

embroidery, she sat plying her needle until her busy hand was stopped by Mrs. Boffin's hand being lightly laid upon it. Yielding to the touch, she felt her hand carried to the good soul's lips, and felt a tear fall on it.

"Oh, my loved husband!" said Mrs. Boffin. "This is hard to see and hear. But, my dear Bella, believe me that in spite of all the change in him, he is the best of men."

He came back, at the moment when Bella had taken the hand comfortingly between her own.

"Eh?" said he, mistrustfully looking in at the door. "What's she telling you?"

"She's only praising you, sir," said Bella.

"Praising me? You are sure? Not blaming me for standing on my own defence against a crew of plunderers, who would suck me dry by driblets? Not blaming me for getting a little hoard together?"

He came up to them, and his wife folded her hands upon his shoulder, and shook her head as she laid it on her hands.

"There, there, there!" urged Mr. Boffin, not unkindly. "Don't take on, old lady."

"But I can't bear to see you so, my dear."

"Nonsense! Recollect we are not our old selves. Recollect, we must scunch or be scrunched. Recollect, we must hold our own. Recollect, money makes money. Don't you be uneasy, Bella, my child; don't you be doubtful. The more I save, the more you shall have."

Bella thought it was well for his wife that she was musing with her affectionate face on his shoulder; for there was a cunning light in his eyes as he said all this, which seemed to cast a disagreeable illumination on the change in him, and make it morally uglier.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE GOLDEN DUSTMAN FALLS INTO WORSE COMPANY.

It had come to pass that Mr. Silas Wegg now rarely attended the minion of fortune and the worm of the hour, at his (the worm's and minion's) own house, but lay under general instructions to await him within a certain margin of hours at the Bower. Mr. Wegg took this arrangement in great dudgeon, because the appointed hours were evening hours, and those he considered precious to the progress of the friendly move. But it was quite in character, he bitterly remarked to Mr. Venus, that the upstart who had trampled on those eminent creatures, Miss Elizabeth, Master George, Aunt Jane, and Uncle Parker, should oppress his literary man.

The Roman Empire having worked out its destruction, Mr. Boffin next appeared in a cab with Rollin's Ancient History, which valuable work being found to possess lethargic properties, broke down, at about the period when the whole of the army of Alexander the Macedonian (at that time about forty thousand strong) burst into tears simultaneously, on his being taken with a shivering fit after bathing. The Wars of the Jews likewise languishing under Mr. Wegg's generalship, Mr. Boffin arrived in another cab with Plutarch: whose Lives he found in the sequel extremely entertaining, though he hoped Plutarch might not expect him to believe them all. What to believe, in the course of his reading, was Mr. Boffin's chief literary difficulty indeed; for some time he was divided in his mind between half,

all, or none; at length, when he decided, as a moderate man, to compound with half, the question still remained, which half? And that stumbling-block he never got over.

One evening, when Silas Wegg had grown accustomed to the arrival of his patron in a cab, accompanied by some profane historian charged with unutterable names of incomprehensible peoples, of impossible descent, waging wars any number of years and syllables long, and carrying illimitable hosts and riches about, with the greatest ease, beyond the confines of geography—one evening the usual time passed by, and no patron appeared. After half an hour's grace, Mr. Wegg proceeded to the outer gate, and there executed a whistle, conveying to Mr. Venus, if perchance within hearing, the tidings of his being at home and disengaged. Forth from the shelter of a neighbouring wall, Mr. Venus then emerged.

"Brother in arms," said Mr. Wegg, in excellent spirits, "welcome!"

In return, Mr. Venus gave him a rather dry good evening.

"Walk in, brother," said Silas, clapping him on the shoulder, "and take your seat in my chimney corner; for what says the ballad?"

'No malice to dread, sir,  
And no falsehood to fear,  
But truth to delight me, Mr. Venus,  
And I forgot what to cheer.  
Li toddle dee om dee,  
And something to guide,  
My ain fireside, sir,  
My ain fireside.'

With this quotation (depending for its neatness rather on the spirit than the words), Mr. Wegg conducted his guest to his hearth.

"And you come, brother," said Mr. Wegg, in a hospitable glow, "you come like I don't know what—exactly like it—I shouldn't know you from it—shedding a halo all around you."

"What kind of halo?" asked Mr. Venus.

"Ope, sir," replied Silas. "That's *your* halo."

Mr. Venus appeared doubtful on the point, and looked rather discontentedly at the fire.

"We'll devote the evening, brother," exclaimed Wegg, "to prosecute our friendly move. And arterwards, crushing a flowing wine-cup—which I allude to brewing rum and water—we'll pledge one another. For what says the Poet?"

'And you needn't, Mr. Venus, be your black bottle,  
For surely I'll be mine,  
And we'll take a glass with a slice of lemon in it to which you're partial,  
For auld lang syne.'

This flow of quotation and hospitality in Wegg indicated his observation of some little querulousness on the part of Venus.

"Why, as to the friendly move," observed the last-named gentleman, rubbing his knees peevishly, "one of my objections to it is, that it *don't* move."

"Rome, brother," returned Wegg: "a city which (it may not be generally known) originated in twins and a wolf, and ended in Imperial marble, wasn't built in a day."

"Did I say it was?" asked Venus.

"No, you did not, brother. Well inquired."

"But I do say," proceeded Venus, "that I am taken from among my trophies of anatomy, am called upon to exchange my human wariou for mere coal-ashes wariou, and nothing comes of it. I think I must give up."

"No, sir!" remonstrated Wegg, enthusiastically. "No, sir!"

<sup>1</sup>Charge, Chester, charge,  
On, Mr. Venus, on!

Never say die, sir! A man of your mark!"

"It's not so much saying it that I object to," returned Mr. Venus, "as doing it. And having got to do it whether or no, I can't afford to waste my time on groping for nothing in cinders."

"But think how little time you have given to the move, sir, after all," urged Wegg. "Add the evenings so occupied together, and what do they come to? And you, sir, harmonizer with myself in opinions, views, and feelings, you with the patience to fit together on wires the whole framework of society—I allude to the human skelinton—you to give in so soon!"

"I don't like it," returned Mr. Venus moodily, as he put his head between his knees and stuck up his dusty hair. "And there's no encouragement to go on."

"Not them Mounds without," said Mr. Wegg, extending his right hand with an air of solemn reasoning, "encouragement? Not them Mounds now looking down upon us?"

"They're too big," grumbled Venus. "What's a scratch here and a scrape there, a poke in this place and a dig in the other, to them? Besides: what have we found?"

"What *have* we found?" cried Wegg, delighted to be able to acquiesce. "Ah! There I grant you, comrade. Nothing. But on the contrary, comrade, what *may* we find? There you'll grant me. Anything."

"I don't like it," pettishly returned Venus as before. "I came into it without enough consideration. And besides again. Isn't your own Mr. Boffin well acquainted with the Mounds? And wasn't he well acquainted with the deceased and his ways? And has he ever showed any expectation of finding anything?"

At that moment wheels were heard.

"Now, I should be loth," said Mr. Wegg, with an air of patient injury, "to think so ill of him as to suppose him capable of coming at this time of night. And yet it sounds like him."

A ring at the yard bell.

"It *is* him," said Mr. Wegg, "and he *is* capable of it. I am sorry, because I could have wished to keep up a little lingering fragment of respect for him."

Here Mr. Boffin was heard lustily calling at the yard gate, "Halloa! Wegg! Halloa!"

"Keep your seat, Mr. Venus," said Wegg. "He may not stop." And then called out, "Halloa, sir! Halloa! I'm with you directly, sir! Half a minute, Mr. Boffin. Coming, sir, as fast as my leg will bring me!" And so with a show of cheerful alacrity stumped out to the gate with a light, and there, through the window of a cab, descried Mr. Boffin inside, blocked up with books.

"Here! lend a hand, Wegg," said Mr. Boffin excitedly, "I can't get out till the way is cleared for me. This is the Annual Register, Wegg, in a cabful of wollumes. Do you know him?"

"Know the Animal Register, sir?" returned the Impostor, who had caught the name imperfectly. "For a trifling wager, I think I could find any Animal in him, blindfold, Mr. Boffin."

"And here's Kirby's Wonderful Museum," said Mr. Boffin, "and Caulfield's Characters, and Wilson's. Such Characters, Wegg, such Characters! I must have one or two of the best of 'em to-night. It's amazing what places they used to put the guineas in, wrapped up in rags. Catch hold of that pile of wollumes.

Wegg, or it'll bulge out and burst into the mud. Is there any one about, to help?"

"There's a friend of mine, sir, that had the intention of spending the evening with me when I gave you up—much against my will—for the night."

"Call him out," cried Mr. Boffin in a bustle; "get him to bear a hand. Don't drop that one under your arm. It's Dancer. Him and his sister made pies of a dead sheep they found when they were out a-walking. Where's your friend? Oh, here's your friend. Would you be so good as help Wegg and myself with these books? But don't take Jemmy Taylor of Southwark, nor yet Jemmy Wood of Gloucester. These are the two Jemmys. I'll carry them myself."

Not ceasing to talk and bustle, in a state of great excitement, Mr. Boffin directed the removal and arrangement of the books, appearing to be in some sort beside himself until they were all deposited on the floor, and the cab was dismissed.

"There!" said Mr. Boffin, gloating over them. "There they are, like the four-and-twenty fiddlers—all of a row. Get on your spectacles, Wegg; I know where to find the best of 'em, and we'll have a taste at once of what we have got before us. What's your friend's name?"

Mr. Wegg presented his friend as Mr. Venus.

"Eh?" cried Mr. Boffin, catching at the name. "Of Clerkenwell?"

"Of Clerkenwell, sir," said Mr. Venus.

"Why, I've heard of you," cried Mr. Boffin. "I heard of you in the old man's time. You knew him. Did you ever buy anything of him?" With piercing eagerness.

"No, sir," returned Venus.

"But he showed you things; didn't he?"

Mr. Venus, with a glance at his friend, replied in the affirmative.

"What did he show you?" asked Mr. Boffin, putting his hands behind him, and eagerly advancing his head. "Did he show you boxes, little cabinets, pocket-books, parcels, anything locked or sealed, anything tied up?"

Mr. Venus shook his head.

"Are you a judge of china?"

Mr. Venus again shook his head.

"Because if he had ever showed you a teapot, I should be glad to know of it," said Mr. Boffin. And then, with his right hand at his lips, repeated thoughtfully, "A Teapot, a Teapot," and glanced over the books on the floor, as if he knew there was something interesting connected with a teapot somewhere among them.

Mr. Wegg and Mr. Venus looked at one another wonderingly; and Mr. Wegg, in fitting on his spectacles, opened his eyes wide, over their rims, and tapped the side of his nose: as an admonition to Venus to keep himself generally wide awake.

"A Teapot," repeated Mr. Boffin, continuing to muse and survey the books; "a Teapot, a Teapot. Are you ready, Wegg?"

"I am at your service, sir," replied that gentleman, taking his usual seat on the usual settle, and poking his wooden leg under the table before it. "Mr. Venus, would you make yourself useful, and take a seat beside me, sir, for the conveniency of snuffing the candles?"

Venus complying with the invitation while it was yet being given, Silas pegged at him with his wooden leg to call his particular attention to Mr. Boffin standing musing before the fire, in the space between the two settles.

"Hem! Ahem!" coughed Mr. Wegg to attract his employer's attention.

"Would you wish to commence with an Animal, sir—from the Register?"

"No," said Mr. Boffin, "no, Wegg." With that, producing a little book

from his breast-pocket, he handed it with great care to the literary gentleman, and inquired, "What do you call that, Wegg?"

"This, sir," replied Silas, adjusting his spectacles, and referring to the title-page, "is Merryweather's Lives and Anecdotes of Misers. Mr. Venus, would you make yourself useful and draw the candles a little nearer, sir?" This to have a special opportunity of bestowing a stare upon his comrade.

"Which of 'em have you got in that lot?" asked Mr. Boffin. "Can you find out pretty easy?"

"Well, sir," replied Silas, turning to the table of contents and slowly fluttering the leaves of the book, "I should say they must be pretty well all here, sir; here's a large assortment, sir; my eye catches John Overs, sir, John Little, sir, Dick Jarrel, John Elwes, the Reverend Mr. Jones of Blewbury, Vulture Hopkins, Daniel Dancer——"

"Give us Dancer, Wegg," said Mr. Boffin.

With another stare at his comrade, Silas sought and found the place.

"Page a hundred and nine, Mr. Boffin. Chapter eight. Contents of chapter, 'His birth and estate. His garments and outward appearance. Miss Dancer and her feminine graces. The Miser's Mansion. The finding of a treasure. The Story of the Mutton Pies. A Miser's Idea of Death. Bob, the Miser's cur. Griffiths and his Master. How to turn a penny. A substitute for a Fire. The Advantages of keeping a Snuff-box. The Miser dies without a Shirt. The Treasures of a Dunghill——'"

"Eh? What's that?" demanded Mr. Boffin.

"'The Treasures,' sir," repeated Silas, reading very distinctly, "'of a Dunghill.' Mr. Venus, sir, would you oblige with the snuffers?" This, to secure attention to his adding with his lips only, "Mounds!"

Mr. Boffin drew an armchair into the space where he stood, and said, seating himself and slyly rubbing his hands:

"Give us Dancer."

Mr. Wegg pursued the biography of that eminent man through its various phases of avarice and dirt, through Miss Dancer's death on a sick regimen of cold dumplings, and through Mr. Dancer's keeping his rags together with a hayband, and warming his dinner by sitting upon it, down to the consolatory incident of his dying naked in a sack. After which he read on as follows:

"The house, or rather the heap of ruins, in which Mr. Dancer lived, and which at his death devolved to the right of Captain Holmes, was a most miserable, decayed building, for it had not been repaired for more than half a century."

(Here Mr. Wegg eyed his comrade and the room in which they sat: which had not been repaired for a long time.)

"But though poor in external structure, the ruinous fabric was very rich in the interior. It took many weeks to explore its whole contents, and Captain Holmes found it a very agreeable task to dive into the miser's secret hoards."

(Here Mr. Wegg repeated 'secret hoards,' and pegged his comrade again.)

"One of Mr. Dancer's richest escreteires was found to be a dunghheap in the cowhouse; a sum but little short of two thousand five hundred pounds was contained in this rich piece of manure; and in an old jacket, carefully tied, and strongly nailed down to the manger, in bank notes and gold were found five hundred pounds more."

(Here Mr. Wegg's wooden leg started forward under the table, and slowly elevated itself as he read on.)

"Several bowls were discovered filled with guineas and half-guineas; and at different times on searching the corners of the house they found various parcels of bank notes. Some were crammed into the crevices of the wall;'"

(Here Mr. Venus looked at the wall.)

"Bundles were hid under the cushions and covers of the chairs;'"

(Here Mr. Venus looked under himself on the settle.)

"Some were reposing snugly at the back of the drawers; and notes amounting to six hundred pounds were found neatly doubled up in the inside of an old teapot. In the stable the Captain found jugs full of old dollars and shillings. The chimney was not left unsearched, and paid very well for the trouble; for in nineteen different holes, all filled with soot, were found various sums of money, amounting together to more than two hundred pounds."

On the way to this crisis Mr. Wegg's wooden leg had gradually elevated itself more and more, and he had nudged Mr. Venus with his opposite elbow deeper and deeper, until at length the preservation of his balance became incompatible with the two actions, and he now dropped over sideways upon that gentleman, squeezing him against the settle's edge. Nor did either of the two, for some few seconds, make any effort to recover himself; both remaining in a kind of pecuniary swoon.

But the sight of Mr. Boffin sitting in the armchair hugging himself, with his eyes upon the fire, acted as a restorative. Counterfeiting a sneeze to cover their movements, Mr. Wegg, with a spasmodic "Tish-ho!" pulled himself and Mr. Venus up in a masterly manner.

"Let's have some more," said Mr. Boffin, hungrily.

"John Elwes is the next, sir. Is it your pleasure to take John Elwes?"

"Ah!" said Mr. Boffin. "Let's hear what John did."

He did not appear to have hidden anything, so went off rather flatly. But an exemplary lady named Wilcocks, who had stowed away gold and silver in a pickle-pot in a clockcase, a canister-full of treasure in a hole under her stairs, and a quantity of money in an old rat-trap, revived the interest. To her succeeded another lady, claiming to be a pauper, whose wealth was found wrapped up in little scraps of paper and old rag. To her, another lady, applewoman by trade, who had saved a fortune of ten thousand pounds and hidden it "here and there, in cracks and corners, behind bricks and under the flooring." To her, a French gentleman, who had crammed up his chimney, rather to the detriment of its drawing powers, "a leather valise, containing twenty-thousand francs, gold coins, and a large quantity of precious stones," as discovered by a chimneysweep after his death. By these steps Mr. Wegg arrived at a concluding instance of the human Magpie:

"Many years ago, there lived at Cambridge a miserly old couple of the name of Jardine: they had two sons: the father was a perfect miser, and at his death one thousand guineas were discovered secreted in his bed. The two sons grew up as parsimonious as their sire. When about twenty years of age, they commenced business at Cambridge as drapers, and they continued there until their death. The establishment of the Messrs. Jardine was the most dirty of all the shops in Cambridge. Customers seldom went in to purchase, except perhaps out of curiosity. The brothers were most disreputable-looking beings; for, although surrounded with gay apparel as their staple in trade, they wore the most filthy rags themselves. It is said that they had no bed, and, to save the expense of one, always slept on a bundle of packing-cloths under the counter. In their house-keeping they were penurious in the extreme. A joint of meat did not grace their board for twenty years. Yet when the first of the brothers died, the other, much to his surprise, found large sums of money which had been secreted even from him."

"There!" cried Mr. Boffin. "Even from him, you see! There was only two of 'em, and yet one of 'em hid from the other."

Mr. Venus, who since his introduction to the French gentleman had been stooping to peer up the chimney, had his attention recalled by the last sentence, and took the liberty of repeating it.

"Do you like it?" asked Mr. Boffin, turning suddenly.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Do you like what Wegg's been a-reading?"

Mr. Venus answered that he found it extremely interesting.

"Then come again," said Mr. Boffin, "and hear some more. Come when you like; come the day after to-morrow, half an hour sooner. There's plenty more; there's no end to it."

Mr. Venus expressed his acknowledgments and accepted the invitation.

"It's wonderful what's been hid, at one time and another," said Mr. Boffin, ruminating; "truly wonderful."

"Meaning, sir," observed Wegg, with a propitiatory face to draw him out, and with another peg at his friend and brother, "in the way of money?"

"Money," said Mr. Boffin. "Ah! And papers."

Mr. Wegg, in a languid transport, again dropped over on Mr. Venus, and again recovering himself, masked his emotions with a sneeze.

"Tish-ho! Did you say papers too, sir? Been hidden, sir?"

"Hidden and forgot," said Mr. Boffin. "Why the bookseller that sold me the Wonderful Museum—where's the Wonderful Museum?" He was on his knees on the floor in a moment, groping eagerly among the books.

"Can I assist you, sir?" asked Wegg.

"No, I have got it; here it is," said Mr. Boffin, dusting it with the sleeve of his coat. "Wollume four. I know it was the fourth wollume, that the bookseller read it to me out of. Look for it, Wegg."

Silas took the book and turned the leaves.

"Remarkable petrefaction, sir?"

"No, that's not it," said Mr. Boffin. "It can't have been a petrefaction."

"Memoirs of General John Reid, commonly called The Walking Rushlight, sir? With portrait."

"No, nor yet him," said Mr. Boffin.

"Remarkable case of a person who swallowed a crown-piece, sir?"

"To hide it?" asked Mr. Boffin.

"Why, no, sir," replied Wegg, consulting the text, "it appears to have been done by accident. Oh! This next must be it. 'Singular discovery of a will, lost twenty-one years.'"

"That's it!" cried Mr. Boffin. "Read that."

"A most extraordinary case," read Silas Wegg aloud, "'was tried at the last Maryborough assizes in Ireland. It was briefly this. Robert Baldwin, in March 1782, made his will, in which he devised the lands now in question to the children of his youngest son; soon after which his faculties failed him, and he became altogether childish, and died, above eighty years old. The defendant, the eldest son, immediately afterwards gave out that his father had destroyed the will, and no will being found, he entered into possession of the lands in question, and so matters remained for twenty-one years, the whole family during all that time believing that the father had died without a will. But after twenty-one years the defendant's wife died, and he very soon afterwards, at the age of seventy-eight, married a very young woman: which caused some anxiety to his two sons, whose poignant expressions of this feeling so exasperated their father, that he in his resentment executed a will to disinherit his eldest son, and in his fit of anger showed it to his second son, who instantly determined to get at it, and destroy it, in order to preserve the property to his brother. With this view, he broke open his father's

desk, where he found—not his father's will which he sought after, but the will of his grandfather, which was then altogether forgotten in the family."

"There!" said Mr. Boffin. "See what men put away and forget, or mean to destroy, and don't!" He then added in a slow tone, "As—ton—ish—ing!" And as he rolled his eyes all round the room, Wegg and Venus likewise rolled their eyes all round the room. And then Wegg, singly, fixed his eyes on Mr. Boffin looking at the fire again; as if he had a mind to spring upon him and demand his thoughts or his life.

"However, time's up for to-night," said Mr. Boffin, waving his hand after a silence. "More, the day after to-morrow. Range the books upon the shelves, Wegg. I dare say Mr. Venus will be so kind as to help you."

While speaking, he thrust his hand into the breast of his outer coat, and struggled with some object there that was too large to be got out easily. What was the stupefaction of the friendly movers when this object at last emerging, proved to be a much-dilapidated dark lantern!

Without at all noticing the effect produced by this little instrument, Mr. Boffin stood it on his knee, and, producing a box of matches, deliberately lighted the candle in the lantern, blew out the kindled match, and cast the end into the fire. "I'm going, Wegg," he then announced, "to take a turn about the place and round the yard. I don't want you. Me and this same lantern have taken hundreds—thousands—of such turns in our time together."

"But I couldn't think, sir—not on any account, I couldn't,"—Wegg was politely beginning, when Mr. Boffin, who had risen and was going towards the door, stopped:

"I have told you that I don't want you, Wegg."

Wegg looked intelligently thoughtful, as if that had not occurred to his mind until he now brought it to bear on the circumstance. He had nothing for it but to let Mr. Boffin go out and shut the door behind him. But, the instant he was on the other side of it, Wegg clutched Venus with both hands, and said in a choking whisper, as if he were being strangled:

"Mr. Venus, he must be followed, he must be watched, he mustn't be lost sight of for a moment."

"Why mustn't he?" asked Venus, also strangling.

"Comrade, you might have noticed I was a little elevated in spirits when you come in to-night. I've found something."

"What have you found?" asked Venus, clutching him with both hands, so that they stood interlocked like a couple of preposterous gladiators.

"There's no time to tell you now. I think he must have gone to look for it. We must have an eye upon him instantly."

Releasing each other, they crept to the door, opened it softly, and peeped out. It was a cloudy night, and the black shadow of the Mounds made the dark yard darker. "If not a double swindler," whispered Wegg, "why a dark lantern? We could have seen what he was about, if he had carried a light one. Softly, this way."

Cautiously along the path that was bordered by fragments of crockery set in ashes, the two stole after him. They could hear him at his peculiar trot, crushing the loose cinders as he went. "He knows the place by heart," muttered Silas, "and don't need to turn his lantern on, confound him!" But he did turn it on, almost in that same instant, and flashed its light upon the first of the Mounds.

"Is that the spot?" asked Venus in a whisper.

"He's warm," said Silas in the same tone. "He's precious warm. He's close. I think he must be going to look for it. What's that he's got in his hand?"

"A shovel," answered Venus. "And he knows how to use it, remember, fifty times as well as either of us."

"If he looks for it and misses it, partner," suggested Wegg, "what shall we do?"

"First of all, wait till he does," said Venus.

Discreet advice too, for he darkened his lantern again, and the mound turned black. After a few seconds, he turned the light on once more, and was seen standing at the foot of the second mound, slowly raising the lantern little by little until he held it up at arm's length, as if he were examining the condition of the whole surface.

"That can't be the spot too," said Venus.

"No," said Wegg, "he's getting cold."

"It strikes me," whispered Venus, "that he wants to find out whether any one has been groping about there."

"Hush!" returned Wegg, "he's getting colder and colder!—Now he's freezing!"

This exclamation was elicited by his having turned the lantern off again, and on again, and being visible at the foot of the third mound.

"Why, he's going up it!" said Venus.

"Shovel and all!" said Wegg.

At a nimble trot, as if the shovel over his shoulder stimulated him by reviving old associations, Mr. Boffin ascended the "serpentine walk," up the Mound which he had described to Silas Wegg on the occasion of their beginning to decline and fall. On striking into it he turned his lantern off. The two followed him, stooping low, so that their figures might make no mark in relief against the sky when he should turn his lantern on again. Mr. Venus took the lead, towing Mr. Wegg, in order that his refractory leg might be promptly extricated from any pitfalls it should dig for itself. They could just make out that the Golden Dustman stopped to breathe. Of course they stopped too, instantly.

"This is his own Mound," whispered Wegg, as he recovered his wind, "this one."

"Why all three are his own," returned Venus.

"So he thinks; but he's used to call this his own, because it's the one first left to him; the one that was his legacy when it was all he took under the will."

"When he shows his light," said Venus, keeping watch upon his dusky figure all the time, "drop lower and keep closer."

He went on again, and they followed again. Gaining the top of the Mound, he turned on his light—but only partially—and stood it on the ground. A bare lopsided, weather-beaten pole was planted in the ashes there, and had been there many a year. Hard by this pole his lantern stood; lighting a few feet of the lower part of it and a little of the ashy surface around, and then casting off a purposeless little clear trail of light into the air.

"He can never be going to dig up the pole!" whispered Venus as they dropped low and kept close.

"Perhaps it's hollower and full of something," whispered Wegg.

He was going to dig, with whatsoever object, for he tucked up his cuffs and spat on his hands, and then went at it like an old digger as he was. He had no design upon the pole, except that he measured a shovel's length from it before beginning, nor was it his purpose to dig deep. Some dozen or so of expert strokes sufficed. Then, he stopped, looked down into the cavity, bent over it, and took out what appeared to be an ordinary case-bottle; one of those squat, high-shouldered, short-necked glass bottles which the Dutchman is said to keep his Courage in. As soon as he had done this, he turned off his lantern, and they could hear that he was filling up the hole in the dark. The ashes being easily moved by a skilful hand, the spies took this as a hint to make off in good time.

Accordingly, Mr. Venus slipped past Mr. Wegg and towed him down. But Mr. Wegg's descent was not accomplished without some personal inconvenience, for his self-willed leg sticking into the ashes about half-way down, and time pressing, Mr. Venus took the liberty of hauling him from his tether by the collar: which occasioned him to make the rest of the journey on his back, with his head enveloped in the skirts of his coat, and his wooden leg coming last, like a drag. So flustered was Mr. Wegg by this mode of travelling, that when he was set on the level ground with his intellectual developments uppermost, he was quite unconscious of his bearings, and had not the least idea where his place of residence was to be found, until Mr. Venus shoved him into it. Even then he staggered round and round, weakly staring about him, until Mr. Venus with a hard brush brushed his senses into him and the dust out of him.

Mr. Boffin came down leisurely, for this brushing process had been well accomplished, and Mr. Venus had had time to take his breath, before he reappeared. That he had the bottle somewhere about him could not be doubted; where, was not so clear. He wore a large rough coat, buttoned over, and it might be in any one of half a dozen pockets.

"What's the matter, Wegg?" said Mr. Boffin. "You are as pale as a candle."

Mr. Wegg replied, with literal exactness, that he felt as if he had had a turn.

"Bile," said Mr. Boffin, blowing out the light in the lantern, shutting it up, and stowing it away in the breast of his coat as before. "Are you subject to bile, Wegg?"

Mr. Wegg again replied, with strict adherence to truth, that he didn't think he had ever had a similar sensation in his head, to anything like the same extent.

"Physic yourself to-morrow, Wegg," said Mr. Boffin, "to be in order for next night. By-the-bye, this neighbourhood is going to have a loss, Wegg."

"A loss, sir?"

"Going to lose the Mounds."

The friendly movers made such an obvious effort not to look at one another, that they might as well have stared at one another with all their might.

"Have you parted with them, Mr. Boffin?" asked Silas.

"Yes; they're going. Mine's as good as gone already."

"You mean the little one of the three, with the pole atop, sir?"

"Yes," said Mr. Boffin, rubbing his ear in his old way, with that new touch of craftiness added to it. "It has fetched a penny. It'll begin to be carted off to-morrow."

"Have you been out to take leave of your old friend, sir?" asked Silas, jocosely.

"No," said Mr. Boffin. "What the devil put that in your head?"

He was so sudden and rough, that Wegg, who had been hovering closer and closer to his skirts, despatching the back of his hand on exploring expeditions in search of the bottle's surface, retired two or three paces.

"No offence, sir," said Wegg, humbly. "No offence."

Mr. Boffin eyed him as a dog might eye another dog who wanted his bone; and actually retorted with a low growl, as the dog might have retorted.

"Good night," he said, after having sunk into a moody silence, with his hands clasped behind him, and his eyes suspiciously wandering about Wegg.—"No! Stop there. I know the way out, and I want no light."

Avarice, and the evening's legends of avarice, and the inflammatory effect of what he had seen, and perhaps the rush of his ill-conditioned blood to his brain in his descent, wrought Silas Wegg to such a pitch of insatiable appetite, that when the door closed he made a swoop at it and drew Venus along with him.

"He mustn't go," he cried. "We mustn't let him go! He has got that bottle about him. We must have that bottle."

"Why, you wouldn't take it by force?" said Venus, restraining him.

"Wouldn't I? Yes I would. I'd take it by any force, I'd have it at any price! Are you so afraid of one old man as to let him go, you coward?"

"I am so afraid of you as not to let *you* go," muttered Venus, sturdily clasping him in his arms.

"Did you hear him?" retorted Wegg. "Did you hear him say that he was resolved to disappoint us? Did you hear him say, you cur, that he was going to have the Mounds cleared off, when no doubt the whole place will be rummaged? If you haven't the spirit of a mouse to defend your rights, I have. Let me go after him."

As in his wildness he was making a strong struggle for it, Mr. Venus deemed it expedient to lift him, throw him, and fall with him; well knowing that, once down, he would not be up again easily with his wooden leg. So they both rolled on the floor, and, as they did so, Mr. Boffin shut the gate.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE FRIENDLY MOVE TAKES UP A STRONG POSITION.

THE friendly movers sat upright on the floor, panting and eyeing one another, after Mr. Boffin had slammed the gate and gone away. In the weak eyes of Venus, and in every reddish dust-coloured hair in his shock of hair, there was a marked distrust of Wegg and an alertness to fly at him on perceiving the smallest occasion. In the hard-grained face of Wegg, and in his stiff knotty figure (he looked like a German wooden toy), there was expressed a politic conciliation, which had no spontaneity in it. Both were flushed, flustered, and ruffled, by the late scuffle; and Wegg, in coming to the ground, had received a humming knock on the back of his devoted head, which caused him still to rub it with an air of having been highly—but disagreeably—astonished. Each was silent for some time, leaving it to the other to begin.

"Brother," said Wegg, at length breaking the silence, "you were right, and I was wrong. I forgot myself."

Mr. Venus knowingly cocked his shock of hair, as rather thinking Mr. Wegg had remembered himself, in respect of appearing without any disguise.

"But, comrade," pursued Wegg, "it was never your lot to know Miss Elizabeth, Master George, Aunt Jane, nor Uncle Parker."

Mr. Venus admitted that he had never known those distinguished persons, and added, in effect, that he had never so much as desired the honour of their acquaintance.

"Don't say that, comrade," retorted Wegg: "No, don't say that! Because, without having known them, you never can fully know what it is to be stimulated to frenzy by the sight of the Usurper."

Offering these excusatory words as if they reflected great credit on himself, Mr. Wegg impelled himself with his hands towards a chair in a corner of the room, and there, after a variety of awkward gambols, attained a perpendicular position. Mr. Venus also rose.

"Comrade," said Wegg, "take a seat. Comrade, what a speaking countenance is yours!"