

## CHAPTER XV.

## TWO NEW SERVANTS.

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

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

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

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

"Mr Rokesmith."

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

Mr Rokesmith appeared.

"Sit down, sir," said Mr Boffin, shaking hands with him.

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

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

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

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

"I said Secretary," assented Mr Rokesmith.

"It rather puzzled me at the time," said Mr Boffin, "and it rather puzzled me and Mrs Boffin when we spoke of it afterwards, because (not to make a mystery of our belief) we have always believed a Secretary to be a piece of furniture, mostly of mahogany, lined with green baize or leather, with a lot of little drawers in it. Now, you won't think I take a liberty when I mention that you certainly ain't *that*."

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

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

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

"Now, for instance—come!" said Mr Boffin, in his pouncing way. "If you entered my employment, what would you do?"

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

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

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

"I tell you what," said Mr Boffin, slowly crumpling his own blotted note in his hand; "if you'll turn to at these

present papers, and see what you can make of 'em, I shall know better what I can make of you."

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

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

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

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

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

"Anyone. Yourself."

Mr Rokesmith quickly wrote, and then read aloud:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"As property?" inquired John Rokesmith.

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

"Association?" the Secretary suggested.

"Ah!" said Mr Boffin. "Perhaps. Anyhow, he named to me that the house had a board up, 'This Eminently Aristocratic Mansion to be let or sold.' Me and Mrs Boffin went to look at it, and finding it beyond a doubt Eminently Aristocratic (though a trifle high and dull, which after all may be part of the same thing) took it. My literary man

was so friendly as to drop into a charming piece of poetry on that occasion, in which he complimented Mrs Boffin on coming into possession of—how did it go, my dear?”

Mrs Boffin replied:

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

“That’s it! And it was made neater by there really being two halls in the house, a front ‘un and a back ‘un, besides the servants’. He likewise dropped into a very pretty piece of poetry to be sure, respecting the extent to which he would be willing to put himself out of the way to bring Mrs Boffin round, in case she should ever get low in her spirits in the house. Mrs Boffin has a wonderful memory. Will you repeat it, my dear?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So it is, my dear,” said Mr Boffin, “when not literary. But when so, not so. And I am bound to bear in mind

that I took Wegg on at a time when I had no thought of being fashionable or of leaving the Bower. To let him feel himself anyway slighted now, would be to be guilty of a meanness, and to act like having one’s head turned by the halls of dazzling light. Which Lord forbid! Rokesmith, what shall we say about your living in the house?”

“In this house?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thank’ee. Being here, would you care at all to look round the Bower?”

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

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

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

A certain leanness falls upon houses not sufficiently imbued with life (as if they were nourished upon it), which was very noticeable here. The staircase, balustrades, and rails, had a spare look—an air of being denuded to the

bone—which the panels of the walls and the jambs of the doors and windows also bore. The scanty moveables partook of it; save for the cleanliness of the place, the dust into which they were all resolving would have lain thick on the floors; and those, both in colour and in grain, were worn like old faces that had kept much alone.

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

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

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

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

“Ah! And his poor sister too,” said Mrs Boffin. “And here’s the sunny place on the white wall where they one day measured one another. Their own little hands wrote up

their names here, only with a pencil; but the names are here still, and the poor dears gone for ever.”

“We must take care of the names, old lady,” said Mr Boffin. “We must take care of the names. They shan’t be rubbed out in our time, nor yet, if we can help it, in the time after us. Poor little children!”

“Ah, poor little children!” said Mrs Boffin.

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

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

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

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

“You have no instructions to give me, Mr Boffin, in reference to this place?”

“Not any, Rokesmith. No.”

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

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

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

“Ay, ay, that’s another thing. I may sell *them*, though I should be sorry to see the neighbourhood deprived of ‘em too. It’ll look but a poor dead flat without the Mounds.

Still I don't say that I'm going to keep 'em always there, for the sake of the beauty of the landscape. There's no hurry about it; that's all I say at present. I ain't a scholar in much, Bokesmith, but I'm a pretty fair scholar in dust. I can price the Mbunds to a fraction, and I know how they can be best disposed of, and likewise that they take no harm by standing where they do. You'll look in to-morrow, will you be so kind?"

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

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

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

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

The man of low cunning had, of course, acquired a mastery over the man of high simplicity. The mean man had, of course, got the better of the generous man. How long such conquests last, is another matter; that they are achieved, is every-day experience, not even to be flourished away by Podsnappery itself. The undesigning Boffin had become so far immeshed by the wily Wegg that his mind misgave him he was a very designing man indeed in purposing to do more for Wegg. It seemed to him (so skilful was Wegg) that he was plotting darkly, when he was contriving to do the very thing that Wegg was plotting to get him to do. And thus, while he was mentally turning the kindest of kind faces on Wegg this morning, he was not absolutely sure but that he might somehow deserve the charge of turning his back on him.

For these reasons Mr Boffin passed but anxious hours until evening came, and with it Mr Wegg, stumping leisurely to the Roman Empire. At about this period Mr Boffin had become profoundly interested in the fortunes of a great military leader known to him as Bully Sawyers, but perhaps better known to fame and easier of identification by the classical student, under the less Britannic name of Belisarius. Even this general's career paled in interest for Mr Boffin before the clearing of his conscience with Wegg; and hence,

when that literary gentleman had according to custom eaten and drunk until he was all a-glow, and when he took up his book with the usual chirping introduction, "And now, Mr Boffin, sir, we'll decline and we'll fall!" Mr Boffin stopped him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Here he is," said Mr Boffin.

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

"No, Mr Boffin, not you, sir. Anybody but you. Do not fear, Mr Boffin, that I shall contaminate the premises which your gold has bought, with *my* lowly pursuits. I am aware, sir, that it would not become me to carry on my little traffic under the windows of your mansion. I have already thought of that, and taken my measures. No need to be

bought out, sir. Would Stepney Fields be considered intrusive? If not remote enough, I can go remoter. In the words of the poet's song, which I do not quite remember:

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

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

"Now, Wegg, Wegg, Wegg," remonstrated the excellent Boffin. "You are too sensitive."

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

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

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

"But I *don't* mean it."

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

"Don't you indeed, sir?"

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

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

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

—Please to proceed, Mr Boffin."

"Thank'ee, Wegg, both for your confidence in me and for your frequent dropping into poetry; both of which is

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

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

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

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

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

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

While delivering these valedictory observations, Wegg continually disappointed Mr Boffin of his hand by flourishing it in the air. He now darted it at his patron, who took it,

and felt his mind relieved of a great weight: observing that as they had arranged their joint affairs so satisfactorily, he would now be glad, to look into those of Bully Sawyers. Which, indeed, had been left over-night in a very unpromising posture, and for whose impending expedition against the Persians the weather had been by no means favourable all day.

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

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

"What's the matter, my dear?"

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

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

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

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

"What is, my dear?"

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

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

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

"Where did you think you saw them?"

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

"Touched them?"

"No. Felt them in the air. I was sorting those things on the chest, and not thinking of the old man or the children,

but singing to myself, when all in a moment I felt there was a face growing out of the dark."

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

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

"And then it was gone?"

"Yes; and then it was gone."

"Where were you then, old lady?"

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

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

"And then you ran down-stairs?"

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

"With the faces?"

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

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

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

"I never had the feeling in the house before," said Mrs Boffin; "and I have been about it alone at all hours of the night. I have been in the house when Death was in

it, and I have been in the house when Murder was a new part of its adventures, and I never had a fright in it yet."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Eh!" said Mr Boffin.

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

"And what then?"

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

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

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### MINDERS AND RE-MINDERS.

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

One part of the Secretary's conduct, underlying all the rest, might have been mistrusted by a man with a better knowledge of men than the Golden Dustman had. The Secretary was as far from being inquisitive or intrusive as Secretary could be, but nothing less than a complete understanding of the whole of the affairs would content him. It soon became apparent (from the knowledge with which he set out) that he must have been to the office where the Harmon will was registered, and must have read the will. He anticipated Mr Boffin's consideration whether he should be advised with on this or that topic, by showing that he already knew of it and understood it. He did this with no attempt at concealment, seeming to be satisfied that it was part of his duty to have prepared himself at all attainable points for its utmost discharge.

This might—let it be repeated—have awakened some little vague mistrust in a man more worldly-wise than the Golden Dustman. On the other hand, the Secretary was discerning, discreet, and silent, though as zealous as if the affairs had been his own. He showed no love of patronage or the command of money, but distinctly preferred resign-