

to the pass of being informed that 'she does not wish to regard herself, nor yet to be regarded, in that bony light!'" Having repeated the fatal expressions, Mr. Venus drinks more tea by gulps, and offers an explanation of his doing so.

"It lowers me. When I'm equally lowered all over, lethargy sets in. By sticking to it till one or two in the morning, I get oblivion. Don't let me detain you, Mr. Wegg. I'm not company for any one."

"It is not on that account," says Silas, rising, "but because I've got an appointment. It's time I was at Harmon's."

"Eh?" said Mr. Venus. "Harmon's, up Battle Bridge way?"

Mr. Wegg admits that he is bound for that port.

"You ought to be in a good thing, if you've worked yourself in there. There's lots of money going there."

"To think," says Silas, "that you should catch it up so quick, and know about it. Wonderful!"

"Not at all, Mr. Wegg. The old gentleman wanted to know the nature and worth of everything that was found in the dust; and many's the bone, and feather, and what not, that he's brought to me."

"Really, now!"

"Yes. (Oh dear me, dear me!) And he's buried quite in this neighbourhood, you know. Over yonder."

Mr. Wegg does not know, but he makes as if he did, by responsively nodding his head. He also follows with his eyes, the toss of Venus's head: as if to seek a direction to over yonder.

"I took an interest in that discovery in the river," says Venus. "(She hadn't written her cutting refusal at that time.) I've got up there—never mind, though."

He had raised the candle at arm's length towards one of the dark shelves, and Mr. Wegg had turned to look, when he broke off.

"The old gentleman was well known all round here. There used to be stories about his having hidden all kinds of property in those dust mounds. I suppose there was nothing in 'em. Probably you know, Mr. Wegg?"

"Nothing in 'em," says Wegg, who has never heard a word of this before.

"Don't let me detain you. Good-night!"

The unfortunate Mr. Venus gives him a shake of the hand with a shake of his own head, and drooping down in his chair, proceeds to pour himself out more tea.

Mr. Wegg, looking back over his shoulder as he pulls the door open by the strap, notices that the movement so shakes the crazy shop, and so shakes a momentary flare out of the candle, as that the babies—Hindoo, African, and British—the "human various," the French gentleman, the green glass-eyed cats, the dogs, the ducks, and all the rest of the collection, show for an instant as if paralytically animated; while even poor little Cock Robin at Mr. Venus's elbow turns over on his innocent side. Next moment, Mr. Wegg is stumping under the gaslights and through the mud.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### MR. BOFFIN IN CONSULTATION.

WHOEVER had gone out of Fleet Street into the Temple at the date of this history, and had wandered disconsolate about the Temple until he stumbled on a dismal churchyard, and had looked up at the dismal windows commanding that

churchyard until at the most dismal window of them all he saw a dismal boy, would in him have beheld, at one grand comprehensive swoop of the eye, the managing clerk, junior clerk, common-law clerk, conveyancing clerk, chancery clerk, every refinement and department of clerk, of Mr. Mortimer Lightwood, erewhile called in the newspapers eminent solicitor.

Mr. Boffin having been several times in communication with this clerkly essence, both on its own ground and at the Bower, had no difficulty in identifying it when he saw it up in its dusty eyrie. To the second floor on which the window was situated, he ascended, much pre-occupied in mind by the uncertainties besetting the Roman Empire, and much regretting the death of the amiable Pertinax: who only last night had left the Imperial affairs in a state of great confusion, by falling a victim to the fury of the praetorian guards.

"Morning, morning, morning!" said Mr. Boffin, with a wave of his hand, as the office door was opened by the dismal boy, whose appropriate name was Blight. "Governor in?"

"Mr. Lightwood gave you an appointment, sir, I think?"

"I don't want him to give it, you know," returned Mr. Boffin; "I'll pay my way, my boy."

"No doubt, sir. Would you walk in? Mr. Lightwood ain't in at the present moment, but I expect him back very shortly. Would you take a seat in Mr. Lightwood's room, sir, while I look over our Appointment Book?" Young Blight made a great show of fetching from his desk a long thin manuscript volume with a brown paper cover, and running his finger down the day's appointments, murmuring, "Mr. Aggs, Mr. Baggs, Mr. Caggs, Mr. Daggs, Mr. Faggs, Mr. Gaggs, Mr. Boffin. Yes, sir, quite right. You are a little before your time, sir. Mr. Lightwood will be in directly."

"I'm not in a hurry," said Mr. Boffin.

"Thank you, sir. I'll take the opportunity, if you please, of entering your name in our Callers' Book for the day." Young Blight made another great show of changing the volume, taking up a pen, sucking it, dipping it, and running over previous entries before he wrote. As, "Mr. Alley, Mr. Balley, Mr. Calley, Mr. Dalley, Mr. Falley, Mr. Galley, Mr. Halley, Mr. Lalley, Mr. Malley. And Mr. Boffin."

"Strict system here; eh, my lad?" said Mr. Boffin, as he was booked.

"Yes, sir," returned the boy. "I couldn't get on without it."

By which he probably meant that his mind would have been shattered to pieces without this fiction of an occupation. Wearing in his solitary confinement no fetters that he could polish, and being provided with no drinking-cup that he could carve, he had fallen on the device of ringing alphabetical changes into the two volumes in question, or of entering vast numbers of persons out of the Directory as transacting business with Mr. Lightwood. It was the more necessary for his spirits, because, being of a sensitive temperament, he was apt to consider it personally disgraceful to himself that his master had no clients.

"How long have you been in the law, now?" asked Mr. Boffin, with a pounce, in his usual inquisitive way.

"I've been in the law, now, sir, about three years."

"Must have been as good as born in it!" said Mr. Boffin, with admiration.

"Do you like it?"

"I don't mind it much," returned Young Blight, heaving a sigh, as if its bitterness were past.

"What wages do you get?"

"Half what I could wish," replied young Blight.

"What's the whole that you could wish?"

"Fifteen shillings a week," said the boy.

"About how long might it take you now, at a average rate of going, to be a Judge?" asked Mr. Boffin, after surveying his small stature in silence.

The boy answered that he had not yet quite worked out that little calculation.

"I suppose there's nothing to prevent your going in for it?" said Mr. Boffin.

The boy virtually replied that as he had the honour to be a Briton who never, never, never, there was nothing to prevent his going in for it. Yet he seemed inclined to suspect that there might be something to prevent his coming out with it.

"Would a couple of pound help you up at all?" asked Mr. Boffin.

On this head, young Blight had no doubt whatever, so Mr. Boffin made him a present of that sum of money, and thanked him for his attention to his (Mr. Boffin's) affairs, which, he added, were now, he believed, as good as settled.

Then Mr. Boffin, with his stick at his ear, like a Familiar Spirit explaining the office to him, sat staring at a little bookcase of Law Practice and Law Reports, and at a window, and at an empty blue bag, and at a stick of sealing-wax, and a pen, and a box of wafers, and an apple, and a writing-pad—all very dusty—and at a number of inky smears and blots, and at an imperfectly-disguised gun-case pretending to be something legal, and at an iron box labelled HARMON ESTATE, until Mr. Lightwood appeared.

Mr. Lightwood explained that he came from the proctor's, with whom he had been engaged in transacting Mr. Boffin's affairs.

"And they seem to have taken a deal out of you!" said Mr. Boffin, with commiseration.

Mr. Lightwood, without explaining that his weariness was chronic, proceeded with his exposition that, all forms of law having been at length complied with, will of Harmon deceased having been proved, death of Harmon next inheriting having been proved, &c., and so forth, Court of Chancery having been moved, &c., and so forth, he, Mr. Lightwood, had now the great gratification, honour, and happiness, again &c. and so forth, of congratulating Mr. Boffin on coming into possession, as residuary legatee, of upwards of one hundred thousand pounds, standing in the books of the Governor and Company of the Bank of England, again &c. and so forth.

"And what is particularly eligible in the property, Mr. Boffin, is, that it involves no trouble. There are no estates to manage, no rents to return so much per cent. upon in bad times (which is an extremely dear way of getting your name into the newspapers), no voters to become parboiled in hot water with, no agents to take the cream off the milk before it comes to table. You could put the whole in a cash-box to-morrow morning, and take it with you to—say, to the Rocky Mountains. Inasmuch as every man," concluded Mr. Lightwood, with an indolent smile, "appears to be under a fatal spell which obliges him, sooner or later, to mention the Rocky Mountains in a tone of extreme familiarity to some other man, I hope you'll excuse my pressing you into the service of that gigantic range of geographical bores."

Without following this last remark very closely, Mr. Boffin cast his perplexed gaze first at the ceiling, and then at the carpet.

"Well," he remarked, "I don't know what to say about it, I am sure. I was a'most as well as I was. It's a great lot to take care of."

"My dear Mr. Boffin, then *don't* take care of it!"

"Eh?" said that gentleman.

"Speaking now," returned Mortimer, "with the irresponsible imbecility of a private individual, and not with the profundity of a professional adviser, I should

say that if the circumstance of its being too much, weighs upon your mind, you have the haven of consolation open to you that you can easily make it less. And if you should be apprehensive of the trouble of doing so, there is the further haven of consolation that any number of people will take the trouble off your hands."

"Well! I don't quite see it," retorted Mr. Boffin, still perplexed. "That's not satisfactory, you know, what you're a-saying."

"Is Anything satisfactory, Mr. Boffin?" asked Mortimer, raising his eyebrows. "I used to find it so," answered Mr. Boffin, with a wistful look. "While I was foreman at the Bower—*afore* it *was* the Bower—I considered the business very satisfactory. The old man was a awful Tartar (saying it, I'm sure, without disrespect to his memory), but the business was a pleasant one to look after, from before daylight to past dark. It's a'most a pity," said Mr. Boffin, rubbing his ear, "that he ever went and made so much money. It would have been better for him if he hadn't so given himself up to it. You may depend upon it," making the discovery all of a sudden, "that *he* found it a great lot to take care of!"

Mr. Lightwood coughed, not convinced.

"And speaking of satisfactory," pursued Mr. Boffin, "why, Lord save us! when we come to take it to pieces, bit by bit, where's the satisfactoriness of the money as yet? When the old man does right the poor boy after all, the poor boy gets no good of it. He gets made away with, at the moment when he's lifting (as one may say) the cup and sarsar to his lips. Mr. Lightwood, I will now name to you, that on behalf of the poor dear boy, me and Mrs. Boffin have stood out against the old man times out of number, till he has called us every name he could lay his tongue to. I have seen him, after Mrs. Boffin has given him her mind respecting the claims of the nat'ral affections, catch off Mrs. Boffin's bonnet (she wore, in general, a black straw, perched as a matter of convenience on the top of her head), and send it spinning across the yard. I have indeed. And once, when he did this in a manner that amounted to personal, I should have given him a rattler for himself, if Mrs. Boffin hadn't thrown herself betwixt us, and received flush on the temple. Which dropped her, Mr. Lightwood. Dropped her."

Mr. Lightwood murmured "Equal honour—Mrs. Boffin's head and heart."

"You understand; I name this," pursued Mr. Boffin, "to show you, now the affairs are wound up, that me and Mrs. Boffin have ever stood, as we were in Christian honour bound, the children's friend. Me and Mrs. Boffin stood the poor girl's friend; me and Mrs. Boffin stood the poor boy's friend; me and Mrs. Boffin up and faced the old man when we momentarily expected to be turned out for our pains. As to Mrs. Boffin," said Mr. Boffin, lowering his voice, "she mightn't wish it mentioned now she's Fashionable, but she went so far as to tell him, in my presence, he was a flinty-hearted rascal."

Mr. Lightwood murmured "Vigorous Saxon spirit—Mrs. Boffin's ancestors—bowmen—Agin-court and Cressy."

"The last time me and Mrs. Boffin saw the poor boy," said Mr. Boffin, warming (as fat usually does), with a tendency to melt, "he was a child of seven year old. For when he come back to make intercession for his sister, me and Mrs. Boffin were away overlooking a country contract which was to be sifted before carted, and he was come and gone in a single hour. I say he was a child of seven year old. He was going away, all alone and forlorn; to that foreign school, and he come into our place, situate up the yard of the present Bower, to have a warm at our fire. There was his little scanty travelling clothes upon him. There was his little scanty box outside in the shivering wind, which I was going to carry for him down to the steamboat, as the old man wouldn't hear of allowing a sixpence coach-money. Mrs. Boffin, then quite a young woman and a pictur of a full-blown rose, stands him by her, kneels down at the fire, warms

her two open hands, and falls to rubbing his cheeks; but seeing the tears come into the child's eyes, the tears come fast into her own, and she holds him round the neck, like as if she was protecting him, and cries to me, 'I'd give the wide wide world, I would, to run away with him!' I don't say but what it cut me, and but what it at the same time heightened my feelings of admiration for Mrs. Boffin. The poor child clings to her for awhile, as she clings to him, and then, when the old man calls, he says 'I must go! God bless you!' and for a moment rests his heart against her bosom, and looks up at both of us, as if it was in pain—in agony. Such a look! I went aboard with him (I gave him first what little treat I thought he'd like), and I left him when he had fallen asleep in his berth, and I came back to Mrs. Boffin. But tell her what I would of how I had left him, it all went for nothing, for, according to her thoughts, he never changed that look that he had looked up at us two. But it did one piece of good. Mrs. Boffin and me had no child of our own, and had sometimes wished that how we had one. But not now. 'We might both of us die,' says Mrs. Boffin, 'and other eyes might see that lonely look in our child.' So of a night, when it was very cold, or when the wind roared, or the rain dripped heavy, she would wake sobbing, and call out in a fluster, 'Don't you see the poor child's face? O shelter the poor child!'—till in course of years it gently wore out, as many things do."

"My dear Mr. Boffin, everything wears to rags," said Mortimer, with a light laugh.

"I won't go so far as to say everything," returned Mr. Boffin, on whom his manner seemed to grate, "because there's some things that I never found among the dust. Well, sir. So Mrs. Boffin and me grow older and older in the old man's service, living and working pretty hard in it, till the old man is discovered dead in his bed. Then Mrs. Boffin and me seal up his box, always standing on the table at the side of his bed, and having frequently heard tell of the Temple as a spot where lawyer's dust is contracted for, I come down here in search of a lawyer to advise, and I see your young man up at this present elevation, chopping at the flies on the window-sill with his penknife, and I give him a Hoy! not then having the pleasure of your acquaintance, and by that means come to gain the honour. Then you, and the gentleman in the uncomfortable neckcloth under the little archway in Saint Paul's Churchyard—"

"Doctors' Commons," observed Lightwood.

"I understood it was another name," said Mr. Boffin, pausing, "But you know best. Then you and Doctor Scummons, you go to work, and you do the thing that's proper, and you and Doctor S. take steps for finding out the poor boy, and at last you do find out the poor boy, and me and Mrs. Boffin often exchange the observation, 'We shall see him again, under happy circumstances.' But it was never to be; and the want of satisfactoriness is, that after all the money never gets to him."

"But it gets," remarked Lightwood, with a languid inclination of the head, "into excellent hands."

"It gets into the hands of me and Mrs. Boffin only this very day and hour, and that's what I'm working round to, having waited for this day and hour a' purpose. Mr. Lightwood, here has been a wicked cruel murder. By that murder me and Mrs. Boffin mysteriously profit. For the apprehension and conviction of the murderer, we offer a reward of one tithe of the property—a reward of Ten Thousand Pound."

"Mr. Boffin, it's too much."

"Mr. Lightwood, me and Mrs. Boffin have fixed the sum together, and we stand to it."

"But let me represent to you," returned Lightwood, "speaking now with professional profundity, and not with individual imbecility, that the offer of such an

immense reward is a temptation to forced suspicion, forced construction of circumstances, strained accusation, a whole tool-box of edged tools."

"Well," said Mr. Boffin, a little staggered, "that's the sum we put o' one side for the purpose. Whether it shall be openly declared in the new notices that must now be put about in our names—"

"In your name, Mr. Boffin; in your name."

"Very well; in my name, which is the same as Mrs. Boffin's, and means both of us, is to be considered in drawing 'em up. But this is the first instruction that I, as the owner of the property, give to my lawyer on coming into it."

"Your lawyer, Mr. Boffin," returned Lightwood, making a very short note of it with a very rusty pen, "has the gratification of taking the instruction. There is another?"

"There is just one other, and no more. Make me as compact a little will as can be reconciled with tightness, leaving the whole of the property to my beloved wife, Heneriety Boffin, sole executrix. Make it as short as you can, using those words; but make it tight."

At some loss to fathom Mr. Boffin's notions of a tight will, Lightwood felt his way.

"I beg your pardon, but professional profundity must be exact. When you say tight—"

"I mean tight," Mr. Boffin explained.

"Exactly so. And nothing can be more laudable. But is the tightness to bind Mrs. Boffin to any and what conditions?"

"Bind Mrs. Boffin?" interposed her husband. "No! What are you thinking of? What I want is, to make it all hers so tight as that her hold of it can't be loosed."

"Hers freely, to do what she likes with? Hers absolutely?"

"Absolutely?" repeated Mr. Boffin, with a short sturdy laugh. "Hah! I should think so! It would be handsome in me to begin to bind Mrs. Boffin at this time of day!"

So that instruction, too, was taken by Mr. Lightwood; and Mr. Lightwood, having taken it, was in the act of showing Mr. Boffin out, when Mr. Eugene Wrayburn almost jostled him in the doorway. Consequently Mr. Lightwood said, in his cool manner, "Let me make you two known to one another," and further signified that Mr. Wrayburn was counsel learned in the law, and that, partly in the way of business and partly in the way of pleasure, he had imparted to Mr. Wrayburn some of the interesting facts of Mr. Boffin's biography.

"Delighted," said Eugene—though he didn't look so—"to know Mr. Boffin."

"Thankee, sir, thankee," returned that gentleman. "And how do you like the law?"

"A—not particularly," returned Eugene.

"Too dry for you, eh? Well, I suppose it wants some years of sticking to, before you master it. But there's nothing like work. Look at the bees."

"I beg your pardon," returned Eugene, with a reluctant smile, "but will you excuse my mentioning that I always protest against being referred to the bees?"

"Do you!" said Mr. Boffin.

"I object on principle," said Eugene, "as a biped—"

"As a what?" asked Mr. Boffin.

"As a two-footed creature;—I object on principle, as a two-footed creature, to being constantly referred to insects and four-footed creatures. I object to being required to model my proceedings according to the proceedings of the bee, or the dog, or the spider, or the camel. I fully admit that the camel, for instance, is an excessively temperate person; but he has several stomachs to entertain himself

with, and I have only one. Besides, I am not fitted up with a convenient cool cellar to keep my drink in."

"But I said, you know," urged Mr. Boffin, rather at a loss for an answer, "the bee."

"Exactly. And may I represent to you that it's injudicious to say the bee? For the whole case is assumed. Conceding for a moment that there is any analogy between a bee and a man in a shirt and pantaloons (which I deny), and that it is settled that the man is to learn from the bee (which I also deny), the question still remains, what is he to learn? To imitate? Or to avoid? When your friends the bees worry themselves to that highly fluttered extent about their sovereign, and become perfectly distracted touching the slightest monarchical movement, are we men to learn the greatness of Tuft-hunting, or the littleness of the Court Circular? I am not clear, Mr. Boffin, but that the hive may be satirical."

"At all events, they work," said Mr. Boffin.

"Ye-es," returned Eugene, disparagingly, "they work; but don't you think they overdo it? They work so much more than they need—they make so much more than they can eat—they are so incessantly boring and buzzing at their one idea till Death comes upon them—that don't you think they overdo it? And are human labourers to have no holidays, because of the bees? And am I never to have change of air, because the bees don't? Mr. Boffin, I think honey excellent at breakfast; but regarded in the light of my conventional schoolmaster and moralist, I protest against the tyrannical humbug of your friend the bee. With the highest respect for you."

"Thankee," said Mr. Boffin. "Morning, morning!"

But, the worthy Mr. Boffin jogged away with a comfortless impression he could have dispensed with, that there was a deal of unsatisfactoriness in the world, besides what he had recalled as appertaining to the Harmon property. And he was still jogging along Fleet Street in this condition of mind, when he became aware that he was closely tracked and observed by a man of genteel appearance.

"Now then?" said Mr. Boffin, stopping short, with his meditations brought to an abrupt check, "what's the next article?"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Boffin."

"My name too, eh? How did you come by it? I don't know you."

"No, sir, you don't know me."

Mr. Boffin looked full at the man, and the man looked full at him.

"No," said Mr. Boffin, after a glance at the pavement, as if it were made of faces and he were trying to match the man's, "I don't know you."

"I am nobody," said the stranger, "and not likely to be known—but Mr. Boffin's wealth—"

"Oh! that's got about already, has it?" muttered Mr. Boffin.

"—And his romantic manner of acquiring it, make him conspicuous. You were pointed out to me the other day."

"Well," said Mr. Boffin, "I should say I was a disappointment to you when I was pointed out, if your politeness would allow you to confess it, for I am well aware I am not much to look at. What might you want with me? Not in the law, are you?"

"No, sir."

"No information to give, for a reward?"

"No, sir."

There may have been a momentary mantling in the face of the man as he made the last answer, but it passed directly.

"If I don't mistake, you have followed me from my lawyer's and tried to fix my

attention. Say out! Have you? Or haven't you?" demanded Mr. Boffin, rather angry.

"Yes."

"Why have you?"

"If you will allow me to walk beside you, Mr. Boffin, I will tell you. Would you object to turn aside into this place—I think it is called Clifford's Inn—where we can hear one another better than in the roaring street?"

"Now," thought Mr. Boffin, "if he proposes a game at skittles, or meets a country gentleman just come into property, or produces any article of jewellery he has found, I'll knock him down!" With this discreet reflection, and carrying his stick in his arms much as Punch carries his, Mr. Boffin turned into Clifford's Inn aforesaid.)

"Mr. Boffin, I happened to be in Chancery Lane this morning, when I saw you going along before me. I took the liberty of following you, trying to make up my mind to speak to you, till you went into your lawyer's. Then I waited outside till you came out."

"Don't quite sound like skittles, nor yet country gentleman, nor yet jewellery," thought Mr. Boffin, "but there's no knowing."

"I am afraid my object is a bold one, I am afraid it has little of the usual practical world about it, but I venture it. If you ask me, or if you ask yourself—which is more likely—what emboldens me, I answer, I have been strongly assured that you are a man of rectitude and plain dealing, with the soundest of sound hearts, and that you are blessed in a wife distinguished by the same qualities."

"Your information is true of Mrs. Boffin, anyhow," was Mr. Boffin's answer, as he surveyed his new friend again. There was something repressed in the strange man's manner, and he walked with his eyes on the ground—though conscious, for all that, of Mr. Boffin's observation—and he spoke in a subdued voice. But his words came easily, and his voice was agreeable in tone, albeit constrained.

"When I add, I can discern for myself what the general tongue says of you—that you are quite unspoiled by Fortune, and not uplifted—I trust you will not, as a man of an open nature, suspect that I mean to flatter you, but will believe that all I mean is to excuse myself, these being my only excuses for my present intrusion."

"How much?" thought Mr. Boffin. "It must be coming to money. How much?"

"You will probably change your manner of living, Mr. Boffin, in your changed circumstances. You will probably keep a larger house, have many matters to arrange, and be beset by numbers of correspondents. If you would try me as your Secretary—"

"As what?" cried Mr. Boffin, with his eyes wide open.

"Your Secretary."

"Well," said Mr. Boffin, under his breath, "that's a queer thing!"

"Or," pursued the stranger, wondering at Mr. Boffin's wonder, "if you would try me as your man of business under any name, I know you would find me faithful and grateful, and I hope you would find me useful. You may naturally think that my immediate object is money. Not so, for I would willingly serve you a year—two years—any term you might appoint—before that should begin to be a consideration between us."

"Where do you come from?" asked Mr. Boffin.

"I come," returned the other, meeting his eye, "from many countries."

Mr. Boffin's acquaintance with the names and situations of foreign lands being limited in extent and somewhat confused in quality, he shaped his next question on an elastic model.

"From—any particular place?"

"I have been in many places."

"What have you been?" asked Mr. Boffin.

Here again he made no great advance, for the reply was, "I have been a student and a traveller."

"But if it ain't a liberty to plump it out," said Mr. Boffin, "what do you do for your living?"

"I have mentioned," returned the other, with another look at him, and a smile, "what I aspire to do. I have been superseded as to some slight intentions I had, and I may say that I have now to begin life."

Not very well knowing how to get rid of this applicant, and feeling the more embarrassed because his manner and appearance claimed a delicacy in which the worthy Mr. Boffin feared he himself might be deficient, that gentleman glanced into the mouldy little plantation, or cat-preserve, of Clifford's Inn, as it was that day, in search of a suggestion. Sparrows were there, cats were there, dry-rot and wet-rot were there, but it was not otherwise a suggestive spot.

"All this time," said the stranger, producing a little pocket-book and taking out a card, "I have not mentioned my name. My name is Rokesmith. I lodge at one Mr. Wilfer's, at Holloway."

Mr. Boffin stared again.

"Father of Miss Bella Wilfer?" said he.

"My landlord has a daughter named Bella. Yes; no doubt."

Now, this name had been more or less in Mr. Boffin's thoughts all the morning, and for days before, therefore he said:

"That's singular, too!" unconsciously staring again, past all bounds of good manners, with the card in his hand. "Though, by-the-by, I suppose it was one of that family that pined me out?"

"No. I have never been in the streets with one of them."

"Heard me talked of among 'em, though?"

"No. I occupy my own rooms, and have held scarcely any communication with them."

"Odder and odder!" said Mr. Boffin. "Well, sir, to tell you the truth, I don't know what to say to you."

"Say nothing," returned Mr. Rokesmith; "allow me to call on you in a few days. I am not so unconscionable as to think it likely that you would accept me on trust at first sight, and take me out of the very street. Let me come to you for your further opinion, at your leisure."

"That's fair, and I don't object," said Mr. Boffin; "but it must be on condition that it's fully understood that I no more know that I shall ever be in want of any gentleman as Secretary—it *was* Secretary you said; wasn't it?"

"Yes."

Again Mr. Boffin's eyes opened wide, and he stared at the applicant from head to foot, repeating, "Queer!—You're sure it was Secretary? Are you?"

"I am sure I said so."

"—As Secretary," repeated Mr. Boffin, meditating upon the word; "I no more know that I may ever want a Secretary, or what not, than I do that I shall ever be in want of the man in the moon. Me and Mrs. Boffin have not even settled that we shall make any change in our way of life. Mrs. Boffin's inclinations certainly do tend towards Fashion; but, being already set up in a fashionable way at the Bower, she may not make further alterations. However, sir, as you don't press yourself, I wish to meet you so far as saying, by all means call at the Bower if you like. Call in the course of a week or two. At the same time, I consider that I ought to name, in addition to what I have already named, that I have in my

employment a literary man—with a wooden leg—as I have no thoughts of parting from."

"I regret to hear I am in some sort anticipated," Mr. Rokesmith answered, evidently having heard it with surprise; "but perhaps other duties might arise?"

"You see," returned Mr. Boffin, with a confidential sense of dignity, "as to my literary man's duties, they're clear. Professionally he declines and he falls, and as a friend he drops into poetry."

Without observing that these duties seemed by no means clear to Mr. Rokesmith's astonished comprehension, Mr. Boffin went on:

"And now, sir, I'll wish you good-day. You can call at the Bower any time in a week or two. It's not above a mile or so from you, and your landlord can direct you to it. But as he may not know it by its new name of Boffin's Bower, say, when you inquire of him, it's Harmon's; will you?"

"Harmon's," repeated Mr. Rokesmith, seeming to have caught the sound imperfectly, "Harmam's. How do you spell it?"

"Why, as to the spelling of it," returned Mr. Boffin, with great presence of mind, "that's *your* look out. Harmon's is all you've got to say to *him*. Morning, morning, morning!" And so departed, without looking back.

## CHAPTER IX.

### MR. AND MRS. BOFFIN IN CONSULTATION.

BETAKING himself straight homeward, Mr. Boffin, without further let or hindrance, arrived at the Bower, and gave Mrs. Boffin (in a walking dress of black velvet and feathers, like a mourning coach-horse) an account of all he had said and done since breakfast.

"This brings us round, my dear," he then pursued, "to the question we left unfinished: namely, whether there's to be any new go-in for Fashion."

"Now, I'll tell you what I want, Noddy," said Mrs. Boffin, "smoothing her dress with an air of immense enjoyment, "I want Society."

"Fashionable Society, my dear?"

"Yes!" cried Mrs. Boffin, laughing with the glee of a child. "Yes! It's no good my being kept here like Wax-Work; is it now?"

"People have to pay to see Wax-Work, my dear," returned her husband, "whereas (though you'd be cheap at the same money) the neighbours is welcome to see *you* for nothing."

"But it don't answer," said the cheerful Mrs. Boffin. "When we worked like the neighbours, we suited one another. Now we have left work off, we have left off suiting one another."

"What, do you think of beginning work again?" Mr. Boffin hinted.

"Out of the question! We have come into a great fortune, and we must do what's right by our fortune; we must act up to it."

Mr. Boffin, who had a deep respect for his wife's intuitive wisdom, replied, though rather pensively: "I suppose we must."

"It's never been acted up to yet, and, consequently, no good has come of it," said Mrs. Boffin.

"True, to the present time," Mr. Boffin assented, with his former pensiveness, as he took his seat upon his settle. "I hope good may be coming of it in the future time. Towards which, what's your views, old lady?"