

would be sure to follow. Besides, he was not the man to be daunted by such obstacles as were likely to present themselves in an undertaking of this kind. They were obstacles of precisely that nature which his slow, dogged, cautious temperament was best fitted to deal with; and he knew this. Perhaps, on the whole, he rather liked that there should be some difficulties in the way, that he might have the satisfaction of overcoming them. At all events, they gave an additional zest to the pursuit that he had in hand; and though his hatred needed no stimulus, Mr. Keckwitch, like most phlegmatic men, was not displeased to be stimulated.

Sufficient, however, for the day was the triumph thereof. Here was the gate of Elton House; and only to have penetrated so far into William Trefalden's mystery was an achievement of no slight importance. But the head clerk was not contented only to see the gate. He wanted to have a glimpse of the house as well; and so walked on to the bottom of the lane, crossed over, and returned up the other side. The lane, however, was narrow, and the walls were high; so that, take it from what point he would, the house remained invisible. He could see the tops of two or three sombre-looking trees, and a faint column of smoke melting away as it rose against the background of blue sky; but that was all, and he was none the wiser for the sight. So, knowing that he risked observation every moment that he lingered in Slade's-lane, he turned quickly back again towards the market-gardens, and passed out through a little turnstile leading to a foot-way shut in by thick green hedges on either side.

He could not tell in the least where this path would lead him; but, seeing a network of similar walks intersecting the enclosures in various directions, he hoped to double back, somehow or another, into the main road. In the mean while, he hurried on till a bend in the path carried him well out of sight of the entrance to Slade's-lane, and there paused to rest in the shade of an apple-orchard.

It was now about half-past six o'clock. The sun was still shining; the evening was still warm; the apple-blossoms filled the air with a delicious perfume. All around and before him, occupying the whole space of ground between Kensington and Brompton, lay nothing but meadows, and fruit-gardens, and orchards heavy with blossoms white and pink. A pleasant, peaceful scene, not without some kind of vernal beauty for appreciative eyes.

But Mr. Keckwitch's dull orbs, however feebly appreciative they might be at other times, were blind just now to every impression of beauty. Waiting there in the shade, he wiped the perspiration from his forehead, recovered his breath as he best could, and thought only of how he might turn his journey to some further account before going back to town. It was much to have discovered Elton House; but he had yet to learn what manner of life was led in it by William Trefalden. It would have been something only to have caught a glimpse through an open gate—to have seen whether the house was large or small, cheerful or dismal. He had expected to find it dull and dilapidated, with half the windows shattered up, and the rest all black with the smoke of many years; and he did not feel inclined to go away in as much ignorance of these points as when he left Chancery-lane. Suddenly an idea occurred to him—a very bright, ingenious idea, which gave him so much satisfaction that he indulged in a little inaudible laugh, and started forward again quite briskly, to find his way out of this labyrinth of hedgerows, orchards, and cabbage-gardens.

He had not gone many yards before he came to a cross-road whence more paths branched off in every direction. Here, however, like a large blue spider in the midst of his web, stood a portly policeman, from whom Mr. Keckwitch at once learned his nearest way to Palace Gardens, and followed it. He asked for Palace Gardens this time, being anxious to emerge conveniently upon the High-street, without again venturing too close to Slade's-lane in broad daylight.

Having emerged at this point, Mr. Keckwitch went into the first stationer's shop that he could see, and bought a ledger. The stationer had considerable difficulty in supplying him, for the ledger he required was of a somewhat unusual shape and size. "It must be oblong," he said, "plain ruled, and bound in red leather." He would not have it ruled off in columns for accounts, and the stationer had none that were not ruled in that manner. At last he found one that was quite plain—a mere oblong book of Bath-post paper bound in purple cloth, with scarlet leather back and corners; and with this, although it was not exactly what he wanted, Mr. Trefalden's head clerk was forced to content himself. He also bought a parallel ruler, a small bottle of ink, and a couple of quill pens, saying that he would rule the book himself.

It was now striking seven by Kensington church clock; and Mr. Keckwitch, who was not used to going without his tea, inquired his way to the nearest coffee-house, which proved to be in Church-street, close by. It was a modest little place enough; but he made himself very comfortable there, establishing himself at a table at the further end of the room, calling for lights and a substantial tea, and setting to work at once upon the ruling of his ledger. When he had done about a dozen pages, he divided each into three parts by a couple of vertical lines, and desired the waiter to bring him the London Post-Office Directory. But he did not look in it for Elton House. He had searched for that some days back, and found no mention of it. He simply opened it at KENSINGTON HIGH-STREET, page four hundred and forty-nine, and proceeded patiently and methodically to copy out its contents under the several titles of Name, Address, and Occupation. By the time that he had thus filled in some four or five pages, and finished his tea, it was half-past eight o'clock, and quite dark.

That is to say, it was quite dark in the sky overhead, but quite brilliant in Kensington High-street. That picturesque thoroughfare was lighted up for the evening. The shops blazed with gas; the pavements were crowded; there was a brass band playing at the public-house at the corner; and the very fruit and oyster stalls in front of the church were bright with lanterns. The place, in fact, was as bright as at noonday, and Mr. Keckwitch, who wished to avoid observation, was naturally disturbed, and a good deal disappointed. He had, however, made up his mind to do a certain thing, and he was determined to go through with it; so he pulled his hat a little more over his eyes, put his ink-bottle and pens in the breast-pocket of his coat, tucked his ledger under his arm, and went boldly out in the direction of Slade's-lane.

He had observed a baker's shop within a few doors of the corner where the omnibus had set him down, and this shop was his present destination. He went in with the assured step of a man who is about his regular work, touched his hat to a pleasant-looking woman behind the counter, and said:

"I am going round, ma'am, for the new Directory. There's been no change here, I suppose, since last year?"

"No, sir; no change whatever," she replied.

Mr. Keckwitch opened his ledger on the counter, pulled out one of his quill pens, and drew his fat forefinger down a certain column of names.

"Wilson, Emma, baker and confectioner," said he, reading one of the entries. "Is that quite right, ma'am?"

"Fancy bread and biscuit baker, if you please, sir," replied Mrs. Wilson, "not confectioner."

"Thank you, ma'am. Fancy bread and biscuit baker."

And Mr. Keckwitch drew his pen through "confectioner," and substituted Mrs. Wilson's emendation with a business-like gravity that did him credit.

"I thought the Post-office Directory for this year was out already, sir," observed Mrs. Wilson, as he blotted off the entry, and closed his ledger.

"This is not the Post-office Directory, ma'am," said Mr. Keckwitch, calmly. "This is a new

Directory of the Western and South-Western districts."

"Oh indeed! a sort of new Court Guide, I suppose?"

"Just so, ma'am. A sort of new Court Guide. Wish you good evening!"

"Good evening, sir," replied Mrs. Wilson, as he again raised his finger half way to the brim of his hat, and left the shop; he had scarcely passed the threshold, however, when he paused, and turned back.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am for troubling you again," he said, "but perhaps you can tell me who lives in Elton House?"

"Elton House?"

"Yes; Elton House, in Slade's-lane. I've been knocking and ringing there till I'm tired, and can get no one to come to the gate. Is it uninhabited?"

Mr. Keckwitch said this so naturally, and with such an air of ill-used respectability, that detective Kidd himself would scarcely have doubted the truth of his statement. As for Mrs. Wilson, she accepted every word of it in perfect good faith.

"Oh no," she replied, "it is not uninhabited. The name is Duvernay."

"Duvernay," repeated Mr. Trefalden's head clerk, re-opening his ledger, and dipping his pen in Mrs. Wilson's ink. "With your leave, ma'am, a foreign family, I suppose?"

"I think she is French."

"And Mr. Duvernay—can you tell me what profession to enter?"

"There is no Mr. Duvernay," said Mrs. Wilson, "with an odd little cough, and a slight elevation of the eyebrows. At least, not that I am aware of."

Mr. Keckwitch looked up with that dull light in his eyes that only came to them under circumstances of strong excitement. Mrs. Wilson looked down, and coughed again.

"Is the lady a widow?" he asked, huskily.

"I believe she calls herself a widow," replied Mrs. Wilson; "but indeed, sir, I can't say what she is."

"And there's no gentleman?"

"I didn't say that, sir."

"I beg your pardon, I thought I understood so."

"I said there was no Mr. Duvernay; and no more there is. But I don't desire to speak ill of my neighbours, and Madame's a customer."

Mr. Keckwitch shook his head solemnly. "Dear! dear!" said he. "Very sad, very sad, indeed. A wicked world, ma'am! So little real respectability in it."

"Very true, sir."

"Then I suppose I must simply put down Madame Duvernay, there being no master to the house?"

"I suppose so, sir. There is no master that I have ever known of; at least, no acknowledged master."

"Still, if there is a gentleman, and he lives in the house, as I think you implied just now—"

"Oh, sir, I imply nothing," said the mistress of the shop impatiently, as if she had had enough of the subject. "Madame Duvernay's doings are nothing to me; and the gentleman may be her husband for anything I know to the contrary."

"You cannot give me his name, ma'am?"

"No, sir."

"I am sorry for that. I ought to have his name if he really lives in the house."

"I cannot give it to you, because I don't know it," said Mrs. Wilson, rather more graciously. "I cannot even take it upon myself to say that he lives at Elton House. There is a gentleman there, I believe, very constantly; but he may be a visitor. I really can't tell; and it's no business of mine, you know, sir."

"Nor of mine, if he is only a visitor," replied Mr. Keckwitch, again closing his ledger, and preparing to be gone. "We take no note of visitors, but we're bound to take note of regular inhabitants. I'm very much obliged to you, ma'am—very much indeed."

"I'm sure, sir, you're very welcome."

"Thank you. A little help often goes a long