

path lay by the old Hall. I paused a moment to look at it. Every window was shut. From the broad front-door and from the necks of the stone lions on the porch streamers of crape were floating. Oh how often I had seen every window ablaze with lights, and heard music and dancing feet and laughter from within! And now, in the winter twilight—for at five the day was nearly done, and the clouds lowered heavy with coming snows—now, how dark and cold it was! And yonder in the grave-yard lay, in their grim vault, master and mistress, and she who had been the pride of their hearts, the toast and beauty of the region—Sabrina Haslet. And Willie—where was *he*?

The gloom, the scene I had just witnessed, the memories, were all too much for me. I bowed my head upon the cold stone of the gateway and wept. "Gone, gone, gone!" I cried, and the sobbing wind among the branches overhead seemed to repeat the words, "Gone, gone, gone!"

I had heard no step on the soft snow; I had seen no shadow. I never guessed any one was near me until a hand came down upon my shoulder—a hand large and strong, but trembling like an aspen leaf.

I looked up. Beside me stood the tall, dark man I had seen in the grave-yard. When I turned he removed his hat, and I saw the face of Willie Haslet. A face altered and aged, bronzed and sad, but his, with love in it.

"Hannah," he said, "Hannah!"

And I, as though I spoke in a dream, murmured,

"He has come back again! He has come back again!"

"Yes, Hannah, back again," said the low, sweet voice that had been in my memory so many years. "Her letter brought me back.

She was my sister and is dead. Hannah, you know all?"

"All," I said.

He looked at me, I felt that though I dared not look at him. We were silent for a moment. Then he spoke,

"I have not crossed that threshold. It rests with you whether I ever shall. I will not be master of the Hall unless you will be my wife and its mistress."

"The Hall, the Hall!" I cried. "Did the Hall woo me? Did I love the Hall? You speak of it first as all do. Oh, Will Haslet, if you had been a poor farmer's son all might have been so different! I never thought of any thing but your love."

"I forgot," he said, "'tis not young Will Haslet now. My hair gray, the time for wooing is past."

"And I am old also," I said. "This is not Hannah Fanthorn, I sometimes think, but another woman with her name."

"There is no change in you," he said. "Oh, Hannah, must I go?"

He opened his arms. I took one step forward, and my head was against his breast as it had been ten years before, and I was his again.

Thirty years ago, but I remember. How the bells rang when we were wed, and how the people crowded to the church to see! And who so proud as mother? for her girl was the Squire's lady and mistress of the Hall, where they sat by the fire many a long day, and died in peace and hope almost together at last.

So may we die—Will and I; for we love each other still, though both our heads are white as snow to-day. But amidst the changes that have come in all these years we have never changed to each other.

OUR MUTUAL FRIEND.

BY CHARLES DICKENS.

IN FOUR BOOKS.—BOOK THE FOURTH. A TURNING.

CHAPTER I.

SETTING TRAPS.

PLASHWATER Weir-Mill Lock looked tranquil and pretty on an evening in the summer time. A soft air stirred the leaves of the fresh green trees, and passed like a smooth shadow over the river, and like a smoother shadow over the yielding grass. The voice of the falling water, like the voices of the sea and the wind, were as an outer memory to a contemplative listener; but not particularly so to Mr. Riderhood, who sat on one of the blunt wooden levers of his lock-gates, dozing. Wine must be got into a butt by some agency before it can be drawn out; and the wine of sentiment never having been got into Mr. Riderhood by any agency, nothing in nature tapped him.

As the Rogue sat, ever and again nodding himself off his balance, his recovery was always attended by an angry stare and growl, as if, in the absence of any one else, he had aggressive inclinations toward himself. In one of these starts the cry of "Lock ho! Lock!" prevented his relapse into a doze. Shaking himself as he got up, like the surly brute he was, he gave his growl a responsive twist at the end, and turned his face down-stream to see who hailed.

It was an amateur sculler, well up to his work though taking it easily, in so light a boat that the Rogue remarked: "A little less on you, and you'd a'most ha' been a Wagerbut:" then went to work at his windlass handles and sluices, to let the sculler in. As the latter stood in his boat, holding on by the boat-hook to the wood-work at the lock side, waiting for the gates to

open, Rogue Riderhood recognized his "T'other governor," Mr. Eugene Wrayburn; who was, however, too indifferent or too much engaged to recognize him.

The creaking lock-gates opened slowly, and the light boat passed in as soon as there was room enough, and the creaking lock-gates closed upon it, and it floated low down in the dock between the two sets of gates, until the water should rise and the second gates should open and let it out. When Riderhood had run to his second windlass and turned it, and while he leaned against the lever of that gate to help it to swing open presently, he noticed, lying to rest under the green hedge by the towing path astern of the Lock, a Bargeman.

The water rose and rose as the sluice poured in, dispersing the scum which had formed behind the lumbering gates, and sending the boat up, so that the sculler gradually rose like an apparition against the light from the bargeman's point of view. Riderhood observed that the bargeman rose too, leaning on his arm, and seemed to have his eyes fastened on the rising figure.

But there was the toll to be taken, as the gates were now complaining and opening. The T'other governor tossed it ashore, twisted in a piece of paper, and, as he did so, knew his man.

"Ay, ay? It's you, is it, honest friend?" said Eugene, seating himself preparatory to resuming his sculls. "You got the place, then?"

"I got the place, and no thanks to you for it, nor yet none to Lawyer Lightwood," gruffly answered Riderhood.

"We saved our recommendation, honest fellow," said Eugene, "for the next candidate—the one who will offer himself when you are transported or hanged. Don't be long about it; will you be so good?"

So imperturbable was the air with which he gravely bent to his work that Riderhood remained staring at him, without having found a retort, until he had rowed past a line of wooden objects by the weir, which showed like huge teetotums standing at rest in the water, and was almost hidden by the drooping boughs on the left bank, as he rowed away, keeping out of the opposing current. It being then too late to retort with any effect—if that could ever have been done—the honest man confined himself to cursing and growling in a grim under-tone. Having then got his gates shut, he crossed back by his plank lock-bridge to the towing-path side of the river.

If, in so doing, he took another glance at the bargeman, he did it by stealth. He cast himself on the grass by the Lock side, in an indolent way, with his back in that direction, and, having gathered a few blades, fell to chewing them. The dip of Eugene Wrayburn's sculls had become hardly audible in his ears when the bargeman passed him, putting the utmost width that he could between them, and keeping under the hedge. Then Riderhood sat up and took a long

look at his figure, and then cried: "Hi—i—i! Lock ho! Lock! Plashwater Weir-Mill Lock!"

The bargeman stopped, and looked back.

"Plashwater Weir - Mill Lock, T'otherest gov—er—nor—or—or—!" cried Mr. Riderhood, with his hands to his mouth.

The bargeman turned back. Approaching nearer and nearer, the bargeman became Bradley Headstone, in rough water-side second-hand clothing.

"Wish I may die," said Riderhood, smiting his right leg, and laughing, as he sat on the grass, "if you ain't ha' been a imitating me, T'otherest governor! Never thought myself so good-looking afore!"

Truly, Bradley Headstone had taken careful note of the honest man's dress in the course of that night-walk they had had together. He must have committed it to memory, and slowly got it by heart. It was exactly reproduced in the dress he now wore. And whereas, in his own schoolmaster clothes, he usually looked as if they were the clothes of some other man, he now looked, in the clothes of some other man or men, as if they were his own.

"This your Lock?" said Bradley, whose surprise had a genuine air; "they told me, where I last inquired, it was the third I should come to. This is only the second."

"It's my belief, governor," returned Riderhood, with a wink and shake of his head, "that you've dropped one in your counting. It ain't Locks as *you've* been giving your mind to. No, no!"

As he expressively jerked his pointing finger in the direction the boat had taken, a flush of impatience mounted into Bradley's face, and he looked anxiously up the river.

"It ain't Locks as *you've* been a reckoning up," said Riderhood, when the schoolmaster's eyes came back again. "No, no!"

"What other calculations do you suppose I have been occupied with? Mathematics?"

"I never heerd it called that. It's a long word for it. Hows'ever, p'raps you call it so," said Riderhood, stubbornly chewing his grass.

"It. What?"

"I'll say them, instead of it, if you like," was the coolly growled reply. "It's safer talk too."

"What do you mean that I should understand by them?"

"Spites, affronts, offenses giv' and took, deadly aggrawations, such like," answered Riderhood.

Do what Bradley Headstone would, he could not keep that former flush of impatience out of his face, or so master his eyes as to prevent their again looking anxiously up the river.

"Ha ha! Don't be afeerd, T'otherest," said Riderhood. "The T'other's got to make way agin the stream, and he takes it easy. You can soon come up with him. But wot's the good of saying that to you! *You* know how fur you could have outwalked him betwixt any wheres about where he lost the tide—say Richmond—and this, if you had had a mind to it."

"You think I have been following him?" said Bradley.

"I KNOW you have," said Riderhood.

"Well! I have, I have," Bradley admitted. "But," with another anxious look up the river, "he may land."

"Easy you! He won't be lost if he does land," said Riderhood. "He must leave his boat behind him. He can't make a bundle or a parcel on it, and carry it ashore with him under his arm."

"He was speaking to you just now," said Bradley, kneeling on one knee on the grass beside the Lock-keeper. "What did he say?"

"Cheek," said Riderhood.

"What?"

"Cheek," repeated Riderhood, with an angry oath; "cheek is what he said. He can't say nothing but cheek. I'd ha' liked to plump down aboard of him, neck and crop, with a heavy jump, and sunk him."

Bradley turned away his haggard face for a few moments, and then said, tearing up a tuft of grass:

"Damn him!"

"Hooroar!" cried Riderhood. "Does you credit! Hooroar! I cry chorus to the T'otherest."

"What turn," said Bradley, with an effort at self-repression that forced him to wipe his face, "did his insolence take to-day?"

"It took the turn," answered Riderhood, with sullen ferocity, "of hoping as I was getting ready to be hanged."

"Let him look to that," cried Bradley. "Let him look to that! It will be bad for him when men he has injured, and at whom he has jeered, are thinking of getting hanged. Let *him* get ready for *his* fate when that comes about. There was more meaning in what he said than he knew of, or he wouldn't have had brains enough to say it. Let him look to it; let him look to it! When men he has wronged, and on whom he has bestowed his insolence, are getting ready to be hanged, there is a death-bell ringing. And not for them."

Riderhood, looking fixedly at him, gradually arose from his recumbent posture while the schoolmaster said these words with the utmost concentration of rage and hatred. So, when the words were all spoken, he too knelt on one knee on the grass, and the two men looked at one another.

"Oh!" said Riderhood, very deliberately spitting out the grass he had been chewing.

"Then, I make out, T'otherest, as he is a-going to her?"

"He left London," answered Bradley, "yesterday. I have hardly a doubt, this time, that at last he is going to her."

"You ain't sure, then?"

"I am as sure here," said Bradley, with a clutch at the breast of his coarse shirt, "as if it was written there;" with a blow or a stab at the sky.

"Ah! But judging from the looks on you," retorted Riderhood, completely ridding himself of his grass, and drawing his sleeve across his mouth, "you've made ekally sure afore, and have got disapinted. It has told upon you."

"Listen," said Bradley, in a low voice, bending forward to lay his hand upon the Lock-keeper's shoulder. "These are my holidays."

"Are they, by George!" muttered Riderhood, with his eyes on the passion-wasted face. "Your working days must be stiff 'uns if these is your holidays."

"And I have never left him," pursued Bradley, waving the interruption aside with an impatient hand, "since they began. And I never will leave him now till I have seen him with her."

"And when you have seen him with her?" said Riderhood.

"—I'll come back to you."

Riderhood stiffened the knee on which he had been resting, got up, and looked gloomily at his new friend. After a few moments they walked side by side in the direction the boat had taken, as if by tacit consent; Bradley pressing forward, and Riderhood holding back; Bradley getting out his neat prim purse into his hand (a present made him by penny subscription among his pupils); and Riderhood, unfolding his arms to smear his coat-cuff across his mouth with a thoughtful air.

"I have a pound for you," said Bradley.

"You've two," said Riderhood.

Bradley held a sovereign between his fingers. Slouching at his side with his eyes upon the towing-path, Riderhood held his left hand open, with a certain slight drawing action toward himself. Bradley dipped in his purse for another sovereign, and two chinked in Riderhood's hand, the drawing action of which, promptly strengthening, drew them home to his pocket.

"Now, I must follow him," said Bradley Headstone. "He takes this river-road—the fool!—to confuse observation, or divert attention, if not solely to baffle me. But he must have the power of making himself invisible before he can shake Me off."

Riderhood stopped. "If you don't get disapinted agin, T'otherest, maybe you'll put up at the Lock-house when you come back?"

"I will."

Riderhood nodded, and the figure of the bargeman went its way along the soft turf by the side of the towing-path, keeping near the hedge and moving quickly. They had turned a point from which a long stretch of river was visible. A stranger to the scene might have been certain that here and there along the line of hedge a figure stood, watching the bargeman, and waiting for him to come up. So he himself had often believed at first, until his eyes became used to the posts, bearing the dagger that slew Wat Tyler, in the City of London shield.

Within Mr. Riderhood's knowledge all daggers were as one. Even to Bradley Headstone,

who could have told to the letter without book all about Wat Tyler, Lord Mayor Walworth, and the King, that it is dutiful for youth to know. There was but one subject living in the world for every sharp destructive instrument that summer evening. So, Riderhood looking after him as he went, and he with his furtive hand laid upon the dagger as he passed it, and his eyes upon the boat, were much upon a par.

The boat went on, under the arching trees, and over their tranquil shadows in the water. The bargeman skulking on the opposite bank of the stream, went on after it. Sparkles of light showed Riderhood when and where the rower dipped his blades, until, even as he stood idly watching, the sun went down and the landscape was dyed red. And then the red had the appearance of fading out of it and mounting up to Heaven, as we say that blood, guiltily shed, does.

Turning back toward his Lock (he had not gone out of view of it), the Rogue pondered as deeply as it was within the contracted power of such a fellow to do. "Why did he copy my clothes? He could have looked like what he wanted to look like without that." This was the subject-matter in his thoughts; in which, too, there came lumbering up, by times, like any half floating and half sinking rubbish in the river, the question, Was it done by accident? The setting of a trap for finding out whether it was accidentally done, soon superseded, as a practical piece of cunning, the abstruser inquiry why otherwise it was done. And he devised a means.

Rogue Riderhood went into his Lock-house, and brought forth, into the now sober gray light, his chest of clothes. Sitting on the grass beside it, he turned out, one by one, the articles it contained, until he came to a conspicuous bright red neckerchief stained black here and there by wear. It arrested his attention, and he sat pausing over it, until he took off the rusty colorless wisp that he wore round his throat, and substituted the red neckerchief, leaving the long ends flowing. "Now," said the Rogue, "if arter he sees me in this neckhankecher, I see him in a sim'lar neckhankecher, it won't be accident!" Elated by his device, he carried his chest in again and went to supper.

"Lock ho! Lock!" It was a light night, and a barge coming down summoned him out of a long doze. In due course he had let the barge through and was alone again, looking to the closing of his gates, when Bradley Headstone appeared before him, standing on the brink of the Lock.

"Halloa!" said Riderhood. "Back a'ready, T'otherest?"

"He has put up for the night, at an Angler's Inn," was the fatigued and hoarse reply. "He goes on, up the river, at six in the morning. I have come back for a couple of hours' rest."

"You want 'em," said Riderhood, making toward the schoolmaster by his plank bridge.

"I don't want them," returned Bradley, irri-

tably, "because I would rather not have them, but would much prefer to follow him all night. However, if he won't lead I can't follow. I have been waiting about, until I could discover, for a certainty, at what time he starts; if I couldn't have made sure of it, I should have staid there.—This would be a bad pit for a man to be flung into with his hands tied. These slippery smooth walls would give him no chance. And I suppose those gates would suck him down?"

"Suck him down, or swaller him up, he wouldn't get out," said Riderhood. "Not even if his hands warn't tied, he wouldn't. Shut him in at both ends, and I'd give him a pint o' old ale ever to come up to me standing here."

Bradley looked down with a ghastly relish. "You run about the brink, and run across it, in this uncertain light, on a few inches width of rotten wood," said he. "I wonder you have no thought of being drowned."

"I can't be!" said Riderhood.

"You can't be drowned?"

"No!" said Riderhood, shaking his head with an air of thorough conviction, "it's well known. I've been brought out o' drowning, and I can't be drowned. I wouldn't have that there busted B'lowbridger aware on it, or her people might make it tell agin' the damages I mean to get. But it's well known to water-side characters like myself, that him as has been brought out o' drowning, can never be drowned."

Bradley smiled sourly at the ignorance he would have corrected in one of his pupils, and continued to look down into the water, as if the place had a gloomy fascination for him.

"You seem to like it," said Riderhood.

He took no notice, but stood looking down, as if he had not heard the words. There was a very dark expression on his face; an expression that the Rogue found it hard to understand. It was fierce, and full of purpose; but the purpose might have been as much against himself as against another. If he had stepped back for a spring, taken a leap, and thrown himself in, it would have been no surprising sequel to the look. Perhaps his troubled soul, set upon some violence, did hover for the moment between that violence and another.

"Didn't you say," asked Riderhood, after watching him for a while with a sidelong glance. "as you had come back for a couple o' hours' rest?" But even then he had to jog him with his elbow before he answered.

"Eh? Yes."

"Hadn't you better come in and take your couple o' hours' rest?"

"Thank you. Yes."

With the look of one just awakened he followed Riderhood into the Lock-house, where the latter produced from a cupboard some cold salt-beef and half a loaf, some gin in a bottle, and some water in a jug. The last he brought in, cool and dripping, from the river.

"There, T'otherest," said Riderhood, stoop-

ing over him to put it on the table. "You'd better take a bite and a sup afore you takes your snooze." The draggling ends of the red neckerchief caught the schoolmaster's eyes. Riderhood saw him look at it.

"Oh!" thought that worthy. "You're a-taking notice, are you? Come! You shall have a good squint at it then." With which reflection he sat down on the other side of the table, threw open his vest, and made a pretense of retying the neckerchief with much deliberation.

Bradley ate and drank. As he sat at his platter and mug Riderhood saw him, again and yet again, steal a look at the neckerchief, as if he were correcting his slow observation and prompting his sluggish memory. "When you're ready for your snooze," said that honest creature, "chuck yourself on my bed in the corner, T'otherest. It'll be broad day afore three. I'll call you early."

"I shall require no calling," answered Bradley. And soon afterward, divesting himself only of his shoes and coat, lay down.

Riderhood, leaning back in his wooden arm-chair, with his arms folded on his breast, looked at him as he lay with his right hand clenched in his sleep and his teeth set, until a film came over his own sight and he slept too. He awoke to find that it was daylight, and that his visitor was already astir, and going out to the river-side to cool his head: "Though I'm blest," muttered Riderhood at the Lock-house door, looking after him, "if I think there's water enough in all the Thames to do *that* for you!" Within five minutes he had taken his departure, and was passing on into the calm distance as he had passed yesterday. Riderhood knew when a fish leaped by his starting and glancing round.

"Lock ho! Lock!" at intervals all day, and "Lock ho! Lock!" thrice in the ensuing night, but no return of Bradley. The second day was sultry and oppressive. In the afternoon a thunder-storm came up, and had but newly broken into a furious sweep of rain when he rushed in at the door, like the storm itself.

"You've seen him with her!" exclaimed Riderhood, starting up.

"I have."

"Where?"

"At his journey's end. His boat's hauled up for three days. I heard him give the order. Then I saw him wait for her and meet her. I saw them"—he stopped as though he were suffocating, and began again—"I saw them walking side by side last night."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing."

"What are you going to do?"

He dropped into a chair and laughed. Immediately afterward a great spirt of blood burst from his nose.

"How does that happen?" asked Riderhood.

"I don't know. I can't keep it back. It has happened twice—three times—four times—I

don't know how many times—since last night. I taste it, smell it, see it; it chokes me, and then it breaks out like this."

He went into the pelting rain again with his head bare, and, bending low over the river, and scooping up the water with his two hands, washed the blood away. All beyond his figure, as Riderhood looked from the door, was a vast dark curtain in solemn movement toward one-quarter of the heavens. He raised his head and came back, wet from head to foot, but with the lower part of his sleeves, where he had dipped into the river, streaming water.

"Your face is like a ghost's," said Riderhood.

"Did you ever see a ghost?" was the sullen retort.

"I mean to say you're quite wore out."

"That may well be. I have had no rest since I left here. I don't remember that I have so much as sat down since I left here."

"Lie down now, then," said Riderhood.

"I will, if you'll give me something to quench my thirst first."

The bottle and jug were again produced, and he mixed a weak draught, and another, and drank both in quick succession. "You asked me something," he said then.

"No, I didn't," replied Riderhood.

"I tell you," retorted Bradley, turning upon him in a wild and desperate manner, "you asked me something before I went out to wash my face in the river."

"Oh! Then?" said Riderhood, backing a little. "I asked you wot you wos a-going to do."

"How can a man in this state know?" he answered, protesting with both his tremulous hands, with an action so vigorously angry that he shook the water from his sleeves upon the floor as if he had wrung them. "How can I plan any thing if I haven't sleep?"

"Why, that's what I as good as said," returned the other. "Didn't I say lie down?"

"Well, perhaps you did."

"Well! Anyways I says it again. Sleep where you slept last; the sounder and longer you can sleep, the better you'll know arterward what you're up to."

His pointing to the truckle-bed in the corner seemed gradually to bring that poor couch to Bradley's wandering remembrance. He slipped off his worn, down-trodden shoes, and cast himself heavily, all wet as he was, upon the bed.

Riderhood sat down in his wooden arm-chair, and looked through the window at the lightning and listened to the thunder. But his thoughts were far from being absorbed by the thunder and the lightning, for again and again and again he looked very curiously at the exhausted man upon the bed. The man had turned up the collar of the rough coat he wore to shelter himself from the storm, and had buttoned it about his neck. Unconscious of that, and of most things, he had left the coat so, both when he had laved his face in the river and when he had cast himself upon



IN THE LOCK-KEEPER'S HOUSE.

the bed; though it would have been much easier to him if he had unloosened it.

The thunder rolled heavily, and the forked lightning seemed to make jagged rents in every part of the vast curtain without, as Riderhood sat by the window glancing at the bed. Sometimes he saw the man upon the bed by a red light; sometimes by a blue; sometimes he scarcely saw him in the darkness of the storm; sometimes he saw nothing of him in the blinding glare of palpitating white fire. Anon, the rain would come again with a tremendous rush, and the river would seem to rise to meet it, and a blast of wind, bursting upon the door, would flutter the hair and dress of the man, as if invisible messengers were come around the bed to carry him away. From all these phases of the storm Riderhood would turn, as if they were interruptions—rather striking interruptions, possibly, but interruptions still—of his scrutiny of the sleeper.

“He sleeps sound,” he said within himself: “yet he’s that up to me and that noticing of me that my getting out of my chair may wake him, when a rattling peal won’t, let alone my touching of him.”

He very cautiously rose to his feet. “T’otherest,” he said, in a low, calm voice, “are you a lying easy? There’s a chill in the air, governor. Shall I put a coat over you?”

No answer.

“That’s about what it is a’ready, you see,” muttered Riderhood, in a lower and a different voice; “a coat over you, a coat over you!”

The sleeper moving an arm, he sat down again in his chair, and feigned to watch the storm from the window. It was a grand spectacle, but not so grand as to keep his eyes, for half a minute together, from stealing a look at the man upon the bed.

It was at the concealed throat of the sleeper that Riderhood so often looked so curiously.

until the sleep seemed to deepen into the stupor of the dead-tired in mind and body. Then Riderhood came from the window cautiously, and stood by the bed.

"Poor man!" he murmured in a low tone, with a crafty face, and a very watchful eye and ready foot, lest he should start up; "this here coat of his must make him uneasy in his sleep. Shall I loosen it for him, and make him more comfortable? Ah! I think I ought to it, poor man. I think I will."

He touched the first button with a very cautious hand and a step backward. But the sleeper remaining in profound unconsciousness, he touched the other buttons with a more assured hand, and perhaps the more lightly on that account. Softly and slowly he opened the coat and drew it back.

The draggling ends of a bright-red neckerchief were then disclosed, and he had even been at the pains of dipping parts of it in some liquid, to give it the appearance of having become stained by wear. With a much-perplexed face Riderhood looked from it to the sleeper, and from the sleeper to it, and finally crept back to his chair, and there, with his hand to his chin, sat long in a brown study, looking at both.

CHAPTER II.

THE GOLDEN DUSTMAN RISES A LITTLE.

Mr. and Mrs. Lammle had come to breakfast with Mr. and Mrs. Boffin. They were not absolutely uninvited, but had pressed themselves with so much urgency on the golden couple, that evasion of the honor and pleasure of their company would have been difficult, if desired. They were in a charming state of mind, were Mr. and Mrs. Lammle, and almost as fond of Mr. and Mrs. Boffin as of one another.

"My dear Mrs. Boffin," said Mrs. Lammle, "it imparts new life to me to see my Alfred in confidential communication with Mr. Boffin. The two were formed to become intimate. So much simplicity combined with so much force of character, such natural sagacity united to such amiability and gentleness—these are the distinguishing characteristics of both."

This being said aloud gave Mr. Lammle an opportunity, as he came with Mr. Boffin from the window to the breakfast-table, of taking up his dear and honored wife.

"My Sophronia," said that gentleman, "your too partial estimate of your poor husband's character—"

"No! Not too partial, Alfred," urged the lady, tenderly moved; "never say that."

"My child, your favorable opinion, then, of your husband—you don't object to that phrase, darling?"

"How can I, Alfred?"

"Your favorable opinion then, my Precious, does less than justice to Mr. Boffin, and more than justice to me."

"To the first charge, Alfred, I plead guilty. But to the second, oh no, no!"

"Less than justice to Mr. Boffin, Sophronia," said Mr. Lammle, soaring into a tone of moral grandeur, "because it represents Mr. Boffin as on a lower level; more than justice to me, Sophronia, because it represents me as on Mr. Boffin's higher level. Mr. Boffin bears and forbears far more than I could."

"Far more than you could for yourself, Alfred?"

"My love, that is not the question."

"Not the question, Lawyer?" said Mrs. Lammle, archly.

"No, dear Sophronia. From my lower level I regard Mr. Boffin as too generous, as possessed of too much clemency, as being too good to persons who are unworthy of him and ungrateful to him. To those noble qualities I can lay no claim. On the contrary, they rouse my indignation when I see them in action."

"Alfred!"

"They rouse my indignation, my dear, against the unworthy persons, and give me a combative desire to stand between Mr. Boffin and all such persons. Why? Because in my lower nature I am more worldly and less delicate. Not being so magnanimous as Mr. Boffin, I feel his injuries more than he does himself, and feel more capable of opposing his injurers."

It struck Mrs. Lammle that it appeared rather difficult this morning to bring Mr. and Mrs. Boffin into agreeable conversation. Here had been several lures thrown out, and neither of them had uttered a word. Here were she, Mrs. Lammle, and her husband discoursing at once affectingly and effectively, but discoursing alone. Assuming that the dear old creatures were impressed by what they heard, still one would like to be sure of it, the more so, as at least one of the dear old creatures was somewhat pointedly referred to. If the dear old creatures were too bashful or too dull to assume their required places in the discussion, why then it would seem desirable that the dear old creatures should be taken by their heads and shoulders and brought into it.

"But is not my husband saying in effect," asked Mrs. Lammle, therefore, with an innocent air, of Mr. and Mrs. Boffin, "that he becomes unmindful of his own temporary misfortunes in his admiration of another whom he is burning to serve? And is not that making an admission that his nature is a generous one? I am wretched in argument, but surely this is so, dear Mr. and Mrs. Boffin?"

Still, neither Mr. nor Mrs. Boffin said a word. He sat with his eyes on his plate, eating his muffins and ham, and she sat shyly looking at the tea-pot. Mrs. Lammle's innocent appeal was merely thrown into the air, to mingle with the steam of the urn. Glancing toward Mr. and Mrs. Boffin, she very slightly raised her eyebrows, as though inquiring of her husband: "Do I notice any thing wrong here?"