the cloth everlastingly laid. This haven was divided from the rough world by a glass partition and a half-door, with a leaden sill upon it for the convenience of resting your liquor; but, over this half-door the bar's snugness so gushed forth that, albeit customers drank there standing, in a dark and draughty passage where they were shouldered by other customers passing in and out, they always appeared to drink under an enchanting delusion that they were in the bar itself.

For the rest, both the tap and parlour of the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters gave upon the river, and had red curtains matching the noses of the regular customers, and were provided with comfortable fireside tin utensils, like models of sugar-loaf hats, made in that shape that they might, with their pointed ends, seek out for themselves glowing nooks in the depths of the red coals, when they mulled your ale, or heated for you those delectable drinks, Purl, Flip, and Dog's Nose. The first of these humming compounds was a speciality of the Porters, which, through an inscription on its door-posts, gently appealed to your feelings as, 'The Early Purl House'. For, it would seem that Purl must always be taken early; though whether for any more distinctly stomachic reason than that, as the early bird catches the worm, so the early purl catches the customer, cannot here be resolved. It only remains to add that in the handle of the flat iron, and opposite the bar, was a very little room like a three-cornered hat, into which no direct ray of sun, moon, or star, ever penetrated, but which was superstitiously regarded as a sanctuary replete with comfort and retirement by gaslight, and on the door of which was therefore painted its alluring name: Cosy.

Miss Potterson, sole proprietor and manager of the Fellowship Porters, reigned supreme on her throne, the Bar, and a man must have drunk himself mad drunk indeed if he thought he could contest a point with her. Being known on her own authority as Miss Abbey Potterson, some water-side heads, which (like the water) were none of the clearest, harboured muddled notions that, because of her dignity and firmness, she was named after, or in some sort related to, the Abbey at Westminster. But, Abbey was only short for Abigail, by which name Miss Potterson had been christened at Limehouse Church, some sixty and odd years before.

'Now, you mind, you Riderhood,' said Miss Abbey Potterson, with emphatic forefinger over the half-door, 'the Fellowship don't want you at all, and would rather by far have your room than your company; but if you were as welcome here as you are not, you shouldn't even then have another drop of drink here this night, after this present pint of beer. So make the most of it.'

'But you know, Miss Potterson,' this was suggested very meekly though, 'if I behave myself, you can't help serving me, miss.'

'CAN'T I!' said Abbey, with infinite expression.

'No, Miss Potterson; because, you see, the law—'

'I am the law here, my man,' returned Miss Abbey, 'and I'll soon convince you of that, if you doubt it at all.'

'I never said I did doubt it at all, Miss Abbey.'

'So much the better for you.'

Abbey the supreme threw the customer's halfpence into the till, and, seating herself in her fireside-chair, resumed the newspaper she had been reading. She was a tall, upright, well-favoured woman, though severe of countenance, and had more of the air of a schoolmistress than mistress of the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters. The man on the other side of the half-door, was a waterside-man with a squinting leer, and he eyed her as if he were one of her pupils in disgrace.

'You're cruel hard upon me, Miss Potterson.'

Miss Potterson read her newspaper with contracted brows, and took no notice until he whispered:

'Miss Potterson! Ma'am! Might I have half a word with you?'

Deigning then to turn her eyes sideways towards the suppliant, Miss Potterson beheld him knuckling his low forehead, and ducking at her with his head, as if he were asking leave to fling himself head foremost over the half-door and alight on his feet in the bar.

'Well?' said Miss Potterson, with a manner as short as she herself was long, 'say your half word. Bring it out.'

'Miss Potterson! Ma'am! Would you 'sxcuse me taking the liberty of asking, is it my character that you take objections to?'

'Certainly,' said Miss Potterson.

'Is it that you're afraid of—'

'I am not afraid OF YOU,' interposed Miss Potterson, 'if you mean that.'

'But I humbly don't mean that, Miss Abbey.'

'Then what do you mean?'

'You really are so cruel hard upon me! What I was going to make inquiries was no more than, might you have any apprehensions—leastways beliefs or suppositions—that the company's property mightn't be altogether to be considered safe, if I used the house too regular?'

'What do you want to know for?'

'Well, Miss Abbey, respectfully meaning no offence to you, it would be some satisfaction to a man's mind, to understand why the Fellowship Porters is not to be free to such as me, and is to be free to such as Gaffer.'

The face of the hostess darkened with some shadow of perplexity, as she replied: 'Gaffer has never been where you have been.'

'Signifying in Quod, Miss? Perhaps not. But he may have merited it. He may be suspected of far worse than ever I was.'

'Who suspects him?'

'Many, perhaps. One, beyond all doubts. I do.'

'YOU are not much,' said Miss Abbey Potterson, knitting her brows again with disdain.

'But I was his pardner. Mind you, Miss Abbey, I was his pardner. As such I know more of the ins and outs of him than any person living does. Notice this! I am the man that was his pardner, and I am the man that suspects him.'

'Then,' suggested Miss Abbey, though with a deeper shade of perplexity than before, 'you criminate yourself.'

'No I don't, Miss Abbey. For how does it stand? It stands this way. When I was his pardner, I couldn't never give him satisfaction. Why couldn't I never give him satisfaction? Because my luck was bad; because I couldn't find many enough of 'em. How was his luck? Always good. Notice

this! Always good! Ah! There's a many games, Miss Abbey, in which there's chance, but there's a many others in which there's skill too, mixed along with it.'

'That Gaffer has a skill in finding what he finds, who doubts, man?' asked Miss Abbey.

'A skill in purwiding what he finds, perhaps,' said Riderhood, shaking his evil head.

Miss Abbey knitted her brow at him, as he darkly leered at her. 'If you're out upon the river pretty nigh every tide, and if you want to find a man or woman in the river, you'll greatly help your luck, Miss Abbey, by knocking a man or woman on the head aforehand and pitching 'em in.'

'Gracious Lud!' was the involuntary exclamation of Miss Potterson.

'Mind you!' returned the other, stretching forward over the half door to throw his words into the bar; for his voice was as if the head of his boat's mop were down his throat; 'I say so, Miss Abbey! And mind you! I'll follow him up, Miss Abbey! And mind you! I'll bring him to hook at last, if it's twenty year hence, I will! Who's he, to be favoured along of his daughter? Ain't I got a daughter of my own!'

With that flourish, and seeming to have talked himself rather more drunk and much more ferocious than he had begun by being, Mr Riderhood took up his pint pot and swaggered off to the taproom.

Gaffer was not there, but a pretty strong muster of Miss Abbey's pupils were, who exhibited, when occasion required, the greatest docility. On the clock's striking ten, and Miss Abbey's appearing at the door, and addressing a certain person in a faded scarlet jacket, with 'George Jones, your time's up! I told your wife you should be punctual,' Jones submissively rose, gave the company good-night, and retired. At half-past ten, on Miss Abbey's looking in again, and saying, 'William Williams, Bob Glamour, and Jonathan, you are all due,' Williams, Bob, and Jonathan with similar meekness took their leave and evaporated. Greater wonder than these, when a bottle-nosed person in a glazed hat had after some considerable hesitation ordered another glass of gin and water of the attendant potboy, and when Miss Abbey, instead of sending it, appeared in person, saying, 'Captain Joey, you have had as much as will do you good,' not only did the captain feebly rub his knees and contemplate the fire without offering a word of protest, but the rest of the company murmured, 'Ay, ay, Captain! Miss Abbey's right; you be guided by Miss Abbey, Captain.' Nor, was Miss Abbey's vigilance in anywise abated by this submission, but rather sharpened; for, looking round on the deferential faces of her school, and descrying two other young persons in need of admonition, she thus bestowed it: 'Tom Tootle, it's time for a young fellow who's going to be married next month, to be at home and asleep. And you needn't nudge him, Mr Jack Mullins, for I know your work begins early tomorrow, and I say the same to you. So come! Good-night, like good lads!' Upon which, the blushing Tootle looked to Mullins, and the

blushing Mullins looked to Tootle, on the question who should rise first, and finally both rose together and went out on the broad grin, followed by Miss Abbey; in whose presence the company did not take the liberty of grinning likewise.

In such an establishment, the white-aproned pot-boy with his shirt-sleeves arranged in a tight roll on each bare shoulder, was a mere hint of the possibility of physical force, thrown out as a matter of state and form. Exactly at the closing hour, all the guests who were left, filed out in the best order: Miss Abbey standing at the half door of the bar, to hold a ceremony of review and dismissal. All wished Miss Abbey good-night and Miss Abbey wished good-night to all, except Riderhood. The sapient pot-boy, looking on officially, then had the conviction borne in upon his soul, that the man was evermore outcast and excommunicate from the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters.

'You Bob Gliddery,' said Miss Abbey to this pot-boy, 'run round to Hexam's and tell his daughter Lizzie that I want to speak to her.'

With exemplary swiftness Bob Gliddery departed, and returned. Lizzie, following him, arrived as one of the two female domestics of the Fellowship Porters arranged on the snug little table by the bar fire, Miss Potterson's supper of hot sausages and mashed potatoes.

'Come in and sit ye down, girl,' said Miss Abbey. 'Can you eat a bit?'

'No thank you, Miss. I have had my supper.'

'I have had mine too, I think,' said Miss Abbey, pushing away the untasted dish, 'and more than enough of it. I am put out, Lizzie.'

'I am very sorry for it, Miss.'

'Then why, in the name of Goodness,' quoth Miss Abbey, sharply, 'do you do it?'

'I do it, Miss!'

'There, there. Don't look astonished. I ought to have begun with a word of explanation, but it's my way to make short cuts at things. I always was a pepperer. You Bob Gliddery there, put the chain upon the door and get ye down to your supper.'

With an alacrity that seemed no less referable to the pepperer fact than to the supper fact, Bob obeyed, and his boots were heard descending towards the bed of the river.

'Lizzie Hexam, Lizzie Hexam,' then began Miss Potterson, 'how often have I held out to you the opportunity of getting clear of your father, and doing well?'

'Very often, Miss.'

'Very often? Yes! And I might as well have spoken to the iron funnel of the strongest sea-going steamer that passes the Fellowship Porters.'

'No, Miss,' Lizzie pleaded; 'because that would not be thankful, and I am.'

'I vow and declare I am half ashamed of myself for taking such an interest in you,' said Miss Abbey, pettishly, 'for I don't believe I should do it if you were not good-looking. Why ain't you ugly?'

Lizzie merely answered this difficult question with an apologetic glance.

'However, you ain't,' resumed Miss Potterson, 'so it's no use going into that. I must take you as I find you. Which indeed is what I've done. And you mean to say you are still obstinate?'

'Not obstinate, Miss, I hope.'

'Firm (I suppose you call it) then?'

'Yes, Miss. Fixed like.'

'Never was an obstinate person yet, who would own to the word!' remarked Miss Potterson, rubbing her vexed nose; 'I'm sure I would, if I was obstinate; but I am a pepperer, which is different. Lizzie Hexam, Lizzie Hexam, think again. Do you know the worst of your father?'

'Do I know the worst of father!' she repeated, opening her eyes.

'Do you know the suspicions to which your father makes himself liable? Do you know the suspicions that are actually about, against him?'

The consciousness of what he habitually did, oppressed the girl heavily, and she slowly cast down her eyes.

'Say, Lizzie. Do you know?' urged Miss Abbey.

'Please to tell me what the suspicions are, Miss,' she asked after a silence, with her eyes upon the ground.

'It's not an easy thing to tell a daughter, but it must be told. It is thought by some, then, that your father helps to their death a few of those that he finds dead.'

The relief of hearing what she felt sure was a false suspicion, in place of the expected real and true one, so lightened Lizzie's breast for the moment, that Miss Abbey was amazed at her demeanour. She raised her eyes quickly, shook her head, and, in a kind of triumph, almost laughed.

'They little know father who talk like that!'

('She takes it,' thought Miss Abbey, 'very quietly. She takes it with extraordinary quietness!')

'And perhaps,' said Lizzie, as a recollection flashed upon her, 'it is some one who has a grudge against father; some one who has threatened father! Is it Riderhood, Miss?'

'Well; yes it is.'

'Yes! He was father's partner, and father broke with him, and now he revenges himself. Father broke with him when I was by, and he was very angry at it. And besides, Miss Abbey!—Will you never, without strong reason, let pass your lips what I am going to say?'

She bent forward to say it in a whisper.

'I promise,' said Miss Abbey.

'It was on the night when the Harmon murder was found out, through father, just above bridge. And just below bridge, as we were sculling home, Riderhood crept out of the dark in his boat. And many and many times afterwards, when such great pains were taken to come to the bottom of the crime, and it never could be come near, I thought in my own thoughts, could Riderhood himself have done the murder, and did he purposely let father find the body? It seemed a'most wicked and cruel to so much as think such a thing; but now that he tries to throw it upon father, I go back to it as if it was a truth. Can it be a truth? That was put into my mind by the dead?'

She asked this question, rather of the fire than of the hostess of the Fellowship Porters, and looked round the little bar with troubled eyes.

But, Miss Potterson, as a ready schoolmistress accustomed to bring her pupils to book, set the matter in a light that was essentially of this world.

'You poor deluded girl,' she said, 'don't you see that you can't open your mind to particular suspicions of one of the two, without opening your mind to general suspicions of the other? They had worked together. Their goings-on had been going on for some time. Even granting that it was as you have had in your thoughts, what the two had done together would come familiar to the mind of one.'

'You don't know father, Miss, when you talk like that. Indeed, indeed, you don't know father.'

'Lizzie, Lizzie,' said Miss Potterson. 'Leave him. You needn't break with him altogether, but leave him. Do well away from him; not because of what I have told you to-night—we'll pass no judgment upon that, and we'll hope it may not be—but because of what I have urged on you before. No matter whether it's owing to your good looks or not, I like you and I want to serve you. Lizzie, come under my direction. Don't fling yourself away, my girl, but be persuaded into being respectable and happy.'

In the sound good feeling and good sense of her entreaty, Miss Abbey had softened into a soothing tone, and had even drawn her arm round the girl's waist. But, she only replied, 'Thank

you, thank you! I can't. I won't. I must not think of it. The harder father is borne upon, the more he needs me to lean on.'

And then Miss Abbey, who, like all hard people when they do soften, felt that there was considerable compensation owing to her, underwent reaction and became frigid.

'I have done what I can,' she said, 'and you must go your way. You make your bed, and you must lie on it. But tell your father one thing: he must not come here any more.'

'Oh, Miss, will you forbid him the house where I know he's safe?'

'The Fellowships,' returned Miss Abbey, 'has itself to look to, as well as others. It has been hard work to establish order here, and make the Fellowships what it is, and it is daily and nightly hard work to keep it so. The Fellowships must not have a taint upon it that may give it a bad name. I forbid the house to Riderhood, and I forbid the house to Gaffer. I forbid both, equally. I find from Riderhood and you together, that there are suspicions against both men, and I'm not going to take upon myself to decide betwixt them. They are both tarred with a dirty brush, and I can't have the Fellowships tarred with the same brush. That's all I know.'

'Good-night, Miss!' said Lizzie Hexam, sorrowfully.

'Hah!—Good-night!' returned Miss Abbey with a shake of her head.

'Believe me, Miss Abbey, I am truly grateful all the same.'

'I can believe a good deal,' returned the stately Abbey, 'so I'll try to believe that too, Lizzie.'

No supper did Miss Potterson take that night, and only half her usual tumbler of hot Port Negus. And the female domestics—two robust sisters, with staring black eyes, shining flat red faces, blunt noses, and strong black curls, like dolls—interchanged the sentiment that Missis had had her hair combed the wrong way by somebody. And the pot-boy afterwards remarked, that he hadn't been 'so rattled to bed', since his late mother had systematically accelerated his retirement to rest with a poker.

The chaining of the door behind her, as she went forth, disenchanted Lizzie Hexam of that first relief she had felt. The night was black and shrill, the river-side wilderness was melancholy, and there was a sound of casting-out, in the rattling of the iron-links, and the grating of the bolts and staples under Miss Abbey's hand. As she came beneath the lowering sky, a sense of being involved in a murky shade of Murder dropped upon her; and, as the tidal swell of the river broke at her feet without her seeing how it gathered, so, her thoughts startled her by rushing out of an unseen void and striking at her heart.

Of her father's being groundlessly suspected, she felt sure. Sure. Sure. And yet, repeat the word inwardly as often as she would, the attempt to reason out and prove that she was sure, always came

after it and failed. Riderhood had done the deed, and entrapped her father. Riderhood had not done the deed, but had resolved in his malice to turn against her father, the appearances that were ready to his hand to distort. Equally and swiftly upon either putting of the case, followed the frightful possibility that her father, being innocent, yet might come to be believed guilty. She had heard of people suffering Death for bloodshed of which they were afterwards proved pure, and those ill-fated persons were not, first, in that dangerous wrong in which her father stood. Then at the best, the beginning of his being set apart, whispered against, and avoided, was a certain fact. It dated from that very night. And as the great black river with its dreary shores was soon lost to her view in the gloom, so, she stood on the river's brink unable to see into the vast blank misery of a life suspected, and fallen away from by good and bad, but knowing that it lay there dim before her, stretching away to the great ocean, Death.

One thing only, was clear to the girl's mind. Accustomed from her very babyhood promptly to do the thing that could be done—whether to keep out weather, to ward off cold, to postpone hunger, or what not—she started out of her meditation, and ran home.

The room was quiet, and the lamp burnt on the table. In the bunk in the corner, her brother lay asleep. She bent over him softly, kissed him, and came to the table.

'By the time of Miss Abbey's closing, and by the run of the tide, it must be one. Tide's running up. Father at Chiswick, wouldn't think of coming down, till after the turn, and that's at half after four. I'll call Charley at six. I shall hear the church-clocks strike, as I sit here.'

Very quietly, she placed a chair before the scanty fire, and sat down in it, drawing her shawl about her.

'Charley's hollow down by the flare is not there now. Poor Charley!'

The clock struck two, and the clock struck three, and the clock struck four, and she remained there, with a woman's patience and her own purpose. When the morning was well on between four and five, she slipped off her shoes (that her going about might not wake Charley), trimmed the fire sparingly, put water on to boil, and set the table for breakfast. Then she went up the ladder, lamp in hand, and came down again, and glided about and about, making a little bundle. Lastly, from her pocket, and from the chimney-piece, and from an inverted basin on the highest shelf she brought halfpence, a few sixpences, fewer shillings, and fell to laboriously and noiselessly counting them, and setting aside one little heap. She was still so engaged, when she was startled by:

'Hal-loa!' From her brother, sitting up in bed.

'You made me jump, Charley.'

'Jump! Didn't you make ME jump, when I opened my eyes a moment ago, and saw you sitting there, like the ghost of a girl miser, in the dead of the night.'

'It's not the dead of the night, Charley. It's nigh six in the morning.'

'Is it though? But what are you up to, Liz?'

'Still telling your fortune, Charley.'

'It seems to be a precious small one, if that's it,' said the boy. 'What are you putting that little pile of money by itself for?'

'For you, Charley.'

'What do you mean?'

'Get out of bed, Charley, and get washed and dressed, and then I'll tell you.'

Her composed manner, and her low distinct voice, always had an influence over him. His head was soon in a basin of water, and out of it again, and staring at her through a storm of towelling.

'I never,' towelling at himself as if he were his bitterest enemy, 'saw such a girl as you are. What IS the move, Liz?'

'Are you almost ready for breakfast, Charley?'

'You can pour it out. Hal-loa! I say? And a bundle?'

'And a bundle, Charley.'

'You don't mean it's for me, too?'

'Yes, Charley; I do; indeed.'

More serious of face, and more slow of action, than he had been, the boy completed his dressing, and came and sat down at the little breakfast-table, with his eyes amazedly directed to her face.

'You see, Charley dear, I have made up my mind that this is the right time for your going away from us. Over and above all the blessed change of by-and-bye, you'll be much happier, and do much better, even so soon as next month. Even so soon as next week.'

'How do you know I shall?'

'I don't quite know how, Charley, but I do.' In spite of her unchanged manner of speaking, and her unchanged appearance of composure, she scarcely trusted herself to look at him, but kept her eyes employed on the cutting and buttering of his bread, and on the mixing of his tea, and other such little preparations. 'You must leave father to me, Charley—I will do what I can with him—but you must go.'

'You don't stand upon ceremony, I think,' grumbled the boy, throwing his bread and butter about, in an ill-humour.

She made him no answer.

'I tell you what,' said the boy, then, bursting out into an angry whimpering, 'you're a selfish jade, and you think there's not enough for three of us, and you want to get rid of me.'

'If you believe so, Charley,—yes, then I believe too, that I am a selfish jade, and that I think there's not enough for three of us, and that I want to get rid of you.'

It was only when the boy rushed at her, and threw his arms round her neck, that she lost her self-restraint. But she lost it then, and wept over him.

'Don't cry, don't cry! I am satisfied to go, Liz; I am satisfied to go. I know you send me away for my good.'

'O, Charley, Charley, Heaven above us knows I do!'

'Yes yes. Don't mind what I said. Don't remember it. Kiss me.'

After a silence, she loosed him, to dry her eyes and regain her strong quiet influence.

'Now listen, Charley dear. We both know it must be done, and I alone know there is good reason for its being done at once. Go straight to the school, and say that you and I agreed upon it—that we can't overcome father's opposition—that father will never trouble them, but will never take you back. You are a credit to the school, and you will be a greater credit to it yet, and they will help you to get a living. Show what clothes you have brought, and what money, and say that I will send some more money. If I can get some in no other way, I will ask a little help of those two gentlemen who came here that night.'

'I say!' cried her brother, quickly. 'Don't you have it of that chap that took hold of me by the chin! Don't you have it of that Wrayburn one!'

Perhaps a slight additional tinge of red flushed up into her face and brow, as with a nod she laid a hand upon his lips to keep him silently attentive.

'And above all things mind this, Charley! Be sure you always speak well of father. Be sure you always give father his full due. You can't deny that because father has no learning himself he is set against it in you; but favour nothing else against him, and be sure you say—as you know—that your sister is devoted to him. And if you should ever happen to hear anything said against father that is new to you, it will not be true. Remember, Charley! It will not be true.'

The boy looked at her with some doubt and surprise, but she went on again without heeding it.