

Chapter 5 - The Golden Dustman Falls Into Bad Company

Were Bella Wilfer's bright and ready little wits at fault, or was the Golden Dustman passing through the furnace of proof and coming out cross? Ill news travels fast. We shall know full soon.

On that very night of her return from the Happy Return, something chanced which Bella closely followed with her eyes and ears. There was an apartment at the side of the Boffin mansion, known as Mr Boffin's room. Far less grand than the rest of the house, it was far more comfortable, being pervaded by a certain air of homely snugness, which upholstering despotism had banished to that spot when it inexorably set its face against Mr Boffin's appeals for mercy in behalf of any other chamber. Thus, although a room of modest situation - for its windows gave on Silas Wegg's old corner - and of no pretensions to velvet, satin, or gilding, it had got itself established in a domestic position analogous to that of an easy dressing-gown or pair of slippers; and whenever the family wanted to enjoy a particularly pleasant fireside evening, they enjoyed it, as an institution that must be, in Mr Boffin's room.

Mr and Mrs Boffin were reported sitting in this room, when Bella got back. Entering it, she found the Secretary there too; in official attendance it would appear, for he was standing with some papers in his hand by a table with shaded candles on it, at which Mr Boffin was seated thrown back in his easy chair.

'You are busy, sir,' said Bella, hesitating at the door.

'Not at all, my dear, not at all. You're one of ourselves. We never make company of you. Come in, come in. Here's the old lady in her usual place.'

Mrs Boffin adding her nod and smile of welcome to Mr Boffin's words, Bella took her book to a chair in the fireside corner, by Mrs Boffin's work-table. Mr Boffin's station was on the opposite side.

'Now, Rokesmith,' said the Golden Dustman, so sharply rapping the table to bespeak his attention as Bella turned the leaves of her book, that she started; 'where were we?'

'You were saying, sir,' returned the Secretary, with an air of some reluctance and a glance towards those others who were present, 'that you considered the time had come for fixing my salary.'

'Don't be above calling it wages, man,' said Mr Boffin, testily. 'What the deuce! I never talked of any salary when I was in service.'

'My wages,' said the Secretary, correcting himself.

'Rokesmith, you are not proud, I hope?' observed Mr Boffin, eyeing him askance.

'I hope not, sir.'

'Because I never was, when I was poor,' said Mr Boffin. 'Poverty and pride don't go at all well together. Mind that. How can they go well together? Why it stands to reason. A man, being poor, has nothing to be proud of. It's nonsense.'

With a slight inclination of his head, and a look of some surprise, the Secretary seemed to assent by forming the syllables of the word 'nonsense' on his lips.

'Now, concerning these same wages,' said Mr Boffin. 'Sit down.'

The Secretary sat down.

'Why didn't you sit down before?' asked Mr Boffin, distrustfully. 'I hope that wasn't pride? But about these wages. Now, I've gone into the matter, and I say two hundred a year. What do you think of it? Do you think it's enough?'

'Thank you. It is a fair proposal.'

'I don't say, you know,' Mr Boffin stipulated, 'but what it may be more than enough. And I'll tell you why, Rokesmith. A man of property, like me, is bound to consider the market-price. At first I didn't enter into that as much as I might have done; but I've got acquainted with other men of property since, and I've got acquainted with the duties of property. I mustn't go putting the market-price up, because money may happen not to be an object with me. A sheep is worth so much in the market, and I ought to give it and no more. A secretary is worth so much in the market, and I ought to give it and no more. However, I don't mind stretching a point with you.'

'Mr Boffin, you are very good,' replied the Secretary, with an effort.

'Then we put the figure,' said Mr Boffin, 'at two hundred a year. Then the figure's disposed of. Now, there must be no misunderstanding regarding what I buy for two hundred a year. If I pay for a sheep, I buy it out and out. Similarly, if I pay for a secretary, I buy HIM out and out.'

'In other words, you purchase my whole time?'

'Certainly I do. Look here,' said Mr Boffin, 'it ain't that I want to occupy your whole time; you can take up a book for a minute or two when you've nothing better to do, though I think you'll a'most always find something useful to do. But I want to keep you in attendance. It's convenient to have you at all times ready on the premises. Therefore, betwixt your breakfast and your supper, - on the premises I expect to find you.'

The Secretary bowed.

'In bygone days, when I was in service myself,' said Mr Boffin, 'I couldn't go cutting about at my will and pleasure, and you won't expect to go cutting about at your will and pleasure. You've rather got into a habit of that, lately; but perhaps it was for want of a right specification betwixt us. Now, let there be a right specification betwixt us, and let it be this. If you want leave, ask for it.'

Again the Secretary bowed. His manner was uneasy and astonished, and showed a sense of humiliation.

'I'll have a bell,' said Mr Boffin, 'hung from this room to yours, and when I want you, I'll touch it. I don't call to mind that I have anything more to say at the present moment.'

The Secretary rose, gathered up his papers, and withdrew. Bella's eyes followed him to the door, lighted on Mr Boffin complacently thrown back in his easy chair, and drooped over her book.

'I have let that chap, that young man of mine,' said Mr Boffin, taking a trot up and down the room, get above his work. It won't do. I must have him down a peg. A man of property owes a duty to other men of property, and must look sharp after his inferiors.'

Bella felt that Mrs Boffin was not comfortable, and that the eyes of that good creature sought to discover from her face what attention she had given to this discourse, and what impression it had made upon her. For which reason Bella's eyes drooped more engrossedly over her book, and she turned the page with an air of profound absorption in it.

'Noddy,' said Mrs Boffin, after thoughtfully pausing in her work.

'My dear,' returned the Golden Dustman, stopping short in his trot.

'Excuse my putting it to you, Noddy, but now really! Haven't you been a little strict with Mr Rokesmith to-night? Haven't you been a little - just a little little - not quite like your old self?'

'Why, old woman, I hope so,' returned Mr Boffin, cheerfully, if not boastfully.

'Hope so, deary?'

'Our old selves wouldn't do here, old lady. Haven't you found that out yet? Our old selves would be fit for nothing here but to be robbed and imposed upon. Our old selves weren't people of fortune; our new selves are; it's a great difference.'

'Ah!' said Mrs Boffin, pausing in her work again, softly to draw a long breath and to look at the fire. 'A great difference.'

'And we must be up to the difference,' pursued her husband; 'we must be equal to the change; that's what we must be. We've got to hold our own now, against everybody (for everybody's hand is stretched out to be dipped into our pockets), and we have got to recollect that money makes money, as well as makes everything else.'

'Mentioning recollecting,' said Mrs Boffin, with her work abandoned, her eyes upon the fire, and her chin upon her hand, 'do you recollect, Noddy, how you said to Mr Rokesmith when he first came to see us at the Bower, and you engaged him - how you said to him that if it had pleased Heaven to send John Harmon to his fortune safe, we could have been content with the one Mound which was our legacy, and should never have wanted the rest?'

'Ay, I remember, old lady. But we hadn't tried what it was to have the rest then. Our new shoes had come home, but we hadn't put 'em on. We're wearing 'em now, we're wearing 'em, and must step out accordingly.'

Mrs Boffin took up her work again, and plied her needle in silence.

'As to Rokesmith, that young man of mine,' said Mr Boffin, dropping his voice and glancing towards the door with an apprehension of being overheard by some eavesdropper there, 'it's the same with him as with the footmen. I have found out that you must either scrunch them, or let them scrunch you. If you ain't imperious with 'em, they won't believe in your being any better than themselves, if as good, after the stories (lies mostly) that they have heard of your beginnings. There's nothing betwixt stiffening yourself up, and throwing yourself away; take my word for that, old lady.'

Bella ventured for a moment to look stealthily towards him under her eyelashes, and she saw a dark cloud of suspicion, covetousness, and conceit, overshadowing the once open face.

'Hows'ever,' said he, 'this isn't entertaining to Miss Bella. Is it, Bella?'

A deceiving Bella she was, to look at him with that pensively abstracted air, as if her mind were full of her book, and she had not heard a single word!

'Hah! Better employed than to attend to it,' said Mr Boffin. 'That's right, that's right. Especially as you have no call to be told how to value yourself, my dear.'

Colouring a little under this compliment, Bella returned, 'I hope sir, you don't think me vain?'

'Not a bit, my dear,' said Mr Boffin. 'But I think it's very creditable in you, at your age, to be so well up with the pace of the world, and to know what to go in for. You are right. Go in for money, my love. Money's the article. You'll make money of your good looks, and of the money Mrs Boffin and me will have the pleasure of settling upon you, and you'll live and die rich. That's the state to live and die in!' said Mr Boffin, in an unctuous manner. R - r - rich!

There was an expression of distress in Mrs Boffin's face, as, after watching her husband's, she turned to their adopted girl, and said:

'Don't mind him, Bella, my dear.'

'Eh?' cried Mr Boffin. 'What! Not mind him?'

'I don't mean that,' said Mrs Boffin, with a worried look, 'but I mean, don't believe him to be anything but good and generous, Bella, because he is the best of men. No, I must say that much, Noddy. You are always the best of men.'

She made the declaration as if he were objecting to it: which assuredly he was not in any way.

'And as to you, my dear Bella,' said Mrs Boffin, still with that distressed expression, 'he is so much attached to you, whatever he says, that your own father has not a truer interest in you and can hardly like you better than he does.'

'Says too!' cried Mr Boffin. 'Whatever he says! Why, I say so, openly. Give me a kiss, my dear child, in saying Good Night, and let me confirm what my old lady tells you. I am very fond of you, my dear, and I am entirely of your mind, and you and I will take care that you shall be rich. These good looks of yours (which you have some right to be vain of; my dear, though you are not, you know) are worth money, and you shall make money of 'em. The money you will have, will be

worth money, and you shall make money of that too. There's a golden ball at your feet. Good night, my dear.'

Somehow, Bella was not so well pleased with this assurance and this prospect as she might have been. Somehow, when she put her arms round Mrs Boffin's neck and said Good Night, she derived a sense of unworthiness from the still anxious face of that good woman and her obvious wish to excuse her husband. 'Why, what need to excuse him?' thought Bella, sitting down in her own room. 'What he said was very sensible, I am sure, and very true, I am sure. It is only what I often say to myself. Don't I like it then? No, I don't like it, and, though he is my liberal benefactor, I disparage him for it. Then pray,' said Bella, sternly putting the question to herself in the looking-glass as usual, 'what do you mean by this, you inconsistent little Beast?'

The looking-glass preserving a discreet ministerial silence when thus called upon for explanation, Bella went to bed with a weariness upon her spirit which was more than the weariness of want of sleep. And again in the morning, she looked for the cloud, and for the deepening of the cloud, upon the Golden Dustman's face.

She had begun by this time to be his frequent companion in his morning strolls about the streets, and it was at this time that he made her a party to his engaging in a curious pursuit. Having been hard at work in one dull enclosure all his life, he had a child's delight in looking at shops. It had been one of the first novelties and pleasures of his freedom, and was equally the delight of his wife. For many years their only walks in London had been taken on Sundays when the shops were shut; and when every day in the week became their holiday, they derived an enjoyment from the variety and fancy and beauty of the display in the windows, which seemed incapable of exhaustion. As if the principal streets were a great Theatre and the play were childishly new to them, Mr and Mrs Boffin, from the beginning of Bella's intimacy in their house, had been constantly in the front row, charmed with all they saw and applauding vigorously. But now, Mr Boffin's interest began to centre in book-shops; and more than that - for that of itself would not have been much - in one exceptional kind of book.

'Look in here, my dear,' Mr Boffin would say, checking Bella's arm at a bookseller's window; 'you can read at sight, and your eyes are as sharp as they're bright. Now, look well about you, my dear, and tell me if you see any book about a Miser.'

If Bella saw such a book, Mr Boffin would instantly dart in and buy it. And still, as if they had not found it, they would seek out another book-shop, and Mr Boffin would say, 'Now, look well all round, my

dear, for a Life of a Miser, or any book of that sort; any Lives of odd characters who may have been Misers.'

Bella, thus directed, would examine the window with the greatest attention, while Mr Boffin would examine her face. The moment she pointed out any book as being entitled Lives of eccentric personages, Anecdotes of strange characters, Records of remarkable individuals, or anything to that purpose, Mr Boffin's countenance would light up, and he would instantly dart in and buy it. Size, price, quality, were of no account. Any book that seemed to promise a chance of miserly biography, Mr Boffin purchased without a moment's delay and carried home. Happening to be informed by a bookseller that a portion of the Annual Register was devoted to 'Characters', Mr Boffin at once bought a whole set of that ingenious compilation, and began to carry it home piecemeal, confiding a volume to Bella, and bearing three himself. The completion of this labour occupied them about a fortnight. When the task was done, Mr Boffin, with his appetite for Misers whetted instead of satiated, began to look out again.

It very soon became unnecessary to tell Bella what to look for, and an understanding was established between her and Mr Boffin that she was always to look for Lives of Misers. Morning after morning they roamed about the town together, pursuing this singular research. Miserly literature not being abundant, the proportion of failures to successes may have been as a hundred to one; still Mr Boffin, never wearied, remained as avaricious for misers as he had been at the first onset. It was curious that Bella never saw the books about the house, nor did she ever hear from Mr Boffin one word of reference to their contents. He seemed to save up his Misers as they had saved up their money. As they had been greedy for it, and secret about it, and had hidden it, so he was greedy for them, and secret about them, and hid them. But beyond all doubt it was to be noticed, and was by Bella very clearly noticed, that, as he pursued the acquisition of those dismal records with the ardour of Don Quixote for his books of chivalry, he began to spend his money with a more sparing hand. And often when he came out of a shop with some new account of one of those wretched lunatics, she would almost shrink from the sly dry chuckle with which he would take her arm again and trot away. It did not appear that Mrs Boffin knew of this taste. He made no allusion to it, except in the morning walks when he and Bella were always alone; and Bella, partly under the impression that he took her into his confidence by implication, and partly in remembrance of Mrs Boffin's anxious face that night, held the same reserve.

While these occurrences were in progress, Mrs Lammle made the discovery that Bella had a fascinating influence over her. The Lammles, originally presented by the dear Veneerings, visited the Boffins on all grand occasions, and Mrs Lammle had not previously

found this out; but now the knowledge came upon her all at once. It was a most extraordinary thing (she said to Mrs Boffin); she was foolishly susceptible of the power of beauty, but it wasn't altogether that; she never had been able to resist a natural grace of manner, but it wasn't altogether that; it was more than that, and there was no name for the indescribable extent and degree to which she was captivated by this charming girl.

This charming girl having the words repeated to her by Mrs Boffin (who was proud of her being admired, and would have done anything to give her pleasure), naturally recognized in Mrs Lammle a woman of penetration and taste. Responding to the sentiments, by being very gracious to Mrs Lammle, she gave that lady the means of so improving her opportunity, as that the captivation became reciprocal, though always wearing an appearance of greater sobriety on Bella's part than on the enthusiastic Sophronia's. Howbeit, they were so much together that, for a time, the Boffin chariot held Mrs Lammle oftener than Mrs Boffin: a preference of which the latter worthy soul was not in the least jealous, placidly remarking, 'Mrs Lammle is a younger companion for her than I am, and Lor! she's more fashionable.'

But between Bella Wilfer and Georgiana Podsnap there was this one difference, among many others, that Bella was in no danger of being captivated by Alfred. She distrusted and disliked him. Indeed, her perception was so quick, and her observation so sharp, that after all she mistrusted his wife too, though with her giddy vanity and wilfulness she squeezed the mistrust away into a corner of her mind, and blocked it up there.

Mrs Lammle took the friendliest interest in Bella's making a good match. Mrs Lammle said, in a sportive way, she really must show her beautiful Bella what kind of wealthy creatures she and Alfred had on hand, who would as one man fall at her feet enslaved. Fitting occasion made, Mrs Lammle accordingly produced the most passable of those feverish, boastful, and indefinitely loose gentlemen who were always lounging in and out of the City on questions of the Bourse and Greek and Spanish and India and Mexican and par and premium and discount and three-quarters and seven-eighths. Who in their agreeable manner did homage to Bella as if she were a compound of fine girl, thorough-bred horse, well-built drag, and remarkable pipe. But without the least effect, though even Mr Fledgeby's attractions were cast into the scale.

'I fear, Bella dear,' said Mrs Lammle one day in the chariot, 'that you will be very hard to please.'

'I don't expect to be pleased, dear,' said Bella, with a languid turn of her eyes.

'Truly, my love,' returned Sophronia, shaking her head, and smiling her best smile, 'it would not be very easy to find a man worthy of your attractions.'

'The question is not a man, my dear,' said Bella, coolly, 'but an establishment.'

'My love,' returned Mrs Lammle, 'your prudence amazes me - where DID you study life so well! - you are right. In such a case as yours, the object is a fitting establishment. You could not descend to an inadequate one from Mr Boffin's house, and even if your beauty alone could not command it, it is to be assumed that Mr and Mrs Boffin will - '

'Oh! they have already,' Bella interposed.

'No! Have they really?'

A little vexed by a suspicion that she had spoken precipitately, and withal a little defiant of her own vexation, Bella determined not to retreat.

'That is to say,' she explained, 'they have told me they mean to portion me as their adopted child, if you mean that. But don't mention it.'

'Mention it!' replied Mrs Lammle, as if she were full of awakened feeling at the suggestion of such an impossibility. 'Men-tion it!'

'I don't mind telling you, Mrs Lammle - ' Bella began again.

'My love, say Sophronia, or I must not say Bella.'

With a little short, petulant 'Oh!' Bella complied. 'Oh! - Sophronia then - I don't mind telling you, Sophronia, that I am convinced I have no heart, as people call it; and that I think that sort of thing is nonsense.'

'Brave girl!' murmured Mrs Lammle.

'And so,' pursued Bella, 'as to seeking to please myself, I don't; except in the one respect I have mentioned. I am indifferent otherwise.'

'But you can't help pleasing, Bella,' said Mrs Lammle, rallying her with an arch look and her best smile, 'you can't help making a proud and an admiring husband. You may not care to please yourself, and you may not care to please him, but you are not a free agent as to pleasing: you are forced to do that, in spite of yourself, my dear; so it may be a question whether you may not as well please yourself too, if you can.'

Now, the very grossness of this flattery put Bella upon proving that she actually did please in spite of herself. She had a misgiving that she was doing wrong - though she had an indistinct foreshadowing that some harm might come of it thereafter, she little thought what consequences it would really bring about - but she went on with her confidence.

'Don't talk of pleasing in spite of one's self, dear,' said Bella. 'I have had enough of that.'

'Ay?' cried Mrs Lammle. 'Am I already corroborated, Bella?'

'Never mind, Sophronia, we will not speak of it any more. Don't ask me about it.'

This plainly meaning Do ask me about it, Mrs Lammle did as she was requested.

'Tell me, Bella. Come, my dear. What provoking burr has been inconveniently attracted to the charming skirts, and with difficulty shaken off?'

'Provoking indeed,' said Bella, 'and no burr to boast of! But don't ask me.'

'Shall I guess?'

'You would never guess. What would you say to our Secretary?'

'My dear! The hermit Secretary, who creeps up and down the back stairs, and is never seen!'

'I don't know about his creeping up and down the back stairs,' said Bella, rather contemptuously, 'further than knowing that he does no such thing; and as to his never being seen, I should be content never to have seen him, though he is quite as visible as you are. But I pleased HIM (for my sins) and he had the presumption to tell me so.'

'The man never made a declaration to you, my dear Bella!'

'Are you sure of that, Sophronia?' said Bella. 'I am not. In fact, I am sure of the contrary.'

'The man must be mad,' said Mrs Lammle, with a kind of resignation.

'He appeared to be in his senses,' returned Bella, tossing her head, 'and he had plenty to say for himself. I told him my opinion of his declaration and his conduct, and dismissed him. Of course this has

all been very inconvenient to me, and very disagreeable. It has remained a secret, however. That word reminds me to observe, Sophronia, that I have glided on into telling you the secret, and that I rely upon you never to mention it.'

'Mention it!' repeated Mrs Lammle with her former feeling. 'Mention it!'

This time Sophronia was so much in earnest that she found it necessary to bend forward in the carriage and give Bella a kiss. A Judas order of kiss; for she thought, while she yet pressed Bella's hand after giving it, 'Upon your own showing, you vain heartless girl, puffed up by the doting folly of a dustman, I need have no relenting towards YOU. If my husband, who sends me here, should form any schemes for making YOU a victim, I should certainly not cross him again.' In those very same moments, Bella was thinking, 'Why am I always at war with myself? Why have I told, as if upon compulsion, what I knew all along I ought to have withheld? Why am I making a friend of this woman beside me, in spite of the whispers against her that I hear in my heart?'

As usual, there was no answer in the looking-glass when she got home and referred these questions to it. Perhaps if she had consulted some better oracle, the result might have been more satisfactory; but she did not, and all things consequent marched the march before them.

On one point connected with the watch she kept on Mr Boffin, she felt very inquisitive, and that was the question whether the Secretary watched him too, and followed the sure and steady change in him, as she did? Her very limited intercourse with Mr Rokesmith rendered this hard to find out. Their communication now, at no time extended beyond the preservation of commonplace appearances before Mr and Mrs Boffin; and if Bella and the Secretary were ever left alone together by any chance, he immediately withdrew. She consulted his face when she could do so covertly, as she worked or read, and could make nothing of it. He looked subdued; but he had acquired a strong command of feature, and, whenever Mr Boffin spoke to him in Bella's presence, or whatever revelation of himself Mr Boffin made, the Secretary's face changed no more than a wall. A slightly knitted brow, that expressed nothing but an almost mechanical attention, and a compression of the mouth, that might have been a guard against a scornful smile - these she saw from morning to night, from day to day, from week to week, monotonous, unvarying, set, as in a piece of sculpture.

The worst of the matter was, that it thus fell out insensibly - and most provokingly, as Bella complained to herself, in her impetuous little

manner - that her observation of Mr Boffin involved a continual observation of Mr Rokesmith. 'Won't THAT extract a look from him?' - 'Can it be possible THAT makes no impression on him?' Such questions Bella would propose to herself, often as many times in a day as there were hours in it. Impossible to know. Always the same fixed face.

'Can he be so base as to sell his very nature for two hundred a year?' Bella would think. And then, 'But why not? It's a mere question of price with others besides him. I suppose I would sell mine, if I could get enough for it.' And so she would come round again to the war with herself.

A kind of illegibility, though a different kind, stole over Mr Boffin's face. Its old simplicity of expression got masked by a certain craftiness that assimilated even his good-humour to itself. His very smile was cunning, as if he had been studying smiles among the portraits of his misers. Saving an occasional burst of impatience, or coarse assertion of his mastery, his good-humour remained to him, but it had now a sordid alloy of distrust; and though his eyes should twinkle and all his face should laugh, he would sit holding himself in his own arms, as if he had an inclination to hoard himself up, and must always grudgingly stand on the defensive.

What with taking heed of these two faces, and what with feeling conscious that the stealthy occupation must set some mark on her own, Bella soon began to think that there was not a candid or a natural face among them all but Mrs Boffin's. None the less because it was far less radiant than of yore, faithfully reflecting in its anxiety and regret every line of change in the Golden Dustman's.

'Rokesmith,' said Mr Boffin one evening when they were all in his room again, and he and the Secretary had been going over some accounts, 'I am spending too much money. Or leastways, you are spending too much for me.'

'You are rich, sir.'

'I am not,' said Mr Boffin.

The sharpness of the retort was next to telling the Secretary that he lied. But it brought no change of expression into the set face.

'I tell you I am not rich,' repeated Mr Boffin, 'and I won't have it.'

'You are not rich, sir?' repeated the Secretary, in measured words.

'Well,' returned Mr Boffin, 'if I am, that's my business. I am not going to spend at this rate, to please you, or anybody. You wouldn't like it, if it was your money.'

'Even in that impossible case, sir, I - '

'Hold your tongue!' said Mr Boffin. 'You oughtn't to like it in any case. There! I didn't mean to be rude, but you put me out so, and after all I'm master. I didn't intend to tell you to hold your tongue. I beg your pardon. Don't hold your tongue. Only, don't contradict. Did you ever come across the life of Mr Elwes?' referring to his favourite subject at last.

'The miser?'

'Ah, people called him a miser. People are always calling other people something. Did you ever read about him?'

'I think so.'

'He never owned to being rich, and yet he might have bought me twice over. Did you ever hear of Daniel Dancer?'

'Another miser? Yes.'

'He was a good 'un,' said Mr Boffin, 'and he had a sister worthy of him. They never called themselves rich neither. If they HAD called themselves rich, most likely they wouldn't have been so.'

'They lived and died very miserably. Did they not, sir?'

'No, I don't know that they did,' said Mr Boffin, curtly.

'Then they are not the Misers I mean. Those abject wretches - '

'Don't call names, Rokesmith,' said Mr Boffin.

' - That exemplary brother and sister - lived and died in the foulest and filthiest degradation.'

'They pleased themselves,' said Mr Boffin, 'and I suppose they could have done no more if they had spent their money. But however, I ain't going to fling mine away. Keep the expenses down. The fact is, you ain't enough here, Rokesmith. It wants constant attention in the littlest things. Some of us will be dying in a workhouse next.'

'As the persons you have cited,' quietly remarked the Secretary, 'thought they would, if I remember, sir.'

'And very creditable in 'em too,' said Mr Boffin. 'Very independent in 'em! But never mind them just now. Have you given notice to quit your lodgings?'

'Under your direction, I have, sir.'

'Then I tell you what,' said Mr Boffin; 'pay the quarter's rent - pay the quarter's rent, it'll be the cheapest thing in the end - and come here at once, so that you may be always on the spot, day and night, and keep the expenses down. You'll charge the quarter's rent to me, and we must try and save it somewhere. You've got some lovely furniture; haven't you?'

'The furniture in my rooms is my own.'

'Then we shan't have to buy any for you. In case you was to think it,' said Mr Boffin, with a look of peculiar shrewdness, 'so honourably independent in you as to make it a relief to your mind, to make that furniture over to me in the light of a set-off against the quarter's rent, why ease your mind, ease your mind. I don't ask it, but I won't stand in your way if you should consider it due to yourself. As to your room, choose any empty room at the top of the house.'

'Any empty room will do for me,' said the Secretary.

'You can take your pick,' said Mr Boffin, 'and it'll be as good as eight or ten shillings a week added to your income. I won't deduct for it; I look to you to make it up handsomely by keeping the expenses down. Now, if you'll show a light, I'll come to your office-room and dispose of a letter or two.'

On that clear, generous face of Mrs Boffin's, Bella had seen such traces of a pang at the heart while this dialogue was being held, that she had not the courage to turn her eyes to it when they were left alone. Feigning to be intent on her 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 is 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 could 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 scrunch 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.