THIRD NARRATIVE

Contributed by FRANKLIN BLAKE

CHAPTER I

In the spring of the year eighteen hundred and forty-nine I was wandering in the East, and had then recently altered the travelling plans which I had laid out some months before, and which I had communicated to my lawyer and my banker in London.

This change made it necessary for me to send one of my servants to obtain my letters and remittances from the English consul in a certain city, which was no longer included as one of my resting-places in my new travelling scheme. The man was to join me again at an appointed place and time. An accident, for which he was not responsible, delayed him on his errand. For a week I and my people waited, encamped on the borders of a desert. At the end of that time the missing man made his appearance, with the money and the letters, at the entrance of my tent.

"I am afraid I bring you bad news, sir," he said, and pointed to one of the letters, which had a mourning border round it, and the address on which was in the handwriting of Mr. Bruff.

I know nothing, in a case of this kind, so unendurable as suspense. The letter with the mourning border was the letter that I opened first.

It informed me that my father was dead, and that I was heir to his great fortune. The wealth which had thus fallen into my hands brought its responsibilities with it, and Mr. Bruff entreated me to lose no time in returning to England.

By daybreak the next morning, I was on my way back to my own country.

The picture presented of me, by my old friend Betteredge, at the time of my departure from England, is (as I think) a little overdrawn. He has, in his own quaint way, interpreted seriously one of his young mistress's many satirical references to my foreign education; and has persuaded himself that he

actually saw those French, German, and Italian sides to my character, which my lively cousin only professed to discover in jest, and which never had any real existence, except in our good Betteredge's own brain. But, barring this drawback, I am bound to own that he has stated no more than the truth in representing me as wounded to the heart by Rachel's treatment, and as leaving England in the first keenness of suffering caused by the bitterest disappointment of my life.

I went abroad, resolved--if change and absence could help me--to forget her. It is, I am persuaded, no true view of human nature which denies that change and absence DO help a man under these circumstances; they force his attention away from the exclusive contemplation of his own sorrow. I never forgot her; but the pang of remembrance lost its worst bitterness, little by little, as time, distance, and novelty interposed themselves more and more effectually between Rachel and me.

On the other hand, it is no less certain that, with the act of turning homeward, the remedy which had gained its ground so steadily, began now, just as steadily, to drop back. The nearer I drew to the country which she inhabited, and to the prospect of seeing her again, the more irresistibly her influence began to recover its hold on me. On leaving England she was the last person in the world whose name I would have suffered to pass my lips. On returning to England, she was the first person I inquired after, when Mr. Bruff and I met again.

I was informed, of course, of all that had happened in my absence; in other words, of all that has been related here in continuation of Betteredge's narrative--one circumstance only being excepted. Mr. Bruff did not, at that time, feel himself at liberty to inform me of the motives which had privately influenced Rachel and Godfrey Ablewhite in recalling the marriage promise, on either side. I troubled him with no embarrassing questions on this delicate subject. It was relief enough to me, after the jealous disappointment caused by hearing that she had ever contemplated being Godfrey's wife, to know that reflection had convinced her of acting rashly, and that she had effected her own release from her marriage engagement.

Having heard the story of the past, my next inquiries (still inquiries after Rachel!) advanced naturally to the present time. Under whose care had she been placed after leaving Mr. Bruff's house? and where was she living now?

She was living under the care of a widowed sister of the late Sir John Verinder--one Mrs. Merridew--whom her mother's executors had requested to act as guardian, and who had accepted the proposal. They were reported

to me as getting on together admirably well, and as being now established, for the season, in Mrs. Merridew's house in Portland Place.

Half an hour after receiving this information, I was on my way to Portland Place--without having had the courage to own it to Mr. Bruff!

The man who answered the door was not sure whether Miss Verinder was at home or not. I sent him upstairs with my card, as the speediest way of setting the question at rest. The man came down again with an impenetrable face, and informed me that Miss Verinder was out.

I might have suspected other people of purposely denying themselves to me. But it was impossible to suspect Rachel. I left word that I would call again at six o'clock that evening.

At six o'clock I was informed for the second time that Miss Verinder was not at home. Had any message been left for me. No message had been left for me. Had Miss Verinder not received my card? The servant begged my pardon--Miss Verinder HAD received it.

The inference was too plain to be resisted. Rachel declined to see me.

On my side, I declined to be treated in this way, without making an attempt, at least, to discover a reason for it. I sent up my name to Mrs. Merridew, and requested her to favour me with a personal interview at any hour which it might be most convenient to her to name.

Mrs. Merridew made no difficulty about receiving me at once. I was shown into a comfortable little sitting-room, and found myself in the presence of a comfortable little elderly lady. She was so good as to feel great regret and much surprise, entirely on my account. She was at the same time, however, not in a position to offer me any explanation, or to press Rachel on a matter which appeared to relate to a question of private feeling alone. This was said over and over again, with a polite patience that nothing could tire; and this was all I gained by applying to Mrs. Merridew.

My last chance was to write to Rachel. My servant took a letter to her the next day, with strict instructions to wait for an answer.

The answer came back, literally in one sentence.

"Miss Verinder begs to decline entering into any correspondence with Mr. Franklin Blake."

Fond as I was of her, I felt indignantly the insult offered to me in that reply. Mr. Bruff came in to speak to me on business, before I had recovered possession of myself. I dismissed the business on the spot, and laid the whole case before him. He proved to be as incapable of enlightening me as Mrs. Merridew herself. I asked him if any slander had been spoken of me in Rachel's hearing. Mr. Bruff was not aware of any slander of which I was the object. Had she referred to me in any way while she was staying under Mr. Bruff's roof? Never. Had she not so much as asked, during all my long absence, whether I was living or dead? No such question had ever passed her lips. I took out of my pocket-book the letter which poor Lady Verinder had written to me from Frizinghall, on the day when I left her house in Yorkshire. And I pointed Mr. Bruff's attention to these two sentences in it:

"The valuable assistance which you rendered to the inquiry after the lost jewel is still an unpardoned offence, in the present dreadful state of Rachel's mind. Moving blindfold in this matter, you have added to the burden of anxiety which she has had to bear, by innocently threatening her secret with discovery through your exertions."

"Is it possible," I asked, "that the feeling towards me which is there described, is as bitter as ever against me now?"

Mr. Bruff looked unaffectedly distressed.

"If you insist on an answer," he said, "I own I can place no other interpretation on her conduct than that."

I rang the bell, and directed my servant to pack my portmanteau, and to send out for a railway guide. Mr. Bruff asked, in astonishment, what I was going to do.

"I am going to Yorkshire," I answered, "by the next train."

"May I ask for what purpose?"

"Mr. Bruff, the assistance I innocently rendered to the inquiry after the Diamond was an unpardoned offence, in Rachel's mind, nearly a year since; and it remains an unpardoned offence still. I won't accept that position! I am determined to find out the secret of her silence towards her mother, and her enmity towards me. If time, pains, and money can do it, I will lay my hand on the thief who took the Moonstone!"

The worthy old gentleman attempted to remonstrate--to induce me to listen to reason--to do his duty towards me, in short. I was deaf to everything that he could urge. No earthly consideration would, at that moment, have shaken the resolution that was in me.

"I shall take up the inquiry again," I went on, "at the point where I dropped it; and I shall follow it onwards, step by step, till I come to the present time. There are missing links in the evidence, as I left it, which Gabriel Betteredge can supply, and to Gabriel Betteredge I go!"

Towards sunset that evening I stood again on the well-remembered terrace, and looked once more at the peaceful old country house. The gardener was the first person whom I saw in the deserted grounds. He had left Betteredge, an hour since, sunning himself in the customary corner of the back yard. I knew it well; and I said I would go and seek him myself.

I walked round by the familiar paths and passages, and looked in at the open gate of the yard.

There he was--the dear old friend of the happy days that were never to come again--there he was in the old corner, on the old beehive chair, with his pipe in his mouth, and his ROBINSON CRUSOE on his lap, and his two friends, the dogs, dozing on either side of him! In the position in which I stood, my shadow was projected in front of me by the last slanting rays of the sun. Either the dogs saw it, or their keen scent informed them of my approach; they started up with a growl. Starting in his turn, the old man quieted them by a word, and then shaded his failing eyes with his hand, and looked inquiringly at the figure at the gate.

My own eyes were full of tears. I was obliged to wait a moment before I could trust myself to speak to him.

CHAPTER II

"Betteredge!" I said, pointing to the well-remembered book on his knee, "has ROBINSON CRUSOE informed you, this evening, that you might expect to see Franklin Blake?"

"By the lord Harry, Mr. Franklin!" cried the old man, "that's exactly what ROBINSON CRUSOE has done!"

He struggled to his feet with my assistance, and stood for a moment, looking backwards and forwards between ROBINSON CRUSOE and me, apparently at a loss to discover which of us had surprised him most. The verdict ended in favour of the book. Holding it open before him in both hands, he surveyed the wonderful volume with a stare of unutterable anticipation--as if he expected to see Robinson Crusoe himself walk out of the pages, and favour us with a personal interview.

"Here's the bit, Mr. Franklin!" he said, as soon as he had recovered the use of his speech. "As I live by bread, sir, here's the bit I was reading, the moment before you came in! Page one hundred and fifty-six as follows:--'I stood like one Thunderstruck, or as if I had seen an Apparition.' If that isn't as much as to say: 'Expect the sudden appearance of Mr. Franklin Blake'--there's no meaning in the English language!" said Betteredge, closing the book with a bang, and getting one of his hands free at last to take the hand which I offered him.

I had expected him, naturally enough under the circumstances, to overwhelm me with questions. But no--the hospitable impulse was the uppermost impulse in the old servant's mind, when a member of the family appeared (no matter how!) as a visitor at the house.

"Walk in, Mr. Franklin," he said, opening the door behind him, with his quaint old-fashioned bow. "I'll ask what brings you here afterwards--I must make you comfortable first. There have been sad changes, since you went away. The house is shut up, and the servants are gone. Never mind that! I'll cook your dinner; and the gardener's wife will make your bed--and if there's a bottle of our famous Latour claret left in the cellar, down your throat, Mr. Franklin, that bottle shall go. I bid you welcome, sir! I bid you heartily welcome!" said the poor old fellow, fighting manfully against the gloom of the deserted house, and receiving me with the sociable and courteous attention of the bygone time.

It vexed me to disappoint him. But the house was Rachel's house, now. Could I eat in it, or sleep in it, after what had happened in London? The commonest sense of self-respect forbade me--properly forbade me--to cross the threshold.

I took Betteredge by the arm, and led him out into the garden. There was no help for it. I was obliged to tell him the truth. Between his attachment to Rachel, and his attachment to me, he was sorely puzzled and distressed at the turn things had taken. His opinion, when he expressed it, was given in his usual downright manner, and was agreeably redolent of the most positive philosophy I know--the philosophy of the Betteredge school.

"Miss Rachel has her faults--I've never denied it," he began. "And riding the high horse, now and then, is one of them. She has been trying to ride over you--and you have put up with it. Lord, Mr. Franklin, don't you know women by this time better than that? You have heard me talk of the late Mrs. Betteredge?"

I had heard him talk of the late Mrs. Betteredge pretty often--invariably producing her as his one undeniable example of the inbred frailty and perversity of the other sex. In that capacity he exhibited her now.

"Very well, Mr. Franklin. Now listen to me. Different women have different ways of riding the high horse. The late Mrs. Betteredge took her exercise on that favourite female animal whenever I happened to deny her anything that she had set her heart on. So sure as I came home from my work on these occasions, so sure was my wife to call to me up the kitchen stairs, and to say that, after my brutal treatment of her, she hadn't the heart to cook me my dinner. I put up with it for some time--just as you are putting up with it now from Miss Rachel. At last my patience wore out. I went downstairs, and I took Mrs. Betteredge--affectionately, you understand--up in my arms, and carried her, holus-bolus, into the best parlour where she received her company. I said 'That's the right place for you, my dear,' and so went back to the kitchen. I locked myself in, and took off my coat, and turned up my shirt-sleeves, and cooked my own dinner. When it was done, I served it up in my best manner, and enjoyed it most heartily. I had my pipe and my drop of grog afterwards; and then I cleared the table, and washed the crockery, and cleaned the knives and forks, and put the things away, and swept up the hearth. When things were as bright and clean again, as bright and clean could be, I opened the door and let Mrs. Betteredge in. 'I've had my dinner, my dear,' I said; 'and I hope you will find that I have left the kitchen all that your fondest wishes can desire.' For the rest of that woman's life, Mr.

Franklin, I never had to cook my dinner again! Moral: You have put up with Miss Rachel in London; don't put up with her in Yorkshire. Come back to the house!"

Quite unanswerable! I could only assure my good friend that even HIS powers of persuasion were, in this case, thrown away on me.

"It's a lovely evening," I said. "I shall walk to Frizinghall, and stay at the hotel, and you must come to-morrow morning and breakfast with me. I have something to say to you."

Betteredge shook his head gravely.

"I am heartily sorry for this," he said. "I had hoped, Mr. Franklin, to hear that things were all smooth and pleasant again between you and Miss Rachel. If you must have your own way, sir," he continued, after a moment's reflection, "there is no need to go to Frizinghall to-night for a bed. It's to be had nearer than that. There's Hotherstone's Farm, barely two miles from here. You can hardly object to THAT on Miss Rachel's account," the old man added slily. "Hotherstone lives, Mr. Franklin, on his own freehold."

I remembered the place the moment Betteredge mentioned it. The farm-house stood in a sheltered inland valley, on the banks of the prettiest stream in that part of Yorkshire: and the farmer had a spare bedroom and parlour, which he was accustomed to let to artists, anglers, and tourists in general. A more agreeable place of abode, during my stay in the neighbourhood, I could not have wished to find.

"Are the rooms to let?" I inquired.

"Mrs. Hotherstone herself, sir, asked for my good word to recommend the rooms, yesterday."

"I'll take them, Betteredge, with the greatest pleasure."

We went back to the yard, in which I had left my travelling-bag. After putting a stick through the handle, and swinging the bag over his shoulder, Betteredge appeared to relapse into the bewilderment which my sudden appearance had caused, when I surprised him in the beehive chair. He looked incredulously at the house, and then he wheeled about, and looked more incredulously still at me.

"I've lived a goodish long time in the world," said this best and dearest of all

old servants--"but the like of this, I never did expect to see. There stands the house, and here stands Mr. Franklin Blake--and, Damme, if one of them isn't turning his back on the other, and going to sleep in a lodging!"

He led the way out, wagging his head and growling ominously. "There's only one more miracle that CAN happen," he said to me, over his shoulder. "The next thing you'll do, Mr. Franklin, will be to pay me back that seven-and-sixpence you borrowed of me when you were a boy."

This stroke of sarcasm put him in a better humour with himself and with me. We left the house, and passed through the lodge gates. Once clear of the grounds, the duties of hospitality (in Betteredge's code of morals) ceased, and the privileges of curiosity began.

He dropped back, so as to let me get on a level with him. "Fine evening for a walk, Mr. Franklin," he said, as if we had just accidentally encountered each other at that moment. "Supposing you had gone to the hotel at Frizinghall, sir?"

"Yes?"

"I should have had the honour of breakfasting with you, to-morrow morning."

"Come and breakfast with me at Hotherstone's Farm, instead."

"Much obliged to you for your kindness, Mr. Franklin. But it wasn't exactly breakfast that I was driving at. I think you mentioned that you had something to say to me? If it's no secret, sir," said Betteredge, suddenly abandoning the crooked way, and taking the straight one, "I'm burning to know what's brought you down here, if you please, in this sudden way."

"What brought me here before?" I asked.

"The Moonstone, Mr. Franklin. But what brings you now, sir?"

"The Moonstone again, Betteredge."

The old man suddenly stood still, and looked at me in the grey twilight as if he suspected his own ears of deceiving him.

"If that's a joke, sir," he said, "I'm afraid I'm getting a little dull in my old age. I don't take it."

"It's no joke," I answered. "I have come here to take up the inquiry which was dropped when I left England. I have come here to do what nobody has done yet--to find out who took the Diamond."

"Let the Diamond be, Mr. Franklin! Take my advice, and let the Diamond be! That cursed Indian jewel has misguided everybody who has come near it. Don't waste your money and your temper--in the fine spring time of your life, sir--by meddling with the Moonstone. How can YOU hope to succeed (saving your presence), when Sergeant Cuff himself made a mess of it? Sergeant Cuff!" repeated Betteredge, shaking his forefinger at me sternly. "The greatest policeman in England!"

"My mind is made up, my old friend. Even Sergeant Cuff doesn't daunt me. By-the-bye, I may want to speak to him, sooner or later. Have you heard anything of him lately?"

"The Sergeant won't help you, Mr. Franklin."

"Why not?"

"There has been an event, sir, in the police-circles, since you went away. The great Cuff has retired from business. He has got a little cottage at Dorking; and he's up to his eyes in the growing of roses. I have it in his own handwriting, Mr. Franklin. He has grown the white moss rose, without budding it on the dog-rose first. And Mr. Begbie the gardener is to go to Dorking, and own that the Sergeant has beaten him at last."

"It doesn't much matter," I said. "I must do without Sergeant Cuff's help. And I must trust to you, at starting."

It is likely enough that I spoke rather carelessly.

At any rate, Betteredge seemed to be piqued by something in the reply which I had just made to him. "You might trust to worse than me, Mr. Franklin--I can tell you that," he said a little sharply.

The tone in which he retorted, and a certain disturbance, after he had spoken, which I detected in his manner, suggested to me that he was possessed of some information which he hesitated to communicate.

"I expect you to help me," I said, "in picking up the fragments of evidence which Sergeant Cuff has left behind him. I know you can do that. Can you

do no more?"

"What more can you expect from me, sir?" asked Betteredge, with an appearance of the utmost humility.

"I expect more--from what you said just now."

"Mere boasting, Mr. Franklin," returned the old man obstinately. "Some people are born boasters, and they never get over it to their dying day. I'm one of them."

There was only one way to take with him. I appealed to his interest in Rachel, and his interest in me.

"Betteredge, would you be glad to hear that Rachel and I were good friends again?"

"I have served your family, sir, to mighty little purpose, if you doubt it!"

"Do you remember how Rachel treated me, before I left England?"

"As well as if it was yesterday! My lady herself wrote you a letter about it; and you were so good as to show the letter to me. It said that Miss Rachel was mortally offended with you, for the part you had taken in trying to recover her jewel. And neither my lady, nor you, nor anybody else could guess why.

"Quite true, Betteredge! And I come back from my travels, and find her mortally offended with me still. I knew that the Diamond was at the bottom of it, last year, and I know that the Diamond is at the bottom of it now. I have tried to speak to her, and she won't see me. I have tried to write to her, and she won't answer me. How, in Heaven's name, am I to clear the matter up? The chance of searching into the loss of the Moonstone, is the one chance of inquiry that Rachel herself has left me."

Those words evidently put the case before him, as he had not seen it yet. He asked a question which satisfied me that I had shaken him.

"There is no ill-feeling in this, Mr. Franklin, on your side--is there?"

"There was some anger," I answered, "when I left London. But that is all worn out now. I want to make Rachel come to an understanding with me--and I want nothing more."

"You don't feel any fear, sir--supposing you make any discoveries--in regard to what you may find out about Miss Rachel?"

I understood the jealous belief in his young mistress which prompted those words.

"I am as certain of her as you are," I answered. "The fullest disclosure of her secret will reveal nothing that can alter her place in your estimation, or in mine."

Betteredge's last-left scruples vanished at that.

"If I am doing wrong to help you, Mr. Franklin," he exclaimed, "all I can say is--I am as innocent of seeing it as the babe unborn! I can put you on the road to discovery, if you can only go on by yourself. You remember that poor girl of ours--Rosanna Spearman?"

"Of course!"

"You always thought she had some sort of confession in regard to this matter of the Moonstone, which she wanted to make to you?"

"I certainly couldn't account for her strange conduct in any other way."

"You may set that doubt at rest, Mr. Franklin, whenever you please."

It was my turn to come to a standstill now. I tried vainly, in the gathering darkness, to see his face. In the surprise of the moment, I asked a little impatiently what he meant.

"Steady, sir!" proceeded Betteredge. "I mean what I say. Rosanna Spearman left a sealed letter behind her--a letter addressed to YOU."

"Where is it?"

"In the possession of a friend of hers, at Cobb's Hole. You must have heard tell, when you were here last, sir, of Limping Lucy--a lame girl with a crutch."

"The fisherman's daughter?"

"The same, Mr. Franklin."

"Why wasn't the letter forwarded to me?"

"Limping Lucy has a will of her own, sir. She wouldn't give it into any hands but yours. And you had left England before I could write to you."

"Let's go back, Betteredge, and get it at once!"

"Too late, sir, to-night. They're great savers of candles along our coast; and they go to bed early at Cobb's Hole."

"Nonsense! We might get there in half an hour."

"You might, sir. And when you did get there, you would find the door locked. He pointed to a light, glimmering below us; and, at the same moment, I heard through the stillness of the evening the bubbling of a stream. 'There's the Farm, Mr. Franklin! Make yourself comfortable for to-night, and come to me to-morrow morning if you'll be so kind?'"

"You will go with me to the fisherman's cottage?"

"Yes, sir."

"Early?"

"As early, Mr. Franklin, as you like."

We descended the path that led to the Farm.

CHAPTER III

I have only the most indistinct recollection of what happened at Hotherstone's Farm.

I remember a hearty welcome; a prodigious supper, which would have fed a whole village in the East; a delightfully clean bedroom, with nothing in it to regret but that detestable product of the folly of our fore-fathers--a feather-bed; a restless night, with much kindling of matches, and many lightings of one little candle; and an immense sensation of relief when the sun rose, and there was a prospect of getting up.

It had been arranged over-night with Betteredge, that I was to call for him, on our way to Cobb's Hole, as early as I liked--which, interpreted by my impatience to get possession of the letter, meant as early as I could. Without waiting for breakfast at the Farm, I took a crust of bread in my hand, and set forth, in some doubt whether I should not surprise the excellent Betteredge in his bed. To my great relief he proved to be quite as excited about the coming event as I was. I found him ready, and waiting for me, with his stick in his hand.

"How are you this morning, Betteredge?"

"Very poorly, sir."

"Sorry to hear it. What do you complain of?"

"I complain of a new disease, Mr. Franklin, of my own inventing. I don't want to alarm you, but you're certain to catch it before the morning is out."

"The devil I am!"

"Do you feel an uncomfortable heat at the pit of your stomach, sir? and a nasty thumping at the top of your head? Ah! not yet? It will lay hold of you at Cobb's Hole, Mr. Franklin. I call it the detective-fever; and I first caught it in the company of Sergeant Cuff."

"Aye! aye! and the cure in this instance is to open Rosanna Spearman's letter, I suppose? Come along, and let's get it."

Early as it was, we found the fisherman's wife astir in her kitchen. On my

presentation by Betteredge, good Mrs. Yolland performed a social ceremony, strictly reserved (as I afterwards learnt) for strangers of distinction. She put a bottle of Dutch gin and a couple of clean pipes on the table, and opened the conversation by saying, "What news from London, sir?"

Before I could find an answer to this immensely comprehensive question, an apparition advanced towards me, out of a dark corner of the kitchen. A wan, wild, haggard girl, with remarkably beautiful hair, and with a fierce keenness in her eyes, came limping up on a crutch to the table at which I was sitting, and looked at me as if I was an object of mingled interest and horror, which it quite fascinated her to see.

"Mr. Betteredge," she said, without taking her eyes off me, "mention his name again, if you please."

"This gentleman's name," answered Betteredge (with a strong emphasis on GENTLEMAN), "is Mr. Franklin Blake."

The girl turned her back on me, and suddenly left the room. Good Mrs. Yolland--as I believe--made some apologies for her daughter's odd behaviour, and Betteredge (probably) translated them into polite English. I speak of this in complete uncertainty. My attention was absorbed in following the sound of the girl's crutch. Thump-thump, up the wooden stairs; thump-thump across the room above our heads; thump-thump down the stairs again--and there stood the apparition at the open door, with a letter in its hand, beckoning me out!

I left more apologies in course of delivery behind me, and followed this strange creature--limping on before me, faster and faster--down the slope of the beach. She led me behind some boats, out of sight and hearing of the few people in the fishing-village, and then stopped, and faced me for the first time.

"Stand there," she said, "I want to look at you."

There was no mistaking the expression on her face. I inspired her with the strongest emotions of abhorrence and disgust. Let me not be vain enough to say that no woman had ever looked at me in this manner before. I will only venture on the more modest assertion that no woman had ever let me perceive it yet. There is a limit to the length of the inspection which a man can endure, under certain circumstances. I attempted to direct Limping Lucy's attention to some less revolting object than my face.

"I think you have got a letter to give me," I began. "Is it the letter there, in your hand?"

"Say that again," was the only answer I received.

I repeated the words, like a good child learning its lesson.

"No," said the girl, speaking to herself, but keeping her eyes still mercilessly fixed on me. "I can't find out what she saw in his face. I can't guess what she heard in his voice." She suddenly looked away from me, and rested her head wearily on the top of her crutch. "Oh, my poor dear!" she said, in the first soft tones which had fallen from her, in my hearing. "Oh, my lost darling! what could you see in this man?" She lifted her head again fiercely, and looked at me once more. "Can you eat and drink?" she asked.

I did my best to preserve my gravity, and answered, "Yes."

"Can you sleep?"

"Yes."

"When you see a poor girl in service, do you feel no remorse?"

"Certainly not. Why should I?"

She abruptly thrust the letter (as the phrase is) into my face.

"Take it!" she exclaimed furiously. "I never set eyes on you before. God Almighty forbid I should ever set eyes on you again."

With those parting words she limped away from me at the top of her speed. The one interpretation that I could put on her conduct has, no doubt, been anticipated by everybody. I could only suppose that she was mad.

Having reached that inevitable conclusion, I turned to the more interesting object of investigation which was presented to me by Rosanna Spearman's letter. The address was written as follows:--"For Franklin Blake, Esq. To be given into his own hands (and not to be trusted to any one else), by Lucy Yolland."

I broke the seal. The envelope contained a letter: and this, in its turn, contained a slip of paper. I read the letter first:--

"Sir,--If you are curious to know the meaning of my behaviour to you, whilst you were staying in the house of my mistress, Lady Verinder, do what you are told to do in the memorandum enclosed with this--and do it without any person being present to overlook you. Your humble servant,

"ROSANNA SPEARMAN."

I turned to the slip of paper next. Here is the literal copy of it, word for word:

"Memorandum:--To go to the Shivering Sand at the turn of the tide. To walk out on the South Spit, until I get the South Spit Beacon, and the flagstaff at the Coast-guard station above Cobb's Hole in a line together. To lay down on the rocks, a stick, or any straight thing to guide my hand, exactly in the line of the beacon and the flagstaff. To take care, in doing this, that one end of the stick shall be at the edge of the rocks, on the side of them which overlooks the quicksand. To feel along the stick, among the sea-weed (beginning from the end of the stick which points towards the beacon), for the Chain. To run my hand along the Chain, when found, until I come to the part of it which stretches over the edge of the rocks, down into the quicksand. AND THEN TO PULL THE CHAIN."

Just as I had read the last words--underlined in the original--I heard the voice of Betteredge behind me. The inventor of the detective-fever had completely succumbed to that irresistible malady. "I can't stand it any longer, Mr. Franklin. What does her letter say? For mercy's sake, sir, tell us, what does her letter say?"

I handed him the letter, and the memorandum. He read the first without appearing to be much interested in it. But the second--the memorandum--produced a strong impression on him.

"The Sergeant said it!" cried Betteredge. "From first to last, sir, the Sergeant said she had got a memorandum of the hiding-place. And here it is! Lord save us, Mr. Franklin, here is the secret that puzzled everybody, from the great Cuff downwards, ready and waiting, as one may say, to show itself to YOU! It's the ebb now, sir, as anybody may see for themselves. How long will it be till the turn of the tide?" He looked up, and observed a lad at work, at some little distance from us, mending a net. "Tammie Bright!" he shouted at the top of his voice.

"I hear you!" Tammie shouted back.

"When's the turn of the tide?"

"In an hour's time."

We both looked at our watches.

"We can go round by the coast, Mr. Franklin," said Betteredge; "and get to the quicksand in that way with plenty of time to spare. What do you say, sir?"

"Come along!"

On our way to the Shivering Sand, I applied to Betteredge to revive my memory of events (as affecting Rosanna Spearman) at the period of Sergeant Cuff's inquiry. With my old friend's help, I soon had the succession of circumstances clearly registered in my mind. Rosanna's journey to Frizinghall, when the whole household believed her to be ill in her own room--Rosanna's mysterious employment of the night-time with her door locked, and her candle burning till the morning--Rosanna's suspicious purchase of the japanned tin case, and the two dog's chains from Mrs. Yolland--the Sergeant's positive conviction that Rosanna had hidden something at the Shivering Sand, and the Sergeant's absolute ignorance as to what that something might be--all these strange results of the abortive inquiry into the loss of the Moonstone were clearly present to me again, when we reached the quicksand, and walked out together on the low ledge of rocks called the South Spit.

With Betteredge's help, I soon stood in the right position to see the Beacon and the Coast-guard flagstaff in a line together. Following the memorandum as our guide, we next laid my stick in the necessary direction, as neatly as we could, on the uneven surface of the rocks. And then we looked at our watches once more.

It wanted nearly twenty minutes yet of the turn of the tide. I suggested waiting through this interval on the beach, instead of on the wet and slippery surface of the rocks. Having reached the dry sand, I prepared to sit down; and, greatly to my surprise, Betteredge prepared to leave me.

"What are you going away for?" I asked.

"Look at the letter again, sir, and you will see."

A glance at the letter reminded me that I was charged, when I made my discovery, to make it alone.

"It's hard enough for me to leave you, at such a time as this," said Betteredge. "But she died a dreadful death, poor soul--and I feel a kind of call on me, Mr. Franklin, to humour that fancy of hers. Besides," he added, confidentially, "there's nothing in the letter against your letting out the secret afterwards. I'll hang about in the fir plantation, and wait till you pick me up. Don't be longer than you can help, sir. The detective-fever isn't an easy disease to deal with, under THESE circumstances."

With that parting caution, he left me.

The interval of expectation, short as it was when reckoned by the measure of time, assumed formidable proportions when reckoned by the measure of suspense. This was one of the occasions on which the invaluable habit of smoking becomes especially precious and consolatory. I lit a cigar, and sat down on the slope of the beach.

The sunlight poured its unclouded beauty on every object that I could see. The exquisite freshness of the air made the mere act of living and breathing a luxury. Even the lonely little bay welcomed the morning with a show of cheerfulness; and the bared wet surface of the quicksand itself, glittering with a golden brightness, hid the horror of its false brown face under a passing smile. It was the finest day I had seen since my return to England.

The turn of the tide came, before my cigar was finished. I saw the preliminary heaving of the Sand, and then the awful shiver that crept over its surface--as if some spirit of terror lived and moved and shuddered in the fathomless deeps beneath. I threw away my cigar, and went back again to the rocks.

My directions in the memorandum instructed me to feel along the line traced by the stick, beginning with the end which was nearest to the beacon.

I advanced, in this manner, more than half way along the stick, without encountering anything but the edges of the rocks. An inch or two further on, however, my patience was rewarded. In a narrow little fissure, just within reach of my forefinger, I felt the chain. Attempting, next, to follow it, by touch, in the direction of the quicksand, I found my progress stopped by a thick growth of seaweed--which had fastened itself into the fissure, no doubt, in the time that had elapsed since Rosanna Spearman had chosen her hiding-place.

It was equally impossible to pull up the seaweed, or to force my hand

through it. After marking the spot indicated by the end of the stick which was placed nearest to the quicksand, I determined to pursue the search for the chain on a plan of my own. My idea was to "sound" immediately under the rocks, on the chance of recovering the lost trace of the chain at the point at which it entered the sand. I took up the stick, and knelt down on the brink of the South Spit.

In this position, my face was within a few feet of the surface of the quicksand. The sight of it so near me, still disturbed at intervals by its hideous shivering fit, shook my nerves for the moment. A horrible fancy that the dead woman might appear on the scene of her suicide, to assist my search--an unutterable dread of seeing her rise through the heaving surface of the sand, and point to the place--forced itself into my mind, and turned me cold in the warm sunlight. I own I closed my eyes at the moment when the point of the stick first entered the quicksand.

The instant afterwards, before the stick could have been submerged more than a few inches, I was free from the hold of my own superstitious terror, and was throbbing with excitement from head to foot. Sounding blindfold, at my first attempt--at that first attempt I had sounded right! The stick struck the chain.

Taking a firm hold of the roots of the seaweed with my left hand, I laid myself down over the brink, and felt with my right hand under the overhanging edges of the rock. My right hand found the chain.

I drew it up without the slightest difficulty. And there was the japanned tin case fastened to the end of it.

The action of the water had so rusted the chain, that it was impossible for me to unfasten it from the hasp which attached it to the case. Putting the case between my knees and exerting my utmost strength, I contrived to draw off the cover. Some white substance filled the whole interior when I looked in. I put in my hand, and found it to be linen.

In drawing out the linen, I also drew out a letter crumpled up with it. After looking at the direction, and discovering that it bore my name, I put the letter in my pocket, and completely removed the linen. It came out in a thick roll, moulded, of course, to the shape of the case in which it had been so long confined, and perfectly preserved from any injury by the sea.

I carried the linen to the dry sand of the beach, and there unrolled and smoothed it out. There was no mistaking it as an article of dress. It was a

nightgown.

The uppermost side, when I spread it out, presented to view innumerable folds and creases, and nothing more. I tried the undermost side, next--and instantly discovered the smear of the paint from the door of Rachel's boudoir!

My eyes remained riveted on the stain, and my mind took me back at a leap from present to past. The very words of Sergeant Cuff recurred to me, as if the man himself was at my side again, pointing to the unanswerable inference which he drew from the smear on the door.

"Find out whether there is any article of dress in this house with the stain of paint on it. Find out who that dress belongs to. Find out how the person can account for having been in the room, and smeared the paint between midnight and three in the morning. If the person can't satisfy you, you haven't far to look for the hand that took the Diamond."

One after another those words travelled over my memory, repeating themselves again and again with a wearisome, mechanical reiteration. I was roused from what felt like a trance of many hours--from what was really, no doubt, the pause of a few moments only--by a voice calling to me. I looked up, and saw that Betteredge's patience had failed him at last. He was just visible between the sandhills, returning to the beach.

The old man's appearance recalled me, the moment I perceived it, to my sense of present things, and reminded me that the inquiry which I had pursued thus far still remained incomplete. I had discovered the smear on the nightgown. To whom did the nightgown belong?

My first impulse was to consult the letter in my pocket--the letter which I had found in the case.

As I raised my hand to take it out, I remembered that there was a shorter way to discovery than this. The nightgown itself would reveal the truth, for, in all probability, the nightgown was marked with its owner's name.

I took it up from the sand, and looked for the mark.

I found the mark, and read--MY OWN NAME.

There were the familiar letters which told me that the nightgown was mine. I looked up from them. There was the sun; there were the glittering waters of

the bay; there was old Betteredge, advancing nearer and nearer to me. I looked back again at the letters. My own name. Plainly confronting me--my own name.

"If time, pains, and money can do it, I will lay my hand on the thief who took the Moonstone."--I had left London, with those words on my lips. I had penetrated the secret which the quicksand had kept from every other living creature. And, on the unanswerable evidence of the paint-stain, I had discovered Myself as the Thief.

CHAPTER IV

I have not a word to say about my own sensations.

My impression is that the shock inflicted on me completely suspended my thinking and feeling power. I certainly could not have known what I was about when Betteredge joined me--for I have it on his authority that I laughed, when he asked what was the matter, and putting the nightgown into his hands, told him to read the riddle for himself.

Of what was said between us on the beach, I have not the faintest recollection. The first place in which I can now see myself again plainly is the plantation of firs. Betteredge and I are walking back together to the house; and Betteredge is telling me that I shall be able to face it, and he will be able to face it, when we have had a glass of grog.

The scene shifts from the plantation, to Betteredge's little sitting-room. My resolution not to enter Rachel's house is forgotten. I feel gratefully the coolness and shadiness and quiet of the room. I drink the grog (a perfectly new luxury to me, at that time of day), which my good old friend mixes with icy-cold water from the well. Under any other circumstances, the drink would simply stupefy me. As things are, it strings up my nerves. I begin to "face it," as Betteredge has predicted. And Betteredge, on his side, begins to "face it," too.

The picture which I am now presenting of myself, will, I suspect, be thought a very strange one, to say the least of it. Placed in a situation which may, I think, be described as entirely without parallel, what is the first proceeding to which I resort? Do I seclude myself from all human society? Do I set my mind to analyse the abominable impossibility which, nevertheless, confronts me as an undeniable fact? Do I hurry back to London by the first train to consult the highest authorities, and to set a searching inquiry on foot immediately? No. I accept the shelter of a house which I had resolved never to degrade myself by entering again; and I sit, tippling spirits and water in the company of an old servant, at ten o'clock in the morning. Is this the conduct that might have been expected from a man placed in my horrible position? I can only answer that the sight of old Betteredge's familiar face was an inexpressible comfort to me, and that the drinking of old Betteredge's grog helped me, as I believe nothing else would have helped me,

in the state of complete bodily and mental prostration into which I had fallen. I can only offer this excuse for myself; and I can only admire that invariable preservation of dignity, and that strictly logical consistency of conduct which distinguish every man and woman who may read these lines, in every emergency of their lives from the cradle to the grave.

"Now, Mr. Franklin, there's one thing certain, at any rate," said Betteredge, throwing the nightgown down on the table between us, and pointing to it as if it was a living creature that could hear him. "HE'S a liar, to begin with."

This comforting view of the matter was not the view that presented itself to my mind.

"I am as innocent of all knowledge of having taken the Diamond as you are," I said. "But there is the witness against me! The paint on the nightgown, and the name on the nightgown are facts."

Betteredge lifted my glass, and put it persuasively into my hand.

"Facts?" he repeated. "Take a drop more grog, Mr. Franklin, and you'll get over the weakness of believing in facts! Foul play, sir!" he continued, dropping his voice confidentially. "That is how I read the riddle. Foul play somewhere--and you and I must find it out. Was there nothing else in the tin case, when you put your hand into it?"

The question instantly reminded me of the letter in my pocket. I took it out, and opened it. It was a letter of many pages, closely written. I looked impatiently for the signature at the end. "Rosanna Spearman."

As I read the name, a sudden remembrance illuminated my mind, and a sudden suspicion rose out of the new light.

"Stop!" I exclaimed. "Rosanna Spearman came to my aunt out of a reformatory? Rosanna Spearman had once been a thief?"

"There's no denying that, Mr. Franklin. What of it now, if you please?"

"What of it now? How do we know she may not have stolen the Diamond after all? How do we know she may not have smeared my nightgown purposely with the paint?"

Betteredge laid his hand on my arm, and stopped me before I could say any more.

"You will be cleared of this, Mr. Franklin, beyond all doubt. But I hope you won't be cleared in THAT way. See what the letter says, sir. In justice to the girl's memory, see what it says."

I felt the earnestness with which he spoke--felt it as a friendly rebuke to me. "You shall form your own judgment on her letter," I said. "I will read it out."

I began--and read these lines:

"Sir--I have something to own to you. A confession which means much misery, may sometimes be made in very few words. This confession can be made in three words. I love you."

The letter dropped from my hand. I looked at Betteredge. "In the name of Heaven," I said, "what does it mean?"

He seemed to shrink from answering the question.

"You and Limping Lucy were alone together this morning, sir," he said. "Did she say nothing about Rosanna Spearman?"

"She never even mentioned Rosanna Spearman's name."

"Please to go back to the letter, Mr. Franklin. I tell you plainly, I can't find it in my heart to distress you, after what you have had to bear already. Let her speak for herself, sir. And get on with your grog. For your own sake, get on with your grog."

I resumed the reading of the letter.

"It would be very disgraceful to me to tell you this, if I was a living woman when you read it. I shall be dead and gone, sir, when you find my letter. It is that which makes me bold. Not even my grave will be left to tell of me. I may own the truth--with the quicksand waiting to hide me when the words are written.

"Besides, you will find your nightgown in my hiding-place, with the smear of the paint on it; and you will want to know how it came to be hidden by me? and why I said nothing to you about it in my life-time? I have only one reason to give. I did these strange things, because I loved you.

"I won't trouble you with much about myself, or my life, before you came to

my lady's house. Lady Verinder took me out of a reformatory. I had gone to the reformatory from the prison. I was put in the prison, because I was a thief. I was a thief, because my mother went on the streets when I was quite a little girl. My mother went on the streets, because the gentleman who was my father deserted her. There is no need to tell such a common story as this, at any length. It is told quite often enough in the newspapers.

"Lady Verinder was very kind to me, and Mr. Betteredge was very kind to me. Those two, and the matron at the reformatory, are the only good people I have ever met with in all my life. I might have got on in my place--not happily--but I might have got on, if you had not come visiting. I don't blame you, sir. It's my fault--all my fault.

"Do you remember when you came out on us from among the sand hills, that morning, looking for Mr. Betteredge? You were like a prince in a fairy-story. You were like a lover in a dream. You were the most adorable human creature I had ever seen. Something that felt like the happy life I had never led yet, leapt up in me at the instant I set eyes on you. Don't laugh at this if you can help it. Oh, if I could only make you feel how serious it is to ME!

"I went back to the house, and wrote your name and mine in my work-box, and drew a true lovers' knot under them. Then, some devil--no, I ought to say some good angel--whispered to me, 'Go and look in the glass.' The glass told me--never mind what. I was too foolish to take the warning. I went on getting fonder and fonder of you, just as if I was a lady in your own rank of life, and the most beautiful creature your eyes ever rested on. I tried--oh, dear, how I tried--to get you to look at me. If you had known how I used to cry at night with the misery and the mortification of your never taking any notice of me, you would have pitied me perhaps, and have given me a look now and then to live on.

"It would have been no very kind look, perhaps, if you had known how I hated Miss Rachel. I believe I found out you were in love with her, before you knew it yourself. She used to give you roses to wear in your button-hole. Ah, Mr. Franklin, you wore my roses oftener than either you or she thought! The only comfort I had at that time, was putting my rose secretly in your glass of water, in place of hers--and then throwing her rose away.

"If she had been really as pretty as you thought her, I might have borne it better. No; I believe I should have been more spiteful against her still. Suppose you put Miss Rachel into a servant's dress, and took her ornaments off? I don't know what is the use of my writing in this way. It can't be denied that she had a bad figure; she was too thin. But who can tell

what the men like? And young ladies may behave in a manner which would cost a servant her place. It's no business of mine. I can't expect you to read my letter, if I write it in this way. But it does stir one up to hear Miss Rachel called pretty, when one knows all the time that it's her dress does it, and her confidence in herself.

"Try not to lose patience with me, sir. I will get on as fast as I can to the time which is sure to interest you--the time when the Diamond was lost.

"But there is one thing which I have got it on my mind to tell you first.

"My life was not a very hard life to bear, while I was a thief. It was only when they had taught me at the reformatory to feel my own degradation, and to try for better things, that the days grew long and weary. Thoughts of the future forced themselves on me now. I felt the dreadful reproach that honest people--even the kindest of honest people--were to me in themselves. A heart-breaking sensation of loneliness kept with me, go where I might, and do what I might, and see what persons I might. It was my duty, I know, to try and get on with my fellow-servants in my new place. Somehow, I couldn't make friends with them. They looked (or I thought they looked) as if they suspected what I had been. I don't regret, far from it, having been roused to make the effort to be a reformed woman--but, indeed, indeed it was a weary life. You had come across it like a beam of sunshine at first--and then you too failed me. I was mad enough to love you; and I couldn't even attract your notice. There was great misery--there really was great misery in that.

"Now I am coming to what I wanted to tell you. In those days of bitterness, I went two or three times, when it was my turn to go out, to my favourite place--the beach above the Shivering Sand. And I said to myself, 'I think it will end here. When I can bear it no longer, I think it will end here.' You will understand, sir, that the place had laid a kind of spell on me before you came. I had always had a notion that something would happen to me at the quicksand. But I had never looked at it, with the thought of its being the means of my making away with myself, till the time came of which I am now writing. Then I did think that here was a place which would end all my troubles for me in a moment or two--and hide me for ever afterwards.

"This is all I have to say about myself, reckoning from the morning when I first saw you, to the morning when the alarm was raised in the house that the Diamond was lost.

"I was so aggravated by the foolish talk among the women servants, all wondering who was to be suspected first; and I was so angry with you

(knowing no better at that time) for the pains you took in hunting for the jewel, and sending for the police, that I kept as much as possible away by myself, until later in the day, when the officer from Frizinghall came to the house.

"Mr. Seegrave began, as you may remember, by setting a guard on the women's bedrooms; and the women all followed him up-stairs in a rage, to know what he meant by the insult he had put on them. I went with the rest, because if I had done anything different from the rest, Mr. Seegrave was the sort of man who would have suspected me directly. We found him in Miss Rachel's room. He told us he wouldn't have a lot of women there; and he pointed to the smear on the painted door, and said some of our petticoats had done the mischief, and sent us all down-stairs again.

"After leaving Miss Rachel's room, I stopped a moment on one of the landings, by myself, to see if I had got the paint-stain by any chance on MY gown. Penelope Betteredge (the only one of the women with whom I was on friendly terms) passed, and noticed what I was about.

"'You needn't trouble yourself, Rosanna,' she said. 'The paint on Miss Rachel's door has been dry for hours. If Mr. Seegrave hadn't set a watch on our bedrooms, I might have told him as much. I don't know what you think--I was never so insulted before in my life!'

"Penelope was a hot-tempered girl. I quieted her, and brought her back to what she had said about the paint on the door having been dry for hours.

"'How do you know that?' I asked.

"'I was with Miss Rachel, and Mr. Franklin, all yesterday morning,' Penelope said, 'mixing the colours, while they finished the door. I heard Miss Rachel ask whether the door would be dry that evening, in time for the birthday company to see it. And Mr. Franklin shook his head, and said it wouldn't be dry in less than twelve hours. It was long past luncheon-time--it was three o'clock before they had done. What does your arithmetic say, Rosanna? Mine says the door was dry by three this morning.'

"'Did some of the ladies go up-stairs yesterday evening to see it?' I asked. 'I thought I heard Miss Rachel warning them to keep clear of the door.'

"'None of the ladies made the smear,' Penelope answered. 'I left Miss Rachel in bed at twelve last night. And I noticed the door, and there was nothing wrong with it then.'

"'Oughtn't you to mention this to Mr. Seegrave, Penelope?'

"'I wouldn't say a word to help Mr. Seegrave for anything that could be offered to me!'

"She went to her work, and I went to mine."

"My work, sir, was to make your bed, and to put your room tidy. It was the happiest hour I had in the whole day. I used to kiss the pillow on which your head had rested all night. No matter who has done it since, you have never had your clothes folded as nicely as I folded them for you. Of all the little knick-knacks in your dressing-case, there wasn't one that had so much as a speck on it. You never noticed it, any more than you noticed me. I beg your pardon; I am forgetting myself. I will make haste, and go on again.

"Well, I went in that morning to do my work in your room. There was your nightgown tossed across the bed, just as you had thrown it off. I took it up to fold it--and I saw the stain of the paint from Miss Rachel's door!

"I was so startled by the discovery that I ran out with the nightgown in my hand, and made for the back stairs, and locked myself into my own room, to look at it in a place where nobody could intrude and interrupt me.

"As soon as I got my breath again, I called to mind my talk with Penelope, and I said to myself, 'Here's the proof that he was in Miss Rachel's sitting-room between twelve last night, and three this morning!'

"I shall not tell you in plain words what was the first suspicion that crossed my mind, when I had made that discovery. You would only be angry--and, if you were angry, you might tear my letter up and read no more of it.

"Let it be enough, if you please, to say only this. After thinking it over to the best of my ability, I made it out that the thing wasn't likely, for a reason that I will tell you. If you had been in Miss Rachel's sitting-room, at that time of night, with Miss Rachel's knowledge (and if you had been foolish enough to forget to take care of the wet door) SHE would have reminded you--SHE would never have let you carry away such a witness against her, as the witness I was looking at now! At the same time, I own I was not completely certain in my own mind that I had proved my own suspicion to be wrong. You will not have forgotten that I have owned to hating Miss Rachel. Try to think, if you can, that there was a little of that hatred in all this. It ended in

my determining to keep the nightgown, and to wait, and watch, and see what use I might make of it. At that time, please to remember, not the ghost of an idea entered my head that you had stolen the Diamond."

There, I broke off in the reading of the letter for the second time.

I had read those portions of the miserable woman's confession which related to myself, with unaffected surprise, and, I can honestly add, with sincere distress. I had regretted, truly regretted, the aspersion which I had thoughtlessly cast on her memory, before I had seen a line of her letter. But when I had advanced as far as the passage which is quoted above, I own I felt my mind growing bitterer and bitterer against Rosanna Spearman as I went on. "Read the rest for yourself," I said, handing the letter to Betteredge across the table. "If there is anything in it that I must look at, you can tell me as you go on."

"I understand you, Mr. Franklin," he answered. "It's natural, sir, in YOU. And, God help us all!" he added, in a lower tone, "it's no less natural in HER."

I proceed to copy the continuation of the letter from the original, in my own possession:--

"Having determined to keep the nightgown, and to see what use my love, or my revenge (I hardly know which) could turn it to in the future, the next thing to discover was how to keep it without the risk of being found out.

"There was only one way--to make another nightgown exactly like it, before Saturday came, and brought the laundry-woman and her inventory to the house.

"I was afraid to put it off till next day (the Friday); being in doubt lest some accident might happen in the interval. I determined to make the new nightgown on that same day (the Thursday), while I could count, if I played my cards properly, on having my time to myself. The first thing to do (after locking up your nightgown in my drawer) was to go back to your bed-room--not so much to put it to rights (Penelope would have done that for me, if I had asked her) as to find out whether you had smeared off any of the paint-stain from your nightgown, on the bed, or on any piece of furniture in the room.

"I examined everything narrowly, and at last, I found a few streaks of the paint on the inside of your dressing-gown--not the linen dressing-gown you

usually wore in that summer season, but a flannel dressing-gown which you had with you also. I suppose you felt chilly after walking to and fro in nothing but your nightdress, and put on the warmest thing you could find. At any rate, there were the stains, just visible, on the inside of the dressing-gown. I easily got rid of these by scraping away the stuff of the flannel. This done, the only proof left against you was the proof locked up in my drawer.

"I had just finished your room when I was sent for to be questioned by Mr. Seegrave, along with the rest of the servants. Next came the examination of all our boxes. And then followed the most extraordinary event of the day--to ME--since I had found the paint on your nightgown. This event came out of the second questioning of Penelope Betteredge by Superintendent Seegrave.

"Penelope returned to us quite beside herself with rage at the manner in which Mr. Seegrave had treated her. He had hinted, beyond the possibility of mistaking him, that he suspected her of being the thief. We were all equally astonished at hearing this, and we all asked, Why?

"'Because the Diamond was in Miss Rachel's sitting-room," Penelope answered. "And because I was the last person in the sitting-room at night!"

"Almost before the words had left her lips, I remembered that another person had been in the sitting-room later than Penelope. That person was yourself. My head whirled round, and my thoughts were in dreadful confusion. In the midst of it all, something in my mind whispered to me that the smear on your nightgown might have a meaning entirely different to the meaning which I had given to it up to that time. 'If the last person who was in the room is the person to be suspected,' I thought to myself, 'the thief is not Penelope, but Mr. Franklin Blake!'

"In the case of any other gentleman, I believe I should have been ashamed of suspecting him of theft, almost as soon as the suspicion had passed through my mind.

"But the bare thought that YOU had let yourself down to my level, and that I, in possessing myself of your nightgown, had also possessed myself of the means of shielding you from being discovered, and disgraced for life--I say, sir, the bare thought of this seemed to open such a chance before me of winning your good will, that I passed blindfold, as one may say, from suspecting to believing. I made up my mind, on the spot, that you had shown yourself the busiest of anybody in fetching the police, as a blind to deceive us all; and that the hand which had taken Miss Rachel's jewel could by no possibility be any other hand than yours.

"The excitement of this new discovery of mine must, I think, have turned my head for a while. I felt such a devouring eagerness to see you--to try you with a word or two about the Diamond, and to MAKE you look at me, and speak to me, in that way--that I put my hair tidy, and made myself as nice as I could, and went to you boldly in the library where I knew you were writing.

"You had left one of your rings up-stairs, which made as good an excuse for my intrusion as I could have desired. But, oh, sir! if you have ever loved, you will understand how it was that all my courage cooled, when I walked into the room, and found myself in your presence. And then, you looked up at me so coldly, and you thanked me for finding your ring in such an indifferent manner, that my knees trembled under me, and I felt as if I should drop on the floor at your feet. When you had thanked me, you looked back, if you remember, at your writing. I was so mortified at being treated in this way, that I plucked up spirit enough to speak. I said, 'This is a strange thing about the Diamond, sir.' And you looked up again, and said, 'Yes, it is!' You spoke civilly (I can't deny that); but still you kept a distance--a cruel distance between us. Believing, as I did, that you had got the lost Diamond hidden about you, while you were speaking, your coolness so provoked me that I got bold enough, in the heat of the moment, to give you a hint. I said, 'They will never find the Diamond, sir, will they? No! nor the person who took it--I'll answer for that.' I nodded, and smiled at you, as much as to say, 'I know!' THIS time, you looked up at me with something like interest in your eyes; and I felt that a few more words on your side and mine might bring out the truth. Just at that moment, Mr. Betteredge spoilt it all by coming to the door. I knew his footstep, and I also knew that it was against his rules for me to be in the library at that time of day--let alone being there along with you. I had only just time to get out of my own accord, before he could come in and tell me to go. I was angry and disappointed; but I was not entirely without hope for all that. The ice, you see, was broken between us--and I thought I would take care, on the next occasion, that Mr. Betteredge was out of the way.

"When I got back to the servants' hall, the bell was going for our dinner. Afternoon already! and the materials for making the new nightgown were still to be got! There was but one chance of getting them. I shammed ill at dinner; and so secured the whole of the interval from then till tea-time to my own use.

"What I was about, while the household believed me to be lying down in my own room; and how I spent the night, after shamming ill again at tea-time,

and having been sent up to bed, there is no need to tell you. Sergeant Cuff discovered that much, if he discovered nothing more. And I can guess how. I was detected (though I kept my veil down) in the draper's shop at Frizinghall. There was a glass in front of me, at the counter where I was buying the longcloth; and--in that glass--I saw one of the shopmen point to my shoulder and whisper to another. At night again, when I was secretly at work, locked into my room, I heard the breathing of the women servants who suspected me, outside my door.

"It didn't matter then; it doesn't matter now. On the Friday morning, hours before Sergeant Cuff entered the house, there was the new nightgown--to make up your number in place of the nightgown that I had got--made, wrung out, dried, ironed, marked, and folded as the laundry woman folded all the others, safe in your drawer. There was no fear (if the linen in the house was examined) of the newness of the nightgown betraying me. All your underclothing had been renewed, when you came to our house--I suppose on your return home from foreign parts.

"The next thing was the arrival of Sergeant Cuff; and the next great surprise was the announcement of what HE thought about the smear on the door.

"I had believed you to be guilty (as I have owned), more because I wanted you to be guilty than for any other reason. And now, the Sergeant had come round by a totally different way to the same conclusion (respecting the nightgown) as mine! And I had got the dress that was the only proof against you! And not a living creature knew it--yourself included! I am afraid to tell you how I felt when I called these things to mind--you would hate my memory for ever afterwards."

At that place, Betteredge looked up from the letter.

"Not a glimmer of light so far, Mr. Franklin," said the old man, taking off his heavy tortoiseshell spectacles, and pushing Rosanna Spearman's confession a little away from him. "Have you come to any conclusion, sir, in your own mind, while I have been reading?"

"Finish the letter first, Betteredge; there may be something to enlighten us at the end of it. I shall have a word or two to say to you after that."

"Very good, sir. I'll just rest my eyes, and then I'll go on again. In the meantime, Mr. Franklin--I don't want to hurry you--but would you mind telling me, in one word, whether you see your way out of this dreadful mess yet?"

"I see my way back to London," I said, "to consult Mr. Bruff. If he can't help me----"

"Yes, sir?"

"And if the Sergeant won't leave his retirement at Dorking----"

"He won't, Mr. Franklin!"

"Then, Betteredge--as far as I can see now--I am at the end of my resources. After Mr. Bruff and the Sergeant, I don't know of a living creature who can be of the slightest use to me."

As the words passed my lips, some person outside knocked at the door of the room.

Betteredge looked surprised as well as annoyed by the interruption.

"Come in," he called out, irritably, "whoever you are!"

The door opened, and there entered to us, quietly, the most remarkable-looking man that I had ever seen. Judging him by his figure and his movements, he was still young. Judging him by his face, and comparing him with Betteredge, he looked the elder of the two. His complexion was of a gipsy darkness; his fleshless cheeks had fallen into deep hollows, over which the bone projected like a pent-house. His nose presented the fine shape and modelling so often found among the ancient people of the East, so seldom visible among the newer races of the West. His forehead rose high and straight from the brow. His marks and wrinkles were innumerable. From this strange face, eyes, stranger still, of the softest brown--eyes dreamy and mournful, and deeply sunk in their orbits--looked out at you, and (in my case, at least) took your attention captive at their will. Add to this a quantity of thick closely-curling hair, which, by some freak of Nature, had lost its colour in the most startlingly partial and capricious manner. Over the top of his head it was still of the deep black which was its natural colour. Round the sides of his head--without the slightest gradation of grey to break the force of the extraordinary contrast--it had turned completely white. The line between the two colours preserved no sort of regularity. At one place, the white hair ran up into the black; at another, the black hair ran down into the white. I looked at the man with a curiosity which, I am ashamed to say, I found it quite impossible to control. His soft brown eyes looked back at me gently; and he met my involuntary rudeness in staring at him, with an

apology which I was conscious that I had not deserved.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I had no idea that Mr. Betteredge was engaged." He took a slip of paper from his pocket, and handed it to Betteredge. "The list for next week," he said. His eyes just rested on me again--and he left the room as quietly as he had entered it.

"Who is that?" I asked.

"Mr. Candy's assistant," said Betteredge. "By-the-bye, Mr. Franklin, you will be sorry to hear that the little doctor has never recovered that illness he caught, going home from the birthday dinner. He's pretty well in health; but he lost his memory in the fever, and he has never recovered more than the wreck of it since. The work all falls on his assistant. Not much of it now, except among the poor. THEY can't help themselves, you know. THEY must put up with the man with the piebald hair, and the gipsy complexion--or they would get no doctoring at all."

"You don't seem to like him, Betteredge?"

"Nobody likes him, sir."

"Why is he so unpopular?"

"Well, Mr. Franklin, his appearance is against him, to begin with. And then there's a story that Mr. Candy took him with a very doubtful character. Nobody knows who he is--and he hasn't a friend in the place. How can you expect one to like him, after that?"

"Quite impossible, of course! May I ask what he wanted with you, when he gave you that bit of paper?"

"Only to bring me the weekly list of the sick people about here, sir, who stand in need of a little wine. My lady always had a regular distribution of good sound port and sherry among the infirm poor; and Miss Rachel wishes the custom to be kept up. Times have changed! times have changed! I remember when Mr. Candy himself brought the list to my mistress. Now it's Mr. Candy's assistant who brings the list to me. I'll go on with the letter, if you will allow me, sir," said Betteredge, drawing Rosanna Spearman's confession back to him. "It isn't lively reading, I grant you. But, there! it keeps me from getting sour with thinking of the past." He put on his spectacles, and wagged his head gloomily. "There's a bottom of good sense, Mr. Franklin, in our conduct to our mothers, when they first start us on the

journey of life. We are all of us more or less unwilling to be brought into the world. And we are all of us right."

Mr. Candy's assistant had produced too strong an impression on me to be immediately dismissed from my thoughts. I passed over the last unanswerable utterance of the Betteredge philosophy; and returned to the subject of the man with the piebald hair.

"What is his name?" I asked.

"As ugly a name as need be," Betteredge answered gruffly. "Ezra Jennings."

CHAPTER V

Having told me the name of Mr. Candy's assistant, Betteredge appeared to think that we had wasted enough of our time on an insignificant subject. He resumed the perusal of Rosanna Spearman's letter.

On my side, I sat at the window, waiting until he had done. Little by little, the impression produced on me by Ezra Jennings--it seemed perfectly unaccountable, in such a situation as mine, that any human being should have produced an impression on me at all!--faded from my mind. My thoughts flowed back into their former channel. Once more, I forced myself to look my own incredible position resolutely in the face. Once more, I reviewed in my own mind the course which I had at last summoned composure enough to plan out for the future.

To go back to London that day; to put the whole case before Mr. Bruff; and, last and most important, to obtain (no matter by what means or at what sacrifice) a personal interview with Rachel--this was my plan of action, so far as I was capable of forming it at the time. There was more than an hour still to spare before the train started. And there was the bare chance that Betteredge might discover something in the unread portion of Rosanna Spearman's letter, which it might be useful for me to know before I left the house in which the Diamond had been lost. For that chance I was now waiting.

The letter ended in these terms:

"You have no need to be angry, Mr. Franklin, even if I did feel some little triumph at knowing that I held all your prospects in life in my own hands. Anxieties and fears soon came back to me. With the view Sergeant Cuff took of the loss of the Diamond, he would be sure to end in examining our linen and our dresses. There was no place in my room--there was no place in the house--which I could feel satisfied would be safe from him. How to hide the nightgown so that not even the Sergeant could find it? and how to do that without losing one moment of precious time?--these were not easy questions to answer. My uncertainties ended in my taking a way that may make you laugh. I undressed, and put the nightgown on me. You had worn it--and I had another little moment of pleasure in wearing it after you.

"The next news that reached us in the servants' hall showed that I had not made sure of the nightgown a moment too soon. Sergeant Cuff wanted to see

the washing-book.

"I found it, and took it to him in my lady's sitting-room. The Sergeant and I had come across each other more than once in former days. I was certain he would know me again--and I was NOT certain of what he might do when he found me employed as servant in a house in which a valuable jewel had been lost. In this suspense, I felt it would be a relief to me to get the meeting between us over, and to know the worst of it at once.

"He looked at me as if I was a stranger, when I handed him the washing-book; and he was very specially polite in thanking me for bringing it. I thought those were both bad signs. There was no knowing what he might say of me behind my back; there was no knowing how soon I might not find myself taken in custody on suspicion, and searched. It was then time for your return from seeing Mr. Godfrey Ablewhite off by the railway; and I went to your favourite walk in the shrubbery, to try for another chance of speaking to you--the last chance, for all I knew to the contrary, that I might have.

"You never appeared; and, what was worse still, Mr. Betteredge and Sergeant Cuff passed by the place where I was hiding--and the Sergeant saw me.

"I had no choice, after that, but to return to my proper place and my proper work, before more disasters happened to me. Just as I was going to step across the path, you came back from the railway. You were making straight for the shrubbery, when you saw me--I am certain, sir, you saw me--and you turned away as if I had got the plague, and went into the house.*

* NOTE: by Franklin Blake.--The writer is entirely mistaken, poor creature. I never noticed her. My intention was certainly to have taken a turn in the shrubbery. But, remembering at the same moment that my aunt might wish to see me, after my return from the railway, I altered my mind, and went into the house.

"I made the best of my way indoors again, returning by the servants' entrance. There was nobody in the laundry-room at that time; and I sat down there alone. I have told you already of the thoughts which the Shivering Sand put into my head. Those thoughts came back to me now. I wondered in myself which it would be harder to do, if things went on in this manner--to bear Mr. Franklin Blake's indifference to me, or to jump into the quicksand and end it for ever in that way?

"It's useless to ask me to account for my own conduct, at this time. I try--and I can't understand it myself.

"Why didn't I stop you, when you avoided me in that cruel manner? Why didn't I call out, 'Mr. Franklin, I have got something to say to you; it concerns yourself, and you must, and shall, hear it?' You were at my mercy--I had got the whip-hand of you, as they say. And better than that, I had the means (if I could only make you trust me) of being useful to you in the future. Of course, I never supposed that you--a gentleman--had stolen the Diamond for the mere pleasure of stealing it. No. Penelope had heard Miss Rachel, and I had heard Mr. Betteredge, talk about your extravagance and your debts. It was plain enough to me that you had taken the Diamond to sell it, or pledge it, and so to get the money of which you stood in need. Well! I could have told you of a man in London who would have advanced a good large sum on the jewel, and who would have asked no awkward questions about it either.

"Why didn't I speak to you! why didn't I speak to you!

"I wonder whether the risks and difficulties of keeping the nightgown were as much as I could manage, without having other risks and difficulties added to them? This might have been the case with some women--but how could it be the case with me? In the days when I was a thief, I had run fifty times greater risks, and found my way out of difficulties to which THIS difficulty was mere child's play. I had been apprenticed, as you may say, to frauds and deceptions--some of them on such a grand scale, and managed so cleverly, that they became famous, and appeared in the newspapers. Was such a little thing as the keeping of the nightgown likely to weigh on my spirits, and to set my heart sinking within me, at the time when I ought to have spoken to you? What nonsense to ask the question! The thing couldn't be.

"Where is the use of my dwelling in this way on my own folly? The plain truth is plain enough, surely? Behind your back, I loved you with all my heart and soul. Before your face--there's no denying it--I was frightened of you; frightened of making you angry with me; frightened of what you might say to me (though you HAD taken the Diamond) if I presumed to tell you that I had found it out. I had gone as near to it as I dared when I spoke to you in the library. You had not turned your back on me then. You had not started away from me as if I had got the plague. I tried to provoke myself into feeling angry with you, and to rouse up my courage in that way. No! I couldn't feel anything but the misery and the mortification of it. You're a plain girl; you have got a crooked shoulder; you're only a housemaid--what

do you mean by attempting to speak to Me?" You never uttered a word of that, Mr. Franklin; but you said it all to me, nevertheless! Is such madness as this to be accounted for? No. There is nothing to be done but to confess it, and let it be.

"I ask your pardon, once more, for this wandering of my pen. There is no fear of its happening again. I am close at the end now.

"The first person who disturbed me by coming into the empty room was Penelope. She had found out my secret long since, and she had done her best to bring me to my senses--and done it kindly too.

"'Ah!' she said, 'I know why you're sitting here, and fretting, all by yourself. The best thing that can happen for your advantage, Rosanna, will be for Mr. Franklin's visit here to come to an end. It's my belief that he won't be long now before he leaves the house."

"In all my thoughts of you I had never thought of your going away. I couldn't speak to Penelope. I could only look at her.

"'I've just left Miss Rachel,' Penelope went on. 'And a hard matter I have had of it to put up with her temper. She says the house is unbearable to her with the police in it; and she's determined to speak to my lady this evening, and to go to her Aunt Ablewhite to-morrow. If she does that, Mr. Franklin will be the next to find a reason for going away, you may depend on it!'

"I recovered the use of my tongue at that. 'Do you mean to say Mr. Franklin will go with her?' I asked.

"'Only too gladly, if she would let him; but she won't. HE has been made to feel her temper; HE is in her black books too--and that after having done all he can to help her, poor fellow! No! no! If they don't make it up before to-morrow, you will see Miss Rachel go one way, and Mr. Franklin another. Where he may betake himself to I can't say. But he will never stay here, Rosanna, after Miss Rachel has left us.'

"I managed to master the despair I felt at the prospect of your going away. To own the truth, I saw a little glimpse of hope for myself if there was really a serious disagreement between Miss Rachel and you. 'Do you know,' I asked, 'what the quarrel is between them?'

"'It is all on Miss Rachel's side,' Penelope said. 'And, for anything I know to the contrary, it's all Miss Rachel's temper, and nothing else. I am loth to

distress you, Rosanna; but don't run away with the notion that Mr. Franklin is ever likely to quarrel with HER. He's a great deal too fond of her for that!'

"She had only just spoken those cruel words when there came a call to us from Mr. Betteredge. All the indoor servants were to assemble in the hall. And then we were to go in, one by one, and be questioned in Mr. Betteredge's room by Sergeant Cuff.

"It came to my turn to go in, after her ladyship's maid and the upper housemaid had been questioned first. Sergeant Cuff's inquiries--though he wrapped them up very cunningly--soon showed me that those two women (the bitterest enemies I had in the house) had made their discoveries outside my door, on the Tuesday afternoon, and again on the Thursday night. They had told the Sergeant enough to open his eyes to some part of the truth. He rightly believed me to have made a new nightgown secretly, but he wrongly believed the paint-stained nightgown to be mine. I felt satisfied of another thing, from what he said, which it puzzled me to understand. He suspected me, of course, of being concerned in the disappearance of the Diamond. But, at the same time, he let me see--purposely, as I thought--that he did not consider me as the person chiefly answerable for the loss of the jewel. He appeared to think that I had been acting under the direction of somebody else. Who that person might be, I couldn't guess then, and can't guess now.

"In this uncertainty, one thing was plain--that Sergeant Cuff was miles away from knowing the whole truth. You were safe as long as the nightgown was safe--and not a moment longer.

"I quite despair of making you understand the distress and terror which pressed upon me now. It was impossible for me to risk wearing your nightgown any longer. I might find myself taken off, at a moment's notice, to the police court at Frizinghall, to be charged on suspicion, and searched accordingly. While Sergeant Cuff still left me free, I had to choose--and at once--between destroying the nightgown, or hiding it in some safe place, at some safe distance from the house.

"If I had only been a little less fond of you, I think I should have destroyed it. But oh! how could destroy the only thing I had which proved that I had saved you from discovery? If we did come to an explanation together, and if you suspected me of having some bad motive, and denied it all, how could I win upon you to trust me, unless I had the nightgown to produce? Was it wronging you to believe, as I did and do still, that you might hesitate to let a poor girl like me be the sharer of your secret, and your accomplice in the theft which your money-troubles had tempted you to commit? Think of your

cold behaviour to me, sir, and you will hardly wonder at my unwillingness to destroy the only claim on your confidence and your gratitude which it was my fortune to possess.

"I determined to hide it; and the place I fixed on was the place I knew best--the Shivering Sand.

"As soon as the questioning was over, I made the first excuse that came into my head, and got leave to go out for a breath of fresh air. I went straight to Cobb's Hole, to Mr. Yolland's cottage. His wife and daughter were the best friends I had. Don't suppose I trusted them with your secret--I have trusted nobody. All I wanted was to write this letter to you, and to have a safe opportunity of taking the nightgown off me. Suspected as I was, I could do neither of those things with any sort of security, at the house.

"And now I have nearly got through my long letter, writing it alone in Lucy Yolland's bedroom. When it is done, I shall go downstairs with the nightgown rolled up, and hidden under my cloak. I shall find the means I want for keeping it safe and dry in its hiding-place, among the litter of old things in Mrs. Yolland's kitchen. And then I shall go to the Shivering Sand--don't be afraid of my letting my footmarks betray me!--and hide the nightgown down in the sand, where no living creature can find it without being first let into the secret by myself.

"And, when that's done, what then?

"Then, Mr. Franklin, I shall have two reasons for making another attempt to say the words to you which I have not said yet. If you leave the house, as Penelope believes you will leave it, and if I haven't spoken to you before that, I shall lose my opportunity forever. That is one reason. Then, again, there is the comforting knowledge--if my speaking does make you angry--that I have got the nightgown ready to plead my cause for me as nothing else can. That is my other reason. If these two together don't harden my heart against the coldness which has hitherto frozen it up (I mean the coldness of your treatment of me), there will be the end of my efforts--and the end of my life.

"Yes. If I miss my next opportunity--if you are as cruel as ever, and if I feel it again as I have felt it already--good-bye to the world which has grudged me the happiness that it gives to others. Good-bye to life, which nothing but a little kindness from you can ever make pleasurable to me again. Don't blame yourself, sir, if it ends in this way. But try--do try--to feel some forgiving sorrow for me! I shall take care that you find out what I have done for you, when I am past telling you of it myself. Will you say something kind of me

then--in the same gentle way that you have when you speak to Miss Rachel? If you do that, and if there are such things as ghosts, I believe my ghost will hear it, and tremble with the pleasure of it.

"It's time I left off. I am making myself cry. How am I to see my way to the hiding-place if I let these useless tears come and blind me?

"Besides, why should I look at the gloomy side? Why not believe, while I can, that it will end well after all? I may find you in a good humour to-night--or, if not, I may succeed better to-morrow morning. I sha'n't improve my plain face by fretting--shall I? Who knows but I may have filled all these weary long pages of paper for nothing? They will go, for safety's sake (never mind now for what other reason) into the hiding-place along with the nightgown. It has been hard, hard work writing my letter. Oh! if we only end in understanding each other, how I shall enjoy tearing it up!

"I beg to remain, sir, your true lover and humble servant,

"ROSANNA SPEARMAN."

The reading of the letter was completed by Betteredge in silence. After carefully putting it back in the envelope, he sat thinking, with his head bowed down, and his eyes on the ground.

"Betteredge," I said, "is there any hint to guide me at the end of the letter?"

He looked up slowly, with a heavy sigh.

"There is nothing to guide you, Mr. Franklin," he answered. "If you take my advice you will keep the letter in the cover till these present anxieties of yours have come to an end. It will sorely distress you, whenever you read it. Don't read it now."

I put the letter away in my pocket-book.

A glance back at the sixteenth and seventeenth chapters of Betteredge's Narrative will show that there really was a reason for my thus sparing myself, at a time when my fortitude had been already cruelly tried. Twice over, the unhappy woman had made her last attempt to speak to me. And twice over, it had been my misfortune (God knows how innocently!) to repel the advances she had made to me. On the Friday night, as Betteredge truly describes it, she had found me alone at the billiard-table. Her manner and language suggested to me and would have suggested to any man, under the

circumstances--that she was about to confess a guilty knowledge of the disappearance of the Diamond. For her own sake, I had purposely shown no special interest in what was coming; for her own sake, I had purposely looked at the billiard-balls, instead of looking at HER--and what had been the result? I had sent her away from me, wounded to the heart! On the Saturday again--on the day when she must have foreseen, after what Penelope had told her, that my departure was close at hand--the same fatality still pursued us. She had once more attempted to meet me in the shrubbery walk, and she had found me there in company with Betteredge and Sergeant Cuff. In her hearing, the Sergeant, with his own underhand object in view, had appealed to my interest in Rosanna Spearman. Again for the poor creature's own sake, I had met the police-officer with a flat denial, and had declared--loudly declared, so that she might hear me too--that I felt "no interest whatever in Rosanna Spearman." At those words, solely designed to warn her against attempting to gain my private ear, she had turned away and left the place: cautioned of her danger, as I then believed; self-doomed to destruction, as I know now. From that point, I have already traced the succession of events which led me to the astounding discovery at the quicksand. The retrospect is now complete. I may leave the miserable story of Rosanna Spearman--to which, even at this distance of time, I cannot revert without a pang of distress--to suggest for itself all that is here purposely left unsaid. I may pass from the suicide at the Shivering Sand, with its strange and terrible influence on my present position and future prospects, to interests which concern the living people of this narrative, and to events which were already paving my way for the slow and toilsome journey from the darkness to the light.

CHAPTER VI

I walked to the railway station accompanied, it is needless to say, by Gabriel Betteredge. I had the letter in my pocket, and the nightgown safely packed in a little bag--both to be submitted, before I slept that night, to the investigation of Mr. Bruff.

We left the house in silence. For the first time in my experience of him, I found old Betteredge in my company without a word to say to me. Having something to say on my side, I opened the conversation as soon as we were clear of the lodge gates.

"Before I go to London," I began, "I have two questions to ask you. They relate to myself, and I believe they will rather surprise you."

"If they will put that poor creature's letter out of my head, Mr. Franklin, they may do anything else they like with me. Please to begin surprising me, sir, as soon as you can."

"My first question, Betteredge, is this. Was I drunk on the night of Rachel's Birthday?"

"YOU drunk!" exclaimed the old man. "Why it's the great defect of your character, Mr. Franklin that you only drink with your dinner, and never touch a drop of liquor afterwards!"

"But the birthday was a special occasion. I might have abandoned my regular habits, on that night of all others."

Betteredge considered for a moment.

"You did go out of your habits, sir," he said. "And I'll tell you how. You looked wretchedly ill--and we persuaded you to have a drop of brandy and water to cheer you up a little."

"I am not used to brandy and water. It is quite possible----"

"Wait a bit, Mr. Franklin. I knew you were not used, too. I poured you out half a wineglass-full of our fifty year old Cognac; and (more shame for me!) I drowned that noble liquor in nigh on a tumbler-full of cold water. A child couldn't have got drunk on it--let alone a grown man!"

I knew I could depend on his memory, in a matter of this kind. It was plainly impossible that I could have been intoxicated. I passed on to the second question.

"Before I was sent abroad, Betteredge, you saw a great deal of me when I was a boy? Now tell me plainly, do you remember anything strange of me, after I had gone to bed at night? Did you ever discover me walking in my sleep?"

Betteredge stopped, looked at me for a moment, nodded his head, and walked on again.

"I see your drift now, Mr. Franklin!" he said "You're trying to account for how you got the paint on your nightgown, without knowing it yourself. It won't do, sir. You're miles away still from getting at the truth. Walk in your sleep? You never did such a thing in your life!"

Here again, I felt that Betteredge must be right. Neither at home nor abroad had my life ever been of the solitary sort. If I had been a sleep-walker, there were hundreds on hundreds of people who must have discovered me, and who, in the interest of my own safety, would have warned me of the habit, and have taken precautions to restrain it.

Still, admitting all this, I clung--with an obstinacy which was surely natural and excusable, under the circumstances--to one or other of the only two explanations that I could see which accounted for the unendurable position in which I then stood. Observing that I was not yet satisfied, Betteredge shrewdly adverted to certain later events in the history of the Moonstone; and scattered both my theories to the wind at once and for ever.

"Let's try it another way, sir," he said. "Keep your own opinion, and see how far it will take you towards finding out the truth. If we are to believe the nightgown--which I don't for one--you not only smeared off the paint from the door, without knowing it, but you also took the Diamond without knowing it. Is that right, so far?"

"Quite right. Go on."

"Very good, sir. We'll say you were drunk, or walking in your sleep, when you took the jewel. That accounts for the night and morning, after the birthday. But how does it account for what has happened since that time? The Diamond has been taken to London, since that time. The Diamond has

been pledged to Mr. Luker, since that time. Did you do those two things, without knowing it, too? Were you drunk when I saw you off in the pony-chaise on that Saturday evening? And did you walk in your sleep to Mr. Luker's, when the train had brought you to your journey's end? Excuse me for saying it, Mr. Franklin, but this business has so upset you, that you're not fit yet to judge for yourself. The sooner you lay your head alongside Mr. Bruff's head, the sooner you will see your way out of the dead-lock that has got you now."

We reached the station, with only a minute or two to spare.

I hurriedly gave Betteredge my address in London, so that he might write to me, if necessary; promising, on my side, to inform him of any news which I might have to communicate. This done, and just as I was bidding him farewell, I happened to glance towards the book-and-newspaper stall. There was Mr. Candy's remarkable-looking assistant again, speaking to the keeper of the stall! Our eyes met at the same moment. Ezra Jennings took off his hat to me. I returned the salute, and got into a carriage just as the train started. It was a relief to my mind, I suppose, to dwell on any subject which appeared to be, personally, of no sort of importance to me. At all events, I began the momentous journey back which was to take me to Mr. Bruff, wondering--absurdly enough, I admit--that I should have seen the man with the piebald hair twice in one day!

The hour at which I arrived in London precluded all hope of my finding Mr. Bruff at his place of business. I drove from the railway to his private residence at Hampstead, and disturbed the old lawyer dozing alone in his dining-room, with his favourite pug-dog on his lap, and his bottle of wine at his elbow.

I shall best describe the effect which my story produced on the mind of Mr. Bruff by relating his proceedings when he had heard it to the end. He ordered lights, and strong tea, to be taken into his study; and he sent a message to the ladies of his family, forbidding them to disturb us on any pretence whatever. These preliminaries disposed of, he first examined the nightgown, and then devoted himself to the reading of Rosanna Spearman's letter.

The reading completed, Mr. Bruff addressed me for the first time since we had been shut up together in the seclusion of his own room.

"Franklin Blake," said the old gentleman, "this is a very serious matter, in more respects than one. In my opinion, it concerns Rachel quite as nearly as

it concerns you. Her extraordinary conduct is no mystery NOW. She believes you have stolen the Diamond."

I had shrunk from reasoning my own way fairly to that revolting conclusion. But it had forced itself on me, nevertheless. My resolution to obtain a personal interview with Rachel, rested really and truly on the ground just stated by Mr. Bruff.

"The first step to take in this investigation," the lawyer proceeded, "is to appeal to Rachel. She has been silent all this time, from motives which I (who know her character) can readily understand. It is impossible, after what has happened, to submit to that silence any longer. She must be persuaded to tell us, or she must be forced to tell us, on what grounds she bases her belief that you took the Moonstone. The chances are, that the whole of this case, serious as it seems now, will tumble to pieces, if we can only break through Rachel's inveterate reserve, and prevail upon her to speak out."

"That is a very comforting opinion for me," I said. "I own I should like to know."

"You would like to know how I can justify it," inter-posed Mr. Bruff. "I can tell you in two minutes. Understand, in the first place, that I look at this matter from a lawyer's point of view. It's a question of evidence, with me. Very well. The evidence breaks down, at the outset, on one important point."

"On what point?"

"You shall hear. I admit that the mark of the name proves the nightgown to be yours. I admit that the mark of the paint proves the nightgown to have made the smear on Rachel's door. But what evidence is there to prove that you are the person who wore it, on the night when the Diamond was lost?"

The objection struck me, all the more forcibly that it reflected an objection which I had felt myself.

"As to this," pursued the lawyer taking up Rosanna Spearman's confession, "I can understand that the letter is a distressing one to YOU. I can understand that you may hesitate to analyse it from a purely impartial point of view. But I am not in your position. I can bring my professional experience to bear on this document, just as I should bring it to bear on any other. Without alluding to the woman's career as a thief, I will merely remark that her letter proves her to have been an adept at deception, on her

own showing; and I argue from that, that I am justified in suspecting her of not having told the whole truth. I won't start any theory, at present, as to what she may or may not have done. I will only say that, if Rachel has suspected you ON THE EVIDENCE OF THE NIGHTGOWN ONLY, the chances are ninety-nine to a hundred that Rosanna Spearman was the person who showed it to her. In that case, there is the woman's letter, confessing that she was jealous of Rachel, confessing that she changed the roses, confessing that she saw a glimpse of hope for herself, in the prospect of a quarrel between Rachel and you. I don't stop to ask who took the Moonstone (as a means to her end, Rosanna Spearman would have taken fifty Moonstones)--I only say that the disappearance of the jewel gave this reclaimed thief who was in love with you, an opportunity of setting you and Rachel at variance for the rest of your lives. She had not decided on destroying herself, THEN, remember; and, having the opportunity, I distinctly assert that it was in her character, and in her position at the time, to take it. What do you say to that?"

"Some such suspicion," I answered, "crossed my own mind, as soon as I opened the letter."

"Exactly! And when you had read the letter, you pitied the poor creature, and couldn't find it in your heart to suspect her. Does you credit, my dear sir--does you credit!"

"But suppose it turns out that I did wear the nightgown? What then?"

"I don't see how the fact can be proved," said Mr. Bruff. "But assuming the proof to be possible, the vindication of your innocence would be no easy matter. We won't go into that, now. Let us wait and see whether Rachel hasn't suspected you on the evidence of the nightgown only."

"Good God, how coolly you talk of Rachel suspecting me!" I broke out. "What right has she to suspect Me, on any evidence, of being a thief?"

"A very sensible question, my dear sir. Rather hotly put--but well worth considering for all that. What puzzles you, puzzles me too. Search your memory, and tell me this. Did anything happen while you were staying at the house--not, of course, to shake Rachel's belief in your honour--but, let us say, to shake her belief (no matter with how little reason) in your principles generally?"

I started, in ungovernable agitation, to my feet. The lawyer's question reminded me, for the first time since I had left England, that something HAD

happened.

In the eighth chapter of Betteredge's Narrative, an allusion will be found to the arrival of a foreigner and a stranger at my aunt's house, who came to see me on business. The nature of his business was this.

I had been foolish enough (being, as usual, straitened for money at the time) to accept a loan from the keeper of a small restaurant in Paris, to whom I was well known as a customer. A time was settled between us for paying the money back; and when the time came, I found it (as thousands of other honest men have found it) impossible to keep my engagement. I sent the man a bill. My name was unfortunately too well known on such documents: he failed to negotiate it. His affairs had fallen into disorder, in the interval since I had borrowed of him; bankruptcy stared him in the face; and a relative of his, a French lawyer, came to England to find me, and to insist upon the payment of my debt. He was a man of violent temper; and he took the wrong way with me. High words passed on both sides; and my aunt and Rachel were unfortunately in the next room, and heard us. Lady Verinder came in, and insisted on knowing what was the matter. The Frenchman produced his credentials, and declared me to be responsible for the ruin of a poor man, who had trusted in my honour. My aunt instantly paid him the money, and sent him off. She knew me better of course than to take the Frenchman's view of the transaction. But she was shocked at my carelessness, and justly angry with me for placing myself in a position, which, but for her interference, might have become a very disgraceful one. Either her mother told her, or Rachel heard what passed--I can't say which. She took her own romantic, high-flown view of the matter. I was "heartless"; I was "dishonourable"; I had "no principle"; there was "no knowing what I might do next"--in short, she said some of the severest things to me which I had ever heard from a young lady's lips. The breach between us lasted for the whole of the next day. The day after, I succeeded in making my peace, and thought no more of it. Had Rachel reverted to this unlucky accident, at the critical moment when my place in her estimation was again, and far more seriously, assailed? Mr. Bruff, when I had mentioned the circumstances to him, answered the question at once in the affirmative.

"It would have its effect on her mind," he said gravely. "And I wish, for your sake, the thing had not happened. However, we have discovered that there WAS a predisposing influence against you--and there is one uncertainty cleared out of our way, at any rate. I see nothing more that we can do now. Our next step in this inquiry must be the step that takes us to Rachel."

He rose, and began walking thoughtfully up and down the room. Twice, I

was on the point of telling him that I had determined on seeing Rachel personally; and twice, having regard to his age and his character, I hesitated to take him by surprise at an unfavourable moment.

"The grand difficulty is," he resumed, "how to make her show her whole mind in this matter, without reserve. Have you any suggestions to offer?"

"I have made up my mind, Mr. Bruff, to speak to Rachel myself."

"You!" He suddenly stopped in his walk, and looked at me as if he thought I had taken leave of my senses. "You, of all the people in the world!" He abruptly checked himself, and took another turn in the room. "Wait a little," he said. "In cases of this extraordinary kind, the rash way is sometimes the best way." He considered the question for a moment or two, under that new light, and ended boldly by a decision in my favour. "Nothing venture, nothing have," the old gentleman resumed. "You have a chance in your favour which I don't possess--and you shall be the first to try the experiment."

"A chance in my favour?" I repeated, in the greatest surprise.

Mr. Bruff's face softened, for the first time, into a smile.

"This is how it stands," he said. "I tell you fairly, I don't trust your discretion, and I don't trust your temper. But I do trust in Rachel's still preserving, in some remote little corner of her heart, a certain perverse weakness for YOU. Touch that--and trust to the consequences for the fullest disclosures that can flow from a woman's lips! The question is--how are you to see her?"

"She has been a guest of yours at this house," I answered. "May I venture to suggest--if nothing was said about me beforehand--that I might see her here?"

"Cool!" said Mr. Bruff. With that one word of comment on the reply that I had made to him, he took another turn up and down the room.

"In plain English," he said, "my house is to be turned into a trap to catch Rachel; with a bait to tempt her, in the shape of an invitation from my wife and daughters. If you were anybody else but Franklin Blake, and if this matter was one atom less serious than it really is, I should refuse point-blank. As things are, I firmly believe Rachel will live to thank me for turning traitor to her in my old age. Consider me your accomplice. Rachel shall be

asked to spend the day here; and you shall receive due notice of it."

"When? To-morrow?"

"To-morrow won't give us time enough to get her answer. Say the day after."

"How shall I hear from you?"

"Stay at home all the morning and expect me to call on you."

I thanked him for the inestimable assistance which he was rendering to me, with the gratitude that I really felt; and, declining a hospitable invitation to sleep that night at Hampstead, returned to my lodgings in London.

Of the day that followed, I have only to say that it was the longest day of my life. Innocent as I knew myself to be, certain as I was that the abominable imputation which rested on me must sooner or later be cleared off, there was nevertheless a sense of self-abasement in my mind which instinctively disinclined me to see any of my friends. We often hear (almost invariably, however, from superficial observers) that guilt can look like innocence. I believe it to be infinitely the truer axiom of the two that innocence can look like guilt. I caused myself to be denied all day, to every visitor who called; and I only ventured out under cover of the night.

The next morning, Mr. Bruff surprised me at the breakfast-table. He handed me a large key, and announced that he felt ashamed of himself for the first time in his life.

"Is she coming?"

"She is coming to-day, to lunch and spend the afternoon with my wife and my girls."

"Are Mrs. Bruff, and your daughters, in the secret?"

"Inevitably. But women, as you may have observed, have no principles. My family don't feel my pangs of conscience. The end being to bring you and Rachel together again, my wife and daughters pass over the means employed to gain it, as composedly as if they were Jesuits."

"I am infinitely obliged to them. What is this key?"

"The key of the gate in my back-garden wall. Be there at three this

afternoon. Let yourself into the garden, and make your way in by the conservatory door. Cross the small drawing-room, and open the door in front of you which leads into the music-room. There, you will find Rachel--and find her, alone."

"How can I thank you!"

"I will tell you how. Don't blame me for what happens afterwards."

With those words, he went out.

I had many weary hours still to wait through. To while away the time, I looked at my letters. Among them was a letter from Betteredge.

I opened it eagerly. To my surprise and disappointment, it began with an apology warning me to expect no news of any importance. In the next sentence the everlasting Ezra Jennings appeared again! He had stopped Betteredge on the way out of the station, and had asked who I was. Informed on this point, he had mentioned having seen me to his master Mr. Candy. Mr. Candy hearing of this, had himself driven over to Betteredge, to express his regret at our having missed each other. He had a reason for wishing particularly to speak to me; and when I was next in the neighbourhood of Frizinghall, he begged I would let him know. Apart from a few characteristic utterances of the Betteredge philosophy, this was the sum and substance of my correspondent's letter. The warm-hearted, faithful old man acknowledged that he had written "mainly for the pleasure of writing to me."

I crumpled up the letter in my pocket, and forgot it the moment after, in the all-absorbing interest of my coming interview with Rachel.

As the clock of Hampstead church struck three, I put Mr. Bruff's key into the lock of the door in the wall. When I first stepped into the garden, and while I was securing the door again on the inner side, I own to having felt a certain guilty doubtfulness about what might happen next. I looked furtively on either side of me; suspicious of the presence of some unexpected witness in some unknown corner of the garden. Nothing appeared, to justify my apprehensions. The walks were, one and all, solitudes; and the birds and the bees were the only witnesses.

I passed through the garden; entered the conservatory; and crossed the small drawing-room. As I laid my hand on the door opposite, I heard a few plaintive chords struck on the piano in the room within. She had often idled

over the instrument in this way, when I was staying at her mother's house. I was obliged to wait a little, to steady myself. The past and present rose side by side, at that supreme moment--and the contrast shook me.

After the lapse of a minute, I roused my manhood, and opened the door.

CHAPTER VII

At the moment when I showed myself in the doorway, Rachel rose from the piano.

I closed the door behind me. We confronted each other in silence, with the full length of the room between us. The movement she had made in rising appeared to be the one exertion of which she was capable. All use of every other faculty, bodily or mental, seemed to be merged in the mere act of looking at me.

A fear crossed my mind that I had shown myself too suddenly. I advanced a few steps towards her. I said gently, "Rachel!"

The sound of my voice brought the life back to her limbs, and the colour to her face. She advanced, on her side, still without speaking. Slowly, as if acting under some influence independent of her own will, she came nearer and nearer to me; the warm dusky colour flushing her cheeks, the light of reviving intelligence brightening every instant in her eyes. I forgot the object that had brought me into her presence; I forgot the vile suspicion that rested on my good name; I forgot every consideration, past, present, and future, which I was bound to remember. I saw nothing but the woman I loved coming nearer and nearer to me. She trembled; she stood irresolute. I could resist it no longer--I caught her in my arms, and covered her face with kisses.

There was a moment when I thought the kisses were returned; a moment when it seemed as if she, too might have forgotten. Almost before the idea could shape itself in my mind, her first voluntary action made me feel that she remembered. With a cry which was like a cry of horror--with a strength which I doubt if I could have resisted if I had tried--she thrust me back from her. I saw merciless anger in her eyes; I saw merciless contempt on her lips. She looked me over, from head to foot, as she might have looked at a stranger who had insulted her.

"You coward!" she said. "You mean, miserable, heartless coward!"

Those were her first words! The most unendurable reproach that a woman can address to a man, was the reproach that she picked out to address to Me.

"I remember the time, Rachel," I said, "when you could have told me that I had offended you, in a worthier way than that. I beg your pardon."

Something of the bitterness that I felt may have communicated itself to my voice. At the first words of my reply, her eyes, which had been turned away the moment before, looked back at me unwillingly. She answered in a low tone, with a sullen submission of manner which was quite new in my experience of her.

"Perhaps there is some excuse for me," she said. "After what you have done, is it a manly action, on your part, to find your way to me as you have found it to-day? It seems a cowardly experiment, to try an experiment on my weakness for you. It seems a cowardly surprise, to surprise me into letting you kiss me. But that is only a woman's view. I ought to have known it couldn't be your view. I should have done better if I had controlled myself, and said nothing."

The apology was more unendurable than the insult. The most degraded man living would have felt humiliated by it.

"If my honour was not in your hands," I said, "I would leave you this instant, and never see you again. You have spoken of what I have done. What have I done?"

"What have you done! YOU ask that question of ME?"

"I ask it."

"I have kept your infamy a secret," she answered. "And I have suffered the consequences of concealing it. Have I no claim to be spared the insult of your asking me what you have done? Is ALL sense of gratitude dead in you? You were once a gentleman. You were once dear to my mother, and dearer still to me----"

Her voice failed her. She dropped into a chair, and turned her back on me, and covered her face with her hands.

I waited a little before I trusted myself to say any more. In that moment of silence, I hardly know which I felt most keenly--the sting which her contempt had planted in me, or the proud resolution which shut me out from all community with her distress.

"If you will not speak first," I said, "I must. I have come here with something

serious to say to you. Will you do me the common justice of listening while I say it?"

She neither moved, nor answered. I made no second appeal to her; I never advanced an inch nearer to her chair. With a pride which was as obstinate as her pride, I told her of my discovery at the Shivering Sand, and of all that had led to it. The narrative, of necessity, occupied some little time. From beginning to end, she never looked round at me, and she never uttered a word.

I kept my temper. My whole future depended, in all probability, on my not losing possession of myself at that moment. The time had come to put Mr. Bruff's theory to the test. In the breathless interest of trying that experiment, I moved round so as to place myself in front of her.

"I have a question to ask you," I said. "It obliges me to refer again to a painful subject. Did Rosanna Spearman show you the nightgown. Yes, or No?"

She started to her feet; and walked close up to me of her own accord. Her eyes looked me searchingly in the face, as if to read something there which they had never read yet.

"Are you mad?" she asked.

I still restrained myself. I said quietly, "Rachel, will you answer my question?"

She went on, without heeding me.

"Have you some object to gain which I don't understand? Some mean fear about the future, in which I am concerned? They say your father's death has made you a rich man. Have you come here to compensate me for the loss of my Diamond? And have you heart enough left to feel ashamed of your errand? Is THAT the secret of your pretence of innocence, and your story about Rosanna Spearman? Is there a motive of shame at the bottom of all the falsehood, this time?"

I stopped her there. I could control myself no longer.

"You have done me an infamous wrong!" I broke out hotly. "You suspect me of stealing your Diamond. I have a right to know, and I WILL know, the reason why!"

"Suspect you!" she exclaimed, her anger rising with mine. "YOU VILLAIN, I SAW YOU TAKE THE DIAMOND WITH MY OWN EYES!"

The revelation which burst upon me in those words, the overthrow which they instantly accomplished of the whole view of the case on which Mr. Bruff had relied, struck me helpless. Innocent as I was, I stood before her in silence. To her eyes, to any eyes, I must have looked like a man overwhelmed by the discovery of his own guilt.

She drew back from the spectacle of my humiliation and of her triumph. The sudden silence that had fallen upon me seemed to frighten her. "I spared you, at the time," she said. "I would have spared you now, if you had not forced me to speak." She moved away as if to leave the room--and hesitated before she got to the door. "Why did you come here to humiliate yourself?" she asked. "Why did you come here to humiliate me?" She went on a few steps, and paused once more. "For God's sake, say something!" she exclaimed, passionately. "If you have any mercy left, don't let me degrade myself in this way! Say something--and drive me out of the room!"

I advanced towards her, hardly conscious of what I was doing. I had possibly some confused idea of detaining her until she had told me more. From the moment when I knew that the evidence on which I stood condemned in Rachel's mind, was the evidence of her own eyes, nothing--not even my conviction of my own innocence--was clear to my mind. I took her by the hand; I tried to speak firmly and to the purpose. All I could say was, "Rachel, you once loved me."

She shuddered, and looked away from me. Her hand lay powerless and trembling in mine. "Let go of it," she said faintly.

My touch seemed to have the same effect on her which the sound of my voice had produced when I first entered the room. After she had said the word which called me a coward, after she had made the avowal which branded me as a thief--while her hand lay in mine I was her master still!

I drew her gently back into the middle of the room. I seated her by the side of me. "Rachel," I said, "I can't explain the contradiction in what I am going to tell you. I can only speak the truth as you have spoken it. You saw me--with your own eyes, you saw me take the Diamond. Before God who hears us, I declare that I now know I took it for the first time! Do you doubt me still?"

She had neither heeded nor heard me. "Let go of my hand," she repeated faintly. That was her only answer. Her head sank on my shoulder; and her hand unconsciously closed on mine, at the moment when she asked me to release it.

I refrained from pressing the question. But there my forbearance stopped. My chance of ever holding up my head again among honest men depended on my chance of inducing her to make her disclosure complete. The one hope left for me was the hope that she might have overlooked something in the chain of evidence some mere trifle, perhaps, which might nevertheless, under careful investigation, be made the means of vindicating my innocence in the end. I own I kept possession of her hand. I own I spoke to her with all that I could summon back of the sympathy and confidence of the bygone time.

"I want to ask you something," I said. "I want you to tell me everything that happened, from the time when we wished each other good night, to the time when you saw me take the Diamond."

She lifted her head from my shoulder, and made an effort to release her hand. "Oh, why go back to it!" she said. "Why go back to it!"

"I will tell you why, Rachel. You are the victim, and I am the victim, of some monstrous delusion which has worn the mask of truth. If we look at what happened on the night of your birthday together, we may end in understanding each other yet."

Her head dropped back on my shoulder. The tears gathered in her eyes, and fell slowly over her cheeks. "Oh!" she said, "have I never had that hope? Have I not tried to see it, as you are trying now?"

"You have tried by yourself," I answered. "You have not tried with me to help you."

Those words seemed to awaken in her something of the hope which I felt myself when I uttered them. She replied to my questions with more than docility--she exerted her intelligence; she willingly opened her whole mind to me.

"Let us begin," I said, "with what happened after we had wished each other good night. Did you go to bed? or did you sit up?"

"I went to bed."

"Did you notice the time? Was it late?"

"Not very. About twelve o'clock, I think."

"Did you fall asleep?"

"No. I couldn't sleep that night."

"You were restless?"

"I was thinking of you."

The answer almost unmanned me. Something in the tone, even more than in the words, went straight to my heart. It was only after pausing a little first that I was able to go on.

"Had you any light in your room?" I asked.

"None--until I got up again, and lit my candle."

"How long was that, after you had gone to bed?"

"About an hour after, I think. About one o'clock."

"Did you leave your bedroom?"

"I was going to leave it. I had put on my dressing-gown; and I was going into my sitting-room to get a book----"

"Had you opened your bedroom door?"

"I had just opened it."

"But you had not gone into the sitting-room?"

"No--I was stopped from going into it."

"What stopped you?

"I saw a light, under the door; and I heard footsteps approaching it."

"Were you frightened?"

"Not then. I knew my poor mother was a bad sleeper; and I remembered that she had tried hard, that evening, to persuade me to let her take charge of my Diamond. She was unreasonably anxious about it, as I thought; and I fancied she was coming to me to see if I was in bed, and to speak to me about the Diamond again, if she found that I was up."

"What did you do?"

"I blew out my candle, so that she might think I was in bed. I was unreasonable, on my side--I was determined to keep my Diamond in the place of my own choosing."

"After blowing out the candle, did you go back to bed?"

"I had no time to go back. At the moment when I blew the candle out, the sitting-room door opened, and I saw----"

"You saw?"

"You."

"Dressed as usual?"

"No."

"In my nightgown?"

"In your nightgown--with your bedroom candle in your hand."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

"Could you see my face?"

"Yes."

"Plainly?"

"Quite plainly. The candle in your hand showed it to me."

"Were my eyes open?"

"Yes."

"Did you notice anything strange in them? Anything like a fixed, vacant expression?"

"Nothing of the sort. Your eyes were bright--brighter than usual. You looked about in the room, as if you knew you were where you ought not to be, and as if you were afraid of being found out."

"Did you observe one thing when I came into the room--did you observe how I walked?"

"You walked as you always do. You came in as far as the middle of the room--and then you stopped and looked about you."

"What did you do, on first seeing me?"

"I could do nothing. I was petrified. I couldn't speak, I couldn't call out, I couldn't even move to shut my door."

"Could I see you, where you stood?"

"You might certainly have seen me. But you never looked towards me. It's useless to ask the question. I am sure you never saw me."

"How are you sure?"

"Would you have taken the Diamond? would you have acted as you did afterwards? would you be here now--if you had seen that I was awake and looking at you? Don't make me talk of that part of it! I want to answer you quietly. Help me to keep as calm as I can. Go on to something else."

She was right--in every way, right. I went on to other things.

"What did I do, after I had got to the middle of the room, and had stopped there?"

"You turned away, and went straight to the corner near the window--where my Indian cabinet stands."

"When I was at the cabinet, my back must have been turned towards you. How did you see what I was doing?"

"When you moved, I moved."

"So as to see what I was about with my hands?"

"There are three glasses in my sitting-room. As you stood there, I saw all that you did, reflected in one of them."

"What did you see?"

"You put your candle on the top of the cabinet. You opened, and shut, one drawer after another, until you came to the drawer in which I had put my Diamond. You looked at the open drawer for a moment. And then you put your hand in, and took the Diamond out."

"How do you know I took the Diamond out?"

"I saw your hand go into the drawer. And I saw the gleam of the stone between your finger and thumb, when you took your hand out."

"Did my hand approach the drawer again--to close it, for instance?"

"No. You had the Diamond in your right hand; and you took the candle from the top of the cabinet with your left hand."

"Did I look about me again, after that?"

"No."

"Did I leave the room immediately?"

"No. You stood quite still, for what seemed a long time. I saw your face sideways in the glass. You looked like a man thinking, and dissatisfied with his own thoughts."

"What happened next?"

"You roused yourself on a sudden, and you went straight out of the room."

"Did I close the door after me?"

"No. You passed out quickly into the passage, and left the door open."

"And then?"

"Then, your light disappeared, and the sound of your steps died away, and I was left alone in the dark."

"Did nothing happen--from that time, to the time when the whole house knew that the Diamond was lost?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure of that? Might you not have been asleep a part of the time?"

"I never slept. I never went back to my bed. Nothing happened until Penelope came in, at the usual time in the morning."

I dropped her hand, and rose, and took a turn in the room. Every question that I could put had been answered. Every detail that I could desire to know had been placed before me. I had even reverted to the idea of sleep-walking, and the idea of intoxication; and, again, the worthlessness of the one theory and the other had been proved--on the authority, this time, of the witness who had seen me. What was to be said next? what was to be done next? There rose the horrible fact of the Theft--the one visible, tangible object that confronted me, in the midst of the impenetrable darkness which enveloped all besides! Not a glimpse of light to guide me, when I had possessed myself of Rosanna Spearman's secret at the Shivering Sand. And not a glimpse of light now, when I had appealed to Rachel herself, and had heard the hateful story of the night from her own lips.

She was the first, this time, to break the silence.

"Well?" she said, "you have asked, and I have answered. You have made me hope something from all this, because you hoped something from it. What have you to say now?"

The tone in which she spoke warned me that my influence over her was a lost influence once more.

"We were to look at what happened on my birthday night, together," she went on; "and we were then to understand each other. Have we done that?"

She waited pitilessly for my reply. In answering her I committed a fatal error--I let the exasperating helplessness of my situation get the better of my self-control. Rashly and uselessly, I reproached her for the silence which

had kept me until that moment in ignorance of the truth.

"If you had spoken when you ought to have spoken," I began; "if you had done me the common justice to explain yourself----"

She broke in on me with a cry of fury. The few words I had said seemed to have lashed her on the instant into a frenzy of rage.

"Explain myself!" she repeated. "Oh! is there another man like this in the world? I spare him, when my heart is breaking; I screen him when my own character is at stake; and HE--of all human beings, HE--turns on me now, and tells me that I ought to have explained myself! After believing in him as I did, after loving him as I did, after thinking of him by day, and dreaming of him by night--he wonders I didn't charge him with his disgrace the first time we met: 'My heart's darling, you are a Thief! My hero whom I love and honour, you have crept into my room under cover of the night, and stolen my Diamond!' That is what I ought to have said. You villain, you mean, mean, mean villain, I would have lost fifty diamonds, rather than see your face lying to me, as I see it lying now!"

I took up my hat. In mercy to HER--yes! I can honestly say it--in mercy to HER, I turned away without a word, and opened the door by which I had entered the room.

She followed, and snatched the door out of my hand; she closed it, and pointed back to the place that I had left.

"No!" she said. "Not yet! It seems that I owe a justification of my conduct to you. You shall stay and hear it. Or you shall stoop to the lowest infamy of all, and force your way out."

It wrung my heart to see her; it wrung my heart to hear her. I answered by a sign--it was all I could do--that I submitted myself to her will.

The crimson flush of anger began to fade out of her face, as I went back, and took my chair in silence. She waited a little, and steadied herself. When she went on, but one sign of feeling was discernible in her. She spoke without looking at me. Her hands were fast clasped in her lap, and her eyes were fixed on the ground.

"I ought to have done you the common justice to explain myself," she said, repeating my own words. "You shall see whether I did try to do you justice, or not. I told you just now that I never slept, and never returned to my bed,

after you had left my sitting-room. It's useless to trouble you by dwelling on what I thought--you would not understand my thoughts--I will only tell you what I did, when time enough had passed to help me to recover myself. I refrained from alarming the house, and telling everybody what had happened--as I ought to have done. In spite of what I had seen, I was fond enough of you to believe--no matter what!--any impossibility, rather than admit it to my own mind that you were deliberately a thief. I thought and thought--and I ended in writing to you."

"I never received the letter."

"I know you never received it. Wait a little, and you shall hear why. My letter would have told you nothing openly. It would not have ruined you for life, if it had fallen into some other person's hands. It would only have said--in a manner which you yourself could not possibly have mistaken--that I had reason to know you were in debt, and that it was in my experience and in my mother's experience of you, that you were not very discreet, or very scrupulous about how you got money when you wanted it. You would have remembered the visit of the French lawyer, and you would have known what I referred to. If you had read on with some interest after that, you would have come to an offer I had to make to you--the offer, privately (not a word, mind, to be said openly about it between us!), of the loan of as large a sum of money as I could get.--And I would have got it!" she exclaimed, her colour beginning to rise again, and her eyes looking up at me once more. "I would have pledged the Diamond myself, if I could have got the money in no other way! In those words I wrote to you. Wait! I did more than that. I arranged with Penelope to give you the letter when nobody was near. I planned to shut myself into my bedroom, and to have the sitting-room left open and empty all the morning. And I hoped--with all my heart and soul I hoped!--that you would take the opportunity, and put the Diamond back secretly in the drawer."

I attempted to speak. She lifted her hand impatiently, and stopped me. In the rapid alternations of her temper, her anger was beginning to rise again. She got up from her chair, and approached me.

"I know what you are going to say," she went on. "You are going to remind me again that you never received my letter. I can tell you why. I tore it up.

"For what reason?" I asked.

"For the best of reasons. I preferred tearing it up to throwing it away upon such a man as you! What was the first news that reached me in the

morning? Just as my little plan was complete, what did I hear? I heard that you--you!!!--were the foremost person in the house in fetching the police. You were the active man; you were the leader; you were working harder than any of them to recover the jewel! You even carried your audacity far enough to ask to speak to ME about the loss of the Diamond--the Diamond which you yourself had stolen; the Diamond which was all the time in your own hands! After that proof of your horrible falseness and cunning, I tore up my letter. But even then--even when I was maddened by the searching and questioning of the policeman, whom you had sent in--even then, there was some infatuation in my mind which wouldn't let me give you up. I said to myself, 'He has played his vile farce before everybody else in the house. Let me try if he can play it before me.' Somebody told me you were on the terrace. I went down to the terrace. I forced myself to look at you; I forced myself to speak to you. Have you forgotten what I said?"

I might have answered that I remembered every word of it. But what purpose, at that moment, would the answer have served?

How could I tell her that what she had said had astonished me, had distressed me, had suggested to me that she was in a state of dangerous nervous excitement, had even roused a moment's doubt in my mind whether the loss of the jewel was as much a mystery to her as to the rest of us--but had never once given me so much as a glimpse at the truth? Without the shadow of a proof to produce in vindication of my innocence, how could I persuade her that I knew no more than the veriest stranger could have known of what was really in her thoughts when she spoke to me on the terrace?

"It may suit your convenience to forget; it suits my convenience to remember," she went on. "I know what I said--for I considered it with myself, before I said it. I gave you one opportunity after another of owning the truth. I left nothing unsaid that I COULD say--short of actually telling you that I knew you had committed the theft. And all the return you made, was to look at me with your vile pretence of astonishment, and your false face of innocence--just as you have looked at me to-day; just as you are looking at me now! I left you, that morning, knowing you at last for what you were--for what you are--as base a wretch as ever walked the earth!"

"If you had spoken out at the time, you might have left me, Rachel, knowing that you had cruelly wronged an innocent man."

"If I had spoken out before other people," she retorted, with another burst of indignation, "you would have been disgraced for life! If I had spoken out to

no ears but yours, you would have denied it, as you are denying it now! Do you think I should have believed you? Would a man hesitate at a lie, who had done what I saw YOU do--who had behaved about it afterwards, as I saw YOU behave? I tell you again, I shrank from the horror of hearing you lie, after the horror of seeing you thieve. You talk as if this was a misunderstanding which a few words might have set right! Well! the misunderstanding is at an end. Is the thing set right? No! the thing is just where it was. I don't believe you NOW! I don't believe you found the nightgown, I don't believe in Rosanna Spearman's letter, I don't believe a word you have said. You stole it--I saw you! You affected to help the police--I saw you! You pledged the Diamond to the money-lender in London--I am sure of it! You cast the suspicion of your disgrace (thanks to my base silence!) on an innocent man! You fled to the Continent with your plunder the next morning! After all that vileness, there was but one thing more you COULD do. You could come here with a last falsehood on your lips--you could come here, and tell me that I have wronged you!"

If I had stayed a moment more, I know not what words might have escaped me which I should have remembered with vain repentance and regret. I passed by her, and opened the door for the second time. For the second time--with the frantic perversity of a roused woman--she caught me by the arm, and barred my way out.

"Let me go, Rachel" I said. "It will be better for both of us. Let me go."

The hysterical passion swelled in her bosom--her quickened convulsive breathing almost beat on my face, as she held me back at the door.

"Why did you come here?" she persisted, desperately. "I ask you again--why did you come here? Are you afraid I shall expose you? Now you are a rich man, now you have got a place in the world, now you may marry the best lady in the land--are you afraid I shall say the words which I have never said yet to anybody but you? I can't say the words! I can't expose you! I am worse, if worse can be, than you are yourself." Sobs and tears burst from her. She struggled with them fiercely; she held me more and more firmly. "I can't tear you out of my heart," she said, "even now! You may trust in the shameful, shameful weakness which can only struggle against you in this way!" She suddenly let go of me--she threw up her hands, and wrung them frantically in the air. "Any other woman living would shrink from the disgrace of touching him!" she exclaimed. "Oh, God! I despise myself even more heartily than I despise HIM!"

The tears were forcing their way into my eyes in spite of me--the horror of it

was to be endured no longer.

"You shall know that you have wronged me, yet," I said. "Or you shall never see me again!"

With those words, I left her. She started up from the chair on which she had dropped the moment before: she started up--the noble creature!--and followed me across the outer room, with a last merciful word at parting.

"Franklin!" she said, "I forgive you! Oh, Franklin, Franklin! we shall never meet again. Say you forgive ME!"

I turned, so as to let my face show her that I was past speaking--I turned, and waved my hand, and saw her dimly, as in a vision, through the tears that had conquered me at last.

The next moment, the worst bitterness of it was over. I was out in the garden again. I saw her, and heard her, no more.

CHAPTER VIII

Late that evening, I was surprised at my lodgings by a visit from Mr. Bruff.

There was a noticeable change in the lawyer's manner. It had lost its usual confidence and spirit. He shook hands with me, for the first time in his life, in silence.

"Are you going back to Hampstead?" I asked, by way of saying something.

"I have just left Hampstead," he answered. "I know, Mr. Franklin, that you have got at the truth at last. But, I tell you plainly, if I could have foreseen the price that was to be paid for it, I should have preferred leaving you in the dark."

"You have seen Rachel?"

"I have come here after taking her back to Portland Place; it was impossible to let her return in the carriage by herself. I can hardly hold you responsible--considering that you saw her in my house and by my permission--for the shock that this unlucky interview has inflicted on her. All I can do is to provide against a repetition of the mischief. She is young--she has a resolute spirit--she will get over this, with time and rest to help her. I want to be assured that you will do nothing to hinder her recovery. May I depend on your making no second attempt to see her--except with my sanction and approval?"

"After what she has suffered, and after what I have suffered," I said, "you may rely on me."

"I have your promise?"

"You have my promise."

Mr. Bruff looked relieved. He put down his hat, and drew his chair nearer to mine.

"That's settled!" he said. "Now, about the future--your future, I mean. To my mind, the result of the extraordinary turn which the matter has now taken is briefly this. In the first place, we are sure that Rachel has told you the whole truth, as plainly as words can tell it. In the second place--though we

know that there must be some dreadful mistake somewhere--we can hardly blame her for believing you to be guilty, on the evidence of her own senses; backed, as that evidence has been, by circumstances which appear, on the face of them, to tell dead against you."

There I interposed. "I don't blame Rachel," I said. "I only regret that she could not prevail on herself to speak more plainly to me at the time."

"You might as well regret that Rachel is not somebody else," rejoined Mr. Bruff. "And even then, I doubt if a girl of any delicacy, whose heart had been set on marrying you, could have brought herself to charge you to your face with being a thief. Anyhow, it was not in Rachel's nature to do it. In a very different matter to this matter of yours--which placed her, however, in a position not altogether unlike her position towards you--I happen to know that she was influenced by a similar motive to the motive which actuated her conduct in your case. Besides, as she told me herself, on our way to town this evening, if she had spoken plainly, she would no more have believed your denial then than she believes it now. What answer can you make to that? There is no answer to be made to it. Come, come, Mr. Franklin! my view of the case has been proved to be all wrong, I admit--but, as things are now, my advice may be worth having for all that. I tell you plainly, we shall be wasting our time, and cudgelling our brains to no purpose, if we attempt to try back, and unravel this frightful complication from the beginning. Let us close our minds resolutely to all that happened last year at Lady Verinder's country house; and let us look to what we CAN discover in the future, instead of to what we can NOT discover in the past."

"Surely you forget," I said, "that the whole thing is essentially a matter of the past--so far as I am concerned?"

"Answer me this," retorted Mr. Bruff. "Is the Moonstone at the bottom of all the mischief--or is it not?"

"It is--of course."

"Very good. What do we believe was done with the Moonstone, when it was taken to London?"

"It was pledged to Mr. Luker."

"We know that you are not the person who pledged it. Do we know who did?"

"No."

"Where do we believe the Moonstone to be now?"

"Deposited in the keeping of Mr. Luker's bankers."

"Exactly. Now observe. We are already in the month of June. Towards the end of the month (I can't be particular to a day) a year will have elapsed from the time when we believe the jewel to have been pledged. There is a chance--to say the least--that the person who pawned it, may be prepared to redeem it when the year's time has expired. If he redeems it, Mr. Luker must himself--according to the terms of his own arrangement--take the Diamond out of his banker's hands. Under these circumstances, I propose setting a watch at the bank, as the present month draws to an end, and discovering who the person is to whom Mr. Luker restores the Moonstone. Do you see it now?"

I admitted (a little unwillingly) that the idea was a new one, at any rate.

"It's Mr. Murthwaite's idea quite as much as mine," said Mr. Bruff. "It might have never entered my head, but for a conversation we had together some time since. If Mr. Murthwaite is right, the Indians are likely to be on the lookout at the bank, towards the end of the month too--and something serious may come of it. What comes of it doesn't matter to you and me except as it may help us to lay our hands on the mysterious Somebody who pawned the Diamond. That person, you may rely on it, is responsible (I don't pretend to know how) for the position in which you stand at this moment; and that person alone can set you right in Rachel's estimation."

"I can't deny," I said, "that the plan you propose meets the difficulty in a way that is very daring, and very ingenious, and very new. But----"

"But you have an objection to make?"

"Yes. My objection is, that your proposal obliges us to wait."

"Granted. As I reckon the time, it requires you to wait about a fortnight--more or less. Is that so very long?"

"It's a life-time, Mr. Bruff, in such a situation as mine. My existence will be simply unendurable to me, unless I do something towards clearing my character at once."

"Well, well, I understand that. Have you thought yet of what you can do?"

"I have thought of consulting Sergeant Cuff."

"He has retired from the police. It's useless to expect the Sergeant to help you."

"I know where to find him; and I can but try."

"Try," said Mr. Bruff, after a moment's consideration. "The case has assumed such an extraordinary aspect since Sergeant Cuff's time, that you may revive his interest in the inquiry. Try, and let me hear the result. In the meanwhile," he continued, rising, "if you make no discoveries between this, and the end of the month, am I free to try, on my side, what can be done by keeping a lookout at the bank?"

"Certainly," I answered--"unless I relieve you of all necessity for trying the experiment in the interval."

Mr. Bruff smiled, and took up his hat.

"Tell Sergeant Cuff," he rejoined, "that I say the discovery of the truth depends on the discovery of the person who pawned the Diamond. And let me hear what the Sergeant's experience says to that."

So we parted.

Early the next morning, I set forth for the little town of Dorking--the place of Sergeant Cuff's retirement, as indicated to me by Betteredge.

Inquiring at the hotel, I received the necessary directions for finding the Sergeant's cottage. It was approached by a quiet bye-road, a little way out of the town, and it stood snugly in the middle of its own plot of garden ground, protected by a good brick wall at the back and the sides, and by a high quickset hedge in front. The gate, ornamented at the upper part by smartly-painted trellis-work, was locked. After ringing at the bell, I peered through the trellis-work, and saw the great Cuff's favourite flower everywhere; blooming in his garden, clustering over his door, looking in at his windows. Far from the crimes and the mysteries of the great city, the illustrious thief-taker was placidly living out the last Sybarite years of his life, smothered in roses!

A decent elderly woman opened the gate to me, and at once annihilated all the hopes I had built on securing the assistance of Sergeant Cuff. He had

started, only the day before, on a journey to Ireland.

"Has he gone there on business?" I asked.

The woman smiled. "He has only one business now, sir," she said; "and that's roses. Some great man's gardener in Ireland has found out something new in the growing of roses--and Mr. Cuff's away to inquire into it."

"Do you know when he will be back?"

"It's quite uncertain, sir. Mr. Cuff said he should come back directly, or be away some time, just according as he found the new discovery worth nothing, or worth looking into. If you have any message to leave for him, I'll take care, sir, that he gets it."

I gave her my card, having first written on it in pencil: "I have something to say about the Moonstone. Let me hear from you as soon as you get back." That done, there was nothing left but to submit to circumstances, and return to London.

In the irritable condition of my mind, at the time of which I am now writing, the abortive result of my journey to the Sergeant's cottage simply aggravated the restless impulse in me to be doing something. On the day of my return from Dorking, I determined that the next morning should find me bent on a new effort at forcing my way, through all obstacles, from the darkness to the light.

What form was my next experiment to take?

If the excellent Betteredge had been present while I was considering that question, and if he had been let into the secret of my thoughts, he would, no doubt, have declared that the German side of me was, on this occasion, my uppermost side. To speak seriously, it is perhaps possible that my German training was in some degree responsible for the labyrinth of useless speculations in which I now involved myself. For the greater part of the night, I sat smoking, and building up theories, one more profoundly improbable than another. When I did get to sleep, my waking fancies pursued me in dreams. I rose the next morning, with Objective-Subjective and Subjective-Objective inextricably entangled together in my mind; and I began the day which was to witness my next effort at practical action of some kind, by doubting whether I had any sort of right (on purely philosophical grounds) to consider any sort of thing (the Diamond included) as existing at all.

How long I might have remained lost in the mist of my own metaphysics, if I had been left to extricate myself, it is impossible for me to say. As the event proved, accident came to my rescue, and happily delivered me. I happened to wear, that morning, the same coat which I had worn on the day of my interview with Rachel. Searching for something else in one of the pockets, I came upon a crumpled piece of paper, and, taking it out, found Betteredge's forgotten letter in my hand.

It seemed hard on my good old friend to leave him without a reply. I went to my writing-table, and read his letter again.

A letter which has nothing of the slightest importance in it, is not always an easy letter to answer. Betteredge's present effort at corresponding with me came within this category. Mr. Candy's assistant, otherwise Ezra Jennings, had told his master that he had seen me; and Mr. Candy, in his turn, wanted to see me and say something to me, when I was next in the neighbourhood of Frizinghall. What was to be said in answer to that, which would be worth the paper it was written on? I sat idly drawing likenesses from memory of Mr. Candy's remarkable-looking assistant, on the sheet of paper which I had vowed to dedicate to Betteredge--until it suddenly occurred to me that here was the irrepressible Ezra Jennings getting in my way again! I threw a dozen portraits, at least, of the man with the piebald hair (the hair in every case, remarkably like), into the waste-paper basket--and then and there, wrote my answer to Betteredge. It was a perfectly commonplace letter--but it had one excellent effect on me. The effort of writing a few sentences, in plain English, completely cleared my mind of the cloudy nonsense which had filled it since the previous day.

Devoting myself once more to the elucidation of the impenetrable puzzle which my own position presented to me, I now tried to meet the difficulty by investigating it from a plainly practical point of view. The events of the memorable night being still unintelligible to me, I looked a little farther back, and searched my memory of the earlier hours of the birthday for any incident which might prove of some assistance to me in finding the clue.

Had anything happened while Rachel and I were finishing the painted door? or, later, when I rode over to Frizinghall? or afterwards, when I went back with Godfrey Ablewhite and his sisters? or, later again, when I put the Moonstone into Rachel's hands? or, later still, when the company came, and we all assembled round the dinner-table? My memory disposed of that string of questions readily enough, until I came to the last. Looking back at the social event of the birthday dinner, I found myself brought to a standstill at

the outset of the inquiry. I was not even capable of accurately remembering the number of the guests who had sat at the same table with me.

To feel myself completely at fault here, and to conclude, thereupon, that the incidents of the dinner might especially repay the trouble of investigating them, formed parts of the same mental process, in my case. I believe other people, in a similar situation, would have reasoned as I did. When the pursuit of our own interests causes us to become objects of inquiry to ourselves, we are naturally suspicious of what we don't know. Once in possession of the names of the persons who had been present at the dinner, I resolved--as a means of enriching the deficient resources of my own memory--to appeal to the memory of the rest of the guests; to write down all that they could recollect of the social events of the birthday; and to test the result, thus obtained, by the light of what had happened afterwards, when the company had left the house.

This last and newest of my many contemplated experiments in the art of inquiry--which Betteredge would probably have attributed to the clear-headed, or French, side of me being uppermost for the moment--may fairly claim record here, on its own merits. Unlikely as it may seem, I had now actually groped my way to the root of the matter at last. All I wanted was a hint to guide me in the right direction at starting. Before another day had passed over my head, that hint was given me by one of the company who had been present at the birthday feast!

With the plan of proceeding which I now had in view, it was first necessary to possess the complete list of the guests. This I could easily obtain from Gabriel Betteredge. I determined to go back to Yorkshire on that day, and to begin my contemplated investigation the next morning.

It was just too late to start by the train which left London before noon. There was no alternative but to wait, nearly three hours, for the departure of the next train. Was there anything I could do in London, which might usefully occupy this interval of time?

My thoughts went back again obstinately to the birthday dinner.

Though I had forgotten the numbers, and, in many cases, the names of the guests, I remembered readily enough that by far the larger proportion of them came from Frizinghall, or from its neighbourhood. But the larger proportion was not all. Some few of us were not regular residents in the country. I myself was one of the few. Mr. Murthwaite was another. Godfrey Ablewhite was a third. Mr. Bruff--no: I called to mind that business had

prevented Mr. Bruff from making one of the party. Had any ladies been present, whose usual residence was in London? I could only remember Miss Clack as coming within this latter category. However, here were three of the guests, at any rate, whom it was clearly advisable for me to see before I left town. I drove off at once to Mr. Bruff's office; not knowing the addresses of the persons of whom I was in search, and thinking it probable that he might put me in the way of finding them.

Mr. Bruff proved to be too busy to give me more than a minute of his valuable time. In that minute, however, he contrived to dispose--in the most discouraging manner--of all the questions I had to put to him.

In the first place, he considered my newly-discovered method of finding a clue to the mystery as something too purely fanciful to be seriously discussed. In the second, third, and fourth places, Mr. Murthwaite was now on his way back to the scene of his past adventures; Miss Clack had suffered losses, and had settled, from motives of economy, in France; Mr. Godfrey Ablewhite might, or might not, be discoverable somewhere in London. Suppose I inquired at his club? And suppose I excused Mr. Bruff, if he went back to his business and wished me good morning?

The field of inquiry in London, being now so narrowed as only to include the one necessity of discovering Godfrey's address, I took the lawyer's hint, and drove to his club.

In the hall, I met with one of the members, who was an old friend of my cousin's, and who was also an acquaintance of my own. This gentleman, after enlightening me on the subject of Godfrey's address, told me of two recent events in his life, which were of some importance in themselves, and which had not previously reached my ears.

It appeared that Godfrey, far from being discouraged by Rachel's withdrawal from her engagement to him had made matrimonial advances soon afterwards to another young lady, reputed to be a great heiress. His suit had prospered, and his marriage had been considered as a settled and certain thing. But, here again, the engagement had been suddenly and unexpectedly broken off--owing, it was said, on this occasion, to a serious difference of opinion between the bridegroom and the lady's father, on the question of settlements.

As some compensation for this second matrimonial disaster, Godfrey had soon afterwards found himself the object of fond pecuniary remembrance, on the part of one of his many admirers. A rich old lady--highly respected at

the Mothers' Small-Clothes-Conversion-Society, and a great friend of Miss Clack's (to whom she left nothing but a mourning ring)--had bequeathed to the admirable and meritorious Godfrey a legacy of five thousand pounds. After receiving this handsome addition to his own modest pecuniary resources, he had been heard to say that he felt the necessity of getting a little respite from his charitable labours, and that his doctor prescribed "a run on the Continent, as likely to be productive of much future benefit to his health." If I wanted to see him, it would be advisable to lose no time in paying my contemplated visit.

I went, then and there, to pay my visit.

The same fatality which had made me just one day too late in calling on Sergeant Cuff, made me again one day too late in calling on Godfrey. He had left London, on the previous morning, by the tidal train, for Dover. He was to cross to Ostend; and his servant believed he was going on to Brussels. The time of his return was rather uncertain; but I might be sure he would be away at least three months.

I went back to my lodgings a little depressed in spirits. Three of the guests at the birthday dinner--and those three all exceptionally intelligent people--were out of my reach, at the very time when it was most important to be able to communicate with them. My last hopes now rested on Betteredge, and on the friends of the late Lady Verinder whom I might still find living in the neighbourhood of Rachel's country house.

On this occasion, I travelled straight to Frizinghall--the town being now the central point in my field of inquiry. I arrived too late in the evening to be able to communicate with Betteredge. The next morning, I sent a messenger with a letter, requesting him to join me at the hotel, at his earliest convenience.

Having taken the precaution--partly to save time, partly to accommodate Betteredge--of sending my messenger in a fly, I had a reasonable prospect, if no delays occurred, of seeing the old man within less than two hours from the time when I had sent for him. During this interval, I arranged to employ myself in opening my contemplated inquiry, among the guests present at the birthday dinner who were personally known to me, and who were easily within my reach. These were my relatives, the Ablewhites, and Mr. Candy. The doctor had expressed a special wish to see me, and the doctor lived in the next street. So to Mr. Candy I went first.

After what Betteredge had told me, I naturally anticipated finding traces in

the doctor's face of the severe illness from which he had suffered. But I was utterly unprepared for such a change as I saw in him when he entered the room and shook hands with me. His eyes were dim; his hair had turned completely grey; his face was wizen; his figure had shrunk. I looked at the once lively, rattlepated, humorous little doctor--associated in my remembrance with the perpetration of incorrigible social indiscretions and innumerable boyish jokes--and I saw nothing left of his former self, but the old tendency to vulgar smartness in his dress. The man was a wreck; but his clothes and his jewellery--in cruel mockery of the change in him--were as gay and as gaudy as ever.

"I have often thought of you, Mr. Blake," he said; "and I am heartily glad to see you again at last. If there is anything I can do for you, pray command my services, sir--pray command my services!"

He said those few commonplace words with needless hurry and eagerness, and with a curiosity to know what had brought me to Yorkshire, which he was perfectly--I might say childishly--incapable of concealing from notice.

With the object that I had in view, I had of course foreseen the necessity of entering into some sort of personal explanation, before I could hope to interest people, mostly strangers to me, in doing their best to assist my inquiry. On the journey to Frizinghall I had arranged what my explanation was to be--and I seized the opportunity now offered to me of trying the effect of it on Mr. Candy.

"I was in Yorkshire, the other day, and I am in Yorkshire again now, on rather a romantic errand," I said. "It is a matter, Mr. Candy, in which the late Lady Verinder's friends all took some interest. You remember the mysterious loss of the Indian Diamond, now nearly a year since? Circumstances have lately happened which lead to the hope that it may yet be found--and I am interesting myself, as one of the family, in recovering it. Among the obstacles in my way, there is the necessity of collecting again all the evidence which was discovered at the time, and more if possible. There are peculiarities in this case which make it desirable to revive my recollection of everything that happened in the house, on the evening of Miss Verinder's birthday. And I venture to appeal to her late mother's friends who were present on that occasion, to lend me the assistance of their memories----"

I had got as far as that in rehearsing my explanatory phrases, when I was suddenly checked by seeing plainly in Mr. Candy's face that my experiment on him was a total failure.

The little doctor sat restlessly picking at the points of his fingers all the time I was speaking. His dim watery eyes were fixed on my face with an expression of vacant and wistful inquiry very painful to see. What he was thinking of, it was impossible to divine. The one thing clearly visible was that I had failed, after the first two or three words, in fixing his attention. The only chance of recalling him to himself appeared to lie in changing the subject. I tried a new topic immediately.

"So much," I said, gaily, "for what brings me to Frizinghall! Now, Mr. Candy, it's your turn. You sent me a message by Gabriel Betteredge----"

He left off picking at his fingers, and suddenly brightened up.

"Yes! yes! yes!" he exclaimed eagerly. "That's it! I sent you a message!"

"And Betteredge duly communicated it by letter," I went on. "You had something to say to me, the next time I was in your neighbourhood. Well, Mr. Candy, here I am!"

"Here you are!" echoed the doctor. "And Betteredge was quite right. I had something to say to you. That was my message. Betteredge is a wonderful man. What a memory! At his age, what a memory!"

He dropped back into silence, and began picking at his fingers again. Recollecting what I had heard from Betteredge about the effect of the fever on his memory, I went on with the conversation, in the hope that I might help him at starting.

"It's a long time since we met," I said. "We last saw each other at the last birthday dinner my poor aunt was ever to give."

"That's it!" cried Mr. Candy. "The birthday dinner!" He started impulsively to his feet, and looked at me. A deep flush suddenly overspread his faded face, and he abruptly sat down again, as if conscious of having betrayed a weakness which he would fain have concealed. It was plain, pitiably plain, that he was aware of his own defect of memory, and that he was bent on hiding it from the observation of his friends.

Thus far he had appealed to my compassion only. But the words he had just said--few as they were--roused my curiosity instantly to the highest pitch. The birthday dinner had already become the one event in the past, at which I looked back with strangely-mixed feelings of hope and distrust. And here

was the birthday dinner unmistakably proclaiming itself as the subject on which Mr. Candy had something important to say to me!

I attempted to help him out once more. But, this time, my own interests were at the bottom of my compassionate motive, and they hurried me on a little too abruptly, to the end I had in view.

"It's nearly a year now," I said, "since we sat at that pleasant table. Have you made any memorandum--in your diary, or otherwise--of what you wanted to say to me?"

Mr. Candy understood the suggestion, and showed me that he understood it, as an insult.

"I require no memorandum, Mr. Blake," he said, stiffly enough. "I am not such a very old man, yet--and my memory (thank God) is to be thoroughly depended on!"

It is needless to say that I declined to understand that he was offended with me.

"I wish I could say the same of my memory," I answered. "When I try to think of matters that are a year old, I seldom find my remembrance as vivid as I could wish it to be. Take the dinner at Lady Verinder's, for instance----"

Mr. Candy brightened up again, the moment the allusion passed my lips.

"Ah! the dinner, the dinner at Lady Verinder's!" he exclaimed, more eagerly than ever. "I have got something to say to you about that."

His eyes looked at me again with the painful expression of inquiry, so wistful, so vacant, so miserably helpless to see. He was evidently trying hard, and trying in vain, to recover the lost recollection. "It was a very pleasant dinner," he burst out suddenly, with an air of saying exactly what he wanted to say. "A very pleasant dinner, Mr. Blake, wasn't it?" He nodded and smiled, and appeared to think, poor fellow, that he had succeeded in concealing the total failure of his memory, by a well-timed exertion of his own presence of mind.

It was so distressing that I at once shifted the talk--deeply as I was interested in his recovering the lost remembrance--to topics of local interest.

Here, he got on glibly enough. Trumpery little scandals and quarrels in the

town, some of them as much as a month old, appeared to recur to his memory readily. He chattered on, with something of the smooth gossiping fluency of former times. But there were moments, even in the full flow of his talkativeness, when he suddenly hesitated--looked at me for a moment with the vacant inquiry once more in his eyes--controlled himself--and went on again. I submitted patiently to my martyrdom (it is surely nothing less than martyrdom to a man of cosmopolitan sympathies, to absorb in silent resignation the news of a country town?) until the clock on the chimney-piece told me that my visit had been prolonged beyond half an hour. Having now some right to consider the sacrifice as complete, I rose to take leave. As we shook hands, Mr. Candy reverted to the birthday festival of his own accord.

"I am so glad we have met again," he said. "I had it on my mind--I really had it on my mind, Mr. Blake, to speak to you. About the dinner at Lady Verinder's, you know? A pleasant dinner--really a pleasant dinner now, wasn't it?"

On repeating the phrase, he seemed to feel hardly as certain of having prevented me from suspecting his lapse of memory, as he had felt on the first occasion. The wistful look clouded his face again: and, after apparently designing to accompany me to the street door, he suddenly changed his mind, rang the bell for the servant, and remained in the drawing-room.

I went slowly down the doctor's stairs, feeling the disheartening conviction that he really had something to say which it was vitally important to me to hear, and that he was morally incapable of saying it. The effort of remembering that he wanted to speak to me was, but too evidently, the only effort that his enfeebled memory was now able to achieve.

Just as I reached the bottom of the stairs, and had turned a corner on my way to the outer hall, a door opened softly somewhere on the ground floor of the house, and a gentle voice said behind me:--

"I am afraid, sir, you find Mr. Candy sadly changed?"

I turned round, and found myself face to face with Ezra Jennings.

CHAPTER IX

The doctor's pretty housemaid stood waiting for me, with the street door open in her hand. Pouring brightly into the hall, the morning light fell full on the face of Mr. Candy's assistant when I turned, and looked at him.

It was impossible to dispute Betteredge's assertion that the appearance of Ezra Jennings, speaking from a popular point of view, was against him. His gipsy-complexion, his fleshless cheeks, his gaunt facial bones, his dreamy eyes, his extraordinary parti-coloured hair, the puzzling contradiction between his face and figure which made him look old and young both together--were all more or less calculated to produce an unfavourable impression of him on a stranger's mind. And yet--feeling this as I certainly did--it is not to be denied that Ezra Jennings made some inscrutable appeal to my sympathies, which I found it impossible to resist. While my knowledge of the world warned me to answer the question which he had put, acknowledging that I did indeed find Mr. Candy sadly changed, and then to proceed on my way out of the house--my interest in Ezra Jennings held me rooted to the place, and gave him the opportunity of speaking to me in private about his employer, for which he had been evidently on the watch.

"Are you walking my way, Mr. Jennings?" I said, observing that he held his hat in his hand. "I am going to call on my aunt, Mrs. Ablewhite."

Ezra Jennings replied that he had a patient to see, and that he was walking my way.

We left the house together. I observed that the pretty servant girl--who was all smiles and amiability, when I wished her good morning on my way out--received a modest little message from Ezra Jennings, relating to the time at which he might be expected to return, with pursed-up lips, and with eyes which ostentatiously looked anywhere rather than look in his face. The poor wretch was evidently no favourite in the house. Out of the house, I had Betteredge's word for it that he was unpopular everywhere. "What a life!" I thought to myself, as we descended the doctor's doorsteps.

Having already referred to Mr. Candy's illness on his side, Ezra Jennings now appeared determined to leave it to me to resume the subject. His silence said significantly, "It's your turn now." I, too, had my reasons for referring to the doctor's illness: and I readily accepted the responsibility of speaking first.

"Judging by the change I see in him," I began, "Mr. Candy's illness must have been far more serious that I had supposed?"

"It is almost a miracle," said Ezra Jennings, "that he lived through it."

"Is his memory never any better than I have found it to-day? He has been trying to speak to me----"

"Of something which happened before he was taken ill?" asked the assistant, observing that I hesitated.

"Yes."

"His memory of events, at that past time, is hopelessly enfeebled," said Ezra Jennings. "It is almost to be deplored, poor fellow, that even the wreck of it remains. While he remembers dimly plans that he formed--things, here and there, that he had to say or do before his illness--he is perfectly incapable of recalling what the plans were, or what the thing was that he had to say or do. He is painfully conscious of his own deficiency, and painfully anxious, as you must have seen, to hide it from observation. If he could only have recovered in a complete state of oblivion as to the past, he would have been a happier man. Perhaps we should all be happier," he added, with a sad smile, "if we could but completely forget!"

"There are some events surely in all men's lives," I replied, "the memory of which they would be unwilling entirely to lose?"

"That is, I hope, to be said of most men, Mr. Blake. I am afraid it cannot truly be said of ALL. Have you any reason to suppose that the lost remembrance which Mr. Candy tried to recover--while you were speaking to him just now--was a remembrance which it was important to YOU that he should recall?"

In saying those words, he had touched, of his own accord, on the very point upon which I was anxious to consult him. The interest I felt in this strange man had impelled me, in the first instance, to give him the opportunity of speaking to me; reserving what I might have to say, on my side, in relation to his employer, until I was first satisfied that he was a person in whose delicacy and discretion I could trust. The little that he had said, thus far, had been sufficient to convince me that I was speaking to a gentleman. He had what I may venture to describe as the UNSOUGHT SELF-POSSESSION, which is a sure sign of good breeding, not in England only, but everywhere

else in the civilised world. Whatever the object which he had in view, in putting the question that he had just addressed to me, I felt no doubt that I was justified--so far--in answering him without reserve.

"I believe I have a strong interest," I said, "in tracing the lost remembrance which Mr. Candy was unable to recall. May I ask whether you can suggest to me any method by which I might assist his memory?"

Ezra Jennings looked at me, with a sudden flash of interest in his dreamy brown eyes.

"Mr. Candy's memory is beyond the reach of assistance," he said. "I have tried to help it often enough since his recovery, to be able to speak positively on that point."

This disappointed me; and I owned it.

"I confess you led me to hope for a less discouraging answer than that," I said.

Ezra Jennings smiled. "It may not, perhaps, be a final answer, Mr. Blake. It may be possible to trace Mr. Candy's lost recollection, without the necessity of appealing to Mr. Candy himself."

"Indeed? Is it an indiscretion, on my part, to ask how?"

"By no means. My only difficulty in answering your question, is the difficulty of explaining myself. May I trust to your patience, if I refer once more to Mr. Candy's illness: and if I speak of it this time without sparing you certain professional details?"

"Pray go on! You have interested me already in hearing the details."

My eagerness seemed to amuse--perhaps, I might rather say, to please him. He smiled again. We had by this time left the last houses in the town behind us. Ezra Jennings stopped for a moment, and picked some wild flowers from the hedge by the roadside. "How beautiful they are!" he said, simply, showing his little nosegay to me. "And how few people in England seem to admire them as they deserve!"

"You have not always been in England?" I said.

"No. I was born, and partly brought up, in one of our colonies. My father was

an Englishman; but my mother--We are straying away from our subject, Mr. Blake; and it is my fault. The truth is, I have associations with these modest little hedgeside flowers--It doesn't matter; we were speaking of Mr. Candy. To Mr. Candy let us return."

Connecting the few words about himself which thus reluctantly escaped him, with the melancholy view of life which led him to place the conditions of human happiness in complete oblivion of the past, I felt satisfied that the story which I had read in his face was, in two particulars at least, the story that it really told. He had suffered as few men suffer; and there was the mixture of some foreign race in his English blood.

"You have heard, I dare say, of the original cause of Mr. Candy's illness?" he resumed. "The night of Lady Verinder's dinner-party was a night of heavy rain. My employer drove home through it in his gig, and reached the house wetted to the skin. He found an urgent message from a patient, waiting for him; and he most unfortunately went at once to visit the sick person, without stopping to change his clothes. I was myself professionally detained, that night, by a case at some distance from Frizinghall. When I got back the next morning, I found Mr. Candy's groom waiting in great alarm to take me to his master's room. By that time the mischief was done; the illness had set in."

"The illness has only been described to me, in general terms, as a fever," I said.

"I can add nothing which will make the description more accurate," answered Ezra Jennings. "From first to last the fever assumed no specific form. I sent at once to two of Mr. Candy's medical friends in the town, both physicians, to come and give me their opinion of the case. They agreed with me that it looked serious; but they both strongly dissented from the view I took of the treatment. We differed entirely in the conclusions which we drew from the patient's pulse. The two doctors, arguing from the rapidity of the beat, declared that a lowering treatment was the only treatment to be adopted. On my side, I admitted the rapidity of the pulse, but I also pointed to its alarming feebleness as indicating an exhausted condition of the system, and as showing a plain necessity for the administration of stimulants. The two doctors were for keeping him on gruel, lemonade, barley-water, and so on. I was for giving him champagne, or brandy, ammonia, and quinine. A serious difference of opinion, as you see! a difference between two physicians of established local repute, and a stranger who was only an assistant in the house. For the first few days, I had no choice but to give way to my elders and betters; the patient steadily sinking

all the time. I made a second attempt to appeal to the plain, undeniably plain, evidence of the pulse. Its rapidity was unchecked, and its feebleness had increased. The two doctors took offence at my obstinacy. They said, 'Mr. Jennings, either we manage this case, or you manage it. Which is it to be?' I said, 'Gentlemen, give me five minutes to consider, and that plain question shall have a plain reply.' When the time expired, I was ready with my answer. I said, 'You positively refuse to try the stimulant treatment?' They refused in so many words. 'I mean to try it at once, gentlemen.'--'Try it, Mr. Jennings, and we withdraw from the case.' I sent down to the cellar for a bottle of champagne; and I administered half a tumbler-full of it to the patient with my own hand. The two physicians took up their hats in silence, and left the house."

"You had assumed a serious responsibility," I said. "In your place, I am afraid I should have shrunk from it."

"In my place, Mr. Blake, you would have remembered that Mr. Candy had taken you into his employment, under circumstances which made you his debtor for life. In my place, you would have seen him sinking, hour by hour; and you would have risked anything, rather than let the one man on earth who had befriended you, die before your eyes. Don't suppose that I had no sense of the terrible position in which I had placed myself! There were moments when I felt all the misery of my friendlessness, all the peril of my dreadful responsibility. If I had been a happy man, if I had led a prosperous life, I believe I should have sunk under the task I had imposed on myself. But I had no happy time to look back at, no past peace of mind to force itself into contrast with my present anxiety and suspense--and I held firm to my resolution through it all. I took an interval in the middle of the day, when my patient's condition was at its best, for the repose I needed. For the rest of the four-and-twenty hours, as long as his life was in danger, I never left his bedside. Towards sunset, as usual in such cases, the delirium incidental to the fever came on. It lasted more or less through the night; and then intermitted, at that terrible time in the early morning--from two o'clock to five--when the vital energies even of the healthiest of us are at their lowest. It is then that Death gathers in his human harvest most abundantly. It was then that Death and I fought our fight over the bed, which should have the man who lay on it. I never hesitated in pursuing the treatment on which I had staked everything. When wine failed, I tried brandy. When the other stimulants lost their influence, I doubled the dose. After an interval of suspense--the like of which I hope to God I shall never feel again--there came a day when the rapidity of the pulse slightly, but appreciably, diminished; and, better still, there came also a change in the beat--an unmistakable change to steadiness and strength. THEN, I knew that I had

saved him; and then I own I broke down. I laid the poor fellow's wasted hand back on the bed, and burst out crying. An hysterical relief, Mr. Blake--nothing more! Physiology says, and says truly, that some men are born with female constitutions--and I am one of them!"

He made that bitterly professional apology for his tears, speaking quietly and unaffectedly, as he had spoken throughout. His tone and manner, from beginning to end, showed him to be especially, almost morbidly, anxious not to set himself up as an object of interest to me.

"You may well ask, why I have wearied you with all these details?" he went on. "It is the only way I can see, Mr. Blake, of properly introducing to you what I have to say next. Now you know exactly what my position was, at the time of Mr. Candy's illness, you will the more readily understand the sore need I had of lightening the burden on my mind by giving it, at intervals, some sort of relief. I have had the presumption to occupy my leisure, for some years past, in writing a book, addressed to the members of my profession--a book on the intricate and delicate subject of the brain and the nervous system. My work will probably never be finished; and it will certainly never be published. It has none the less been the friend of many lonely hours; and it helped me to while away the anxious time--the time of waiting, and nothing else--at Mr. Candy's bedside. I told you he was delirious, I think? And I mentioned the time at which his delirium came on?"

"Yes."

"Well, I had reached a section of my book, at that time, which touched on this same question of delirium. I won't trouble you at any length with my theory on the subject--I will confine myself to telling you only what it is your present interest to know. It has often occurred to me in the course of my medical practice, to doubt whether we can justifiably infer--in cases of delirium--that the loss of the faculty of speaking connectedly, implies of necessity the loss of the faculty of thinking connectedly as well. Poor Mr. Candy's illness gave me an opportunity of putting this doubt to the test. I understand the art of writing in shorthand; and I was able to take down the patient's 'wanderings', exactly as they fell from his lips.--Do you see, Mr. Blake, what I am coming to at last?"

I saw it clearly, and waited with breathless interest to hear more.

"At odds and ends of time," Ezra Jennings went on, "I reproduced my shorthand notes, in the ordinary form of writing--leaving large spaces between the broken phrases, and even the single words, as they had fallen

disconnectedly from Mr. Candy's lips. I then treated the result thus obtained, on something like the principle which one adopts in putting together a child's 'puzzle.' It is all confusion to begin with; but it may be all brought into order and shape, if you can only find the right way. Acting on this plan, I filled in each blank space on the paper, with what the words or phrases on either side of it suggested to me as the speaker's meaning; altering over and over again, until my additions followed naturally on the spoken words which came before them, and fitted naturally into the spoken words which came after them. The result was, that I not only occupied in this way many vacant and anxious hours, but that I arrived at something which was (as it seemed to me) a confirmation of the theory that I held. In plainer words, after putting the broken sentences together I found the superior faculty of thinking going on, more or less connectedly, in my patient's mind, while the inferior faculty of expression was in a state of almost complete incapacity and confusion."

"One word!" I interposed eagerly. "Did my name occur in any of his wanderings?"

"You shall hear, Mr. Blake. Among my written proofs of the assertion which I have just advanced--or, I ought to say, among the written experiments, tending to put my assertion to the proof--there IS one, in which your name occurs. For nearly the whole of one night, Mr. Candy's mind was occupied with SOMETHING between himself and you. I have got the broken words, as they dropped from his lips, on one sheet of paper. And I have got the links of my own discovering which connect those words together, on another sheet of paper. The product (as the arithmeticians would say) is an intelligible statement--first, of something actually done in the past; secondly, of something which Mr. Candy contemplated doing in the future, if his illness had not got in the way, and stopped him. The question is whether this does, or does not, represent the lost recollection which he vainly attempted to find when you called on him this morning?"

"Not a doubt of it!" I answered. "Let us go back directly, and look at the papers!"

"Quite impossible, Mr. Blake."

"Why?"

"Put yourself in my position for a moment," said Ezra Jennings. "Would you disclose to another person what had dropped unconsciously from the lips of your suffering patient and your helpless friend, without first knowing that

there was a necessity to justify you in opening your lips?"

I felt that he was unanswerable, here; but I tried to argue the question, nevertheless.

"My conduct in such a delicate matter as you describe," I replied, "would depend greatly on whether the disclosure was of a nature to compromise my friend or not."

"I have disposed of all necessity for considering that side of the question, long since," said Ezra Jennings. "Wherever my notes included anything which Mr. Candy might have wished to keep secret, those notes have been destroyed. My manuscript experiments at my friend's bedside, include nothing, now, which he would have hesitated to communicate to others, if he had recovered the use of his memory. In your case, I have every reason to suppose that my notes contain something which he actually wished to say to you."

"And yet, you hesitate?"

"And yet, I hesitate. Remember the circumstances under which I obtained the information which I possess! Harmless as it is, I cannot prevail upon myself to give it up to you, unless you first satisfy me that there is a reason for doing so. He was so miserably ill, Mr. Blake! and he was so helplessly dependent upon Me! Is it too much to ask, if I request you only to hint to me what your interest is in the lost recollection--or what you believe that lost recollection to be?"

To have answered him with the frankness which his language and his manner both claimed from me, would have been to commit myself to openly acknowledging that I was suspected of the theft of the Diamond. Strongly as Ezra Jennings had intensified the first impulsive interest which I had felt in him, he had not overcome my unconquerable reluctance to disclose the degrading position in which I stood. I took refuge once more in the explanatory phrases with which I had prepared myself to meet the curiosity of strangers.

This time I had no reason to complain of a want of attention on the part of the person to whom I addressed myself. Ezra Jennings listened patiently, even anxiously, until I had done.

"I am sorry to have raised your expectations, Mr. Blake, only to disappoint them," he said. "Throughout the whole period of Mr. Candy's illness, from

first to last, not one word about the Diamond escaped his lips. The matter with which I heard him connect your name has, I can assure you, no discoverable relation whatever with the loss or the recovery of Miss Verinder's jewel."

We arrived, as he said those words, at a place where the highway along which we had been walking branched off into two roads. One led to Mr. Ablewhite's house, and the other to a moorland village some two or three miles off. Ezra Jennings stopped at the road which led to the village.

"My way lies in this direction," he said. "I am really and truly sorry, Mr. Blake, that I can be of no use to you."

His voice told me that he spoke sincerely. His soft brown eyes rested on me for a moment with a look of melancholy interest. He bowed, and went, without another word, on his way to the village.

For a minute or more I stood and watched him, walking farther and farther away from me; carrying farther and farther away with him what I now firmly believed to be the clue of which I was in search. He turned, after walking on a little way, and looked back. Seeing me still standing at the place where we had parted, he stopped, as if doubting whether I might not wish to speak to him again. There was no time for me to reason out my own situation--to remind myself that I was losing my opportunity, at what might be the turning point of my life, and all to flatter nothing more important than my own self-esteem! There was only time to call him back first, and to think afterwards. I suspect I am one of the rashest of existing men. I called him back--and then I said to myself, "Now there is no help for it. I must tell him the truth!"

He retraced his steps directly. I advanced along the road to meet him.

"Mr. Jennings," I said. "I have not treated you quite fairly. My interest in tracing Mr. Candy's lost recollection is not the interest of recovering the Moonstone. A serious personal matter is at the bottom of my visit to Yorkshire. I have but one excuse for not having dealt frankly with you in this matter. It is more painful to me than I can say, to mention to anybody what my position really is."

Ezra Jennings looked at me with the first appearance of embarrassment which I had seen in him yet.

"I have no right, Mr. Blake, and no wish," he said, "to intrude myself into

your private affairs. Allow me to ask your pardon, on my side, for having (most innocently) put you to a painful test."

"You have a perfect right," I rejoined, "to fix the terms on which you feel justified in revealing what you heard at Mr. Candy's bedside. I understand and respect the delicacy which influences you in this matter. How can I expect to be taken into your confidence if I decline to admit you into mine? You ought to know, and you shall know, why I am interested in discovering what Mr. Candy wanted to say to me. If I turn out to be mistaken in my anticipations, and if you prove unable to help me when you are really aware of what I want, I shall trust to your honour to keep my secret--and something tells me that I shall not trust in vain."

"Stop, Mr. Blake. I have a word to say, which must be said before you go any farther." I looked at him in astonishment. The grip of some terrible emotion seemed to have seized him, and shaken him to the soul. His gipsy complexion had altered to a livid greyish paleness; his eyes had suddenly become wild and glittering; his voice had dropped to a tone--low, stern, and resolute--which I now heard for the first time. The latent resources in the man, for good or for evil--it was hard, at that moment, to say which--leapt up in him and showed themselves to me, with the suddenness of a flash of light.

"Before you place any confidence in me," he went on, "you ought to know, and you MUST know, under what circumstances I have been received into Mr. Candy's house. It won't take long. I don't profess, sir, to tell my story (as the phrase is) to any man. My story will die with me. All I ask, is to be permitted to tell you, what I have told Mr. Candy. If you are still in the mind, when you have heard that, to say what you have proposed to say, you will command my attention and command my services. Shall we walk on?"

The suppressed misery in his face silenced me. I answered his question by a sign. We walked on.

After advancing a few hundred yards, Ezra Jennings stopped at a gap in the rough stone wall which shut off the moor from the road, at this part of it.

"Do you mind resting a little, Mr. Blake?" he asked. "I am not what I was--and some things shake me."

I agreed of course. He led the way through the gap to a patch of turf on the heathy ground, screened by bushes and dwarf trees on the side nearest to the road, and commanding in the opposite direction a grandly desolate view

over the broad brown wilderness of the moor. The clouds had gathered, within the last half hour. The light was dull; the distance was dim. The lovely face of Nature met us, soft and still colourless--met us without a smile.

We sat down in silence. Ezra Jennings laid aside his hat, and passed his hand wearily over his forehead, wearily through his startling white and black hair. He tossed his little nosegay of wild flowers away from him, as if the remembrances which it recalled were remembrances which hurt him now.

"Mr. Blake!" he said, suddenly. "You are in bad company. The cloud of a horrible accusation has rested on me for years. I tell you the worst at once. I am a man whose life is a wreck, and whose character is gone."

I attempted to speak. He stopped me.

"No," he said. "Pardon me; not yet. Don't commit yourself to expressions of sympathy which you may afterwards wish to recall. I have mentioned an accusation which has rested on me for years. There are circumstances in connexion with it that tell against me. I cannot bring myself to acknowledge what the accusation is. And I am incapable, perfectly incapable, of proving my innocence. I can only assert my innocence. I assert it, sir, on my oath, as a Christian. It is useless to appeal to my honour as a man."

He paused again. I looked round at him. He never looked at me in return. His whole being seemed to be absorbed in the agony of recollecting, and in the effort to speak.

"There is much that I might say," he went on, "about the merciless treatment of me by my own family, and the merciless enmity to which I have fallen a victim. But the harm is done; the wrong is beyond all remedy. I decline to weary or distress you, sir, if I can help it. At the outset of my career in this country, the vile slander to which I have referred struck me down at once and for ever. I resigned my aspirations in my profession--obscurity was the only hope left for me. I parted with the woman I loved--how could I condemn her to share my disgrace? A medical assistant's place offered itself, in a remote corner of England. I got the place. It promised me peace; it promised me obscurity, as I thought. I was wrong. Evil report, with time and chance to help it, travels patiently, and travels far. The accusation from which I had fled followed me. I got warning of its approach. I was able to leave my situation voluntarily, with the testimonials that I had earned. They got me another situation in another remote district. Time passed again;

and again the slander that was death to my character found me out. On this occasion I had no warning. My employer said, 'Mr. Jennings, I have no complaint to make against you; but you must set yourself right, or leave me.' I had but one choice--I left him. It's useless to dwell on what I suffered after that. I am only forty years old now. Look at my face, and let it tell for me the story of some miserable years. It ended in my drifting to this place, and meeting with Mr. Candy. He wanted an assistant. I referred him, on the question of capacity, to my last employer. The question of character remained. I told him what I have told you--and more. I warned him that there were difficulties in the way, even if he believed me. 'Here, as elsewhere,' I said 'I scorn the guilty evasion of living under an assumed name: I am no safer at Frizinghall than at other places from the cloud that follows me, go where I may.' He answered, 'I don't do things by halves--I believe you, and I pity you. If you will risk what may happen, I will risk it too.' God Almighty bless him! He has given me shelter, he has given me employment, he has given me rest of mind--and I have the certain conviction (I have had it for some months past) that nothing will happen now to make him regret it."

"The slander has died out?" I said.

"The slander is as active as ever. But when it follows me here, it will come too late."

"You will have left the place?"

"No, Mr. Blake--I shall be dead. For ten years past I have suffered from an incurable internal complaint. I don't disguise from you that I should have let the agony of it kill me long since, but for one last interest in life, which makes my existence of some importance to me still. I want to provide for a person--very dear to me--whom I shall never see again. My own little patrimony is hardly sufficient to make her independent of the world. The hope, if I could only live long enough, of increasing it to a certain sum, has impelled me to resist the disease by such palliative means as I could devise. The one effectual palliative in my case, is--opium. To that all-potent and all-merciful drug I am indebted for a respite of many years from my sentence of death. But even the virtues of opium have their limit. The progress of the disease has gradually forced me from the use of opium to the abuse of it. I am feeling the penalty at last. My nervous system is shattered; my nights are nights of horror. The end is not far off now. Let it come--I have not lived and worked in vain. The little sum is nearly made up; and I have the means of completing it, if my last reserves of life fail me sooner than I expect. I hardly know how I have wandered into telling you this. I don't think I am

mean enough to appeal to your pity. Perhaps, I fancy you may be all the readier to believe me, if you know that what I have said to you, I have said with the certain knowledge in me that I am a dying man. There is no disguising, Mr. Blake, that you interest me. I have attempted to make my poor friend's loss of memory the means of bettering my acquaintance with you. I have speculated on the chance of your feeling a passing curiosity about what he wanted to say, and of my being able to satisfy it. Is there no excuse for my intruding myself on you? Perhaps there is some excuse. A man who has lived as I have lived has his bitter moments when he ponders over human destiny. You have youth, health, riches, a place in the world, a prospect before you. You, and such as you, show me the sunny side of human life, and reconcile me with the world that I am leaving, before I go. However this talk between us may end, I shall not forget that you have done me a kindness in doing that. It rests with you, sir, to say what you proposed saying, or to wish me good morning."

I had but one answer to make to that appeal. Without a moment's hesitation I told him the truth, as unreservedly as I have told it in these pages.

He started to his feet, and looked at me with breathless eagerness as I approached the leading incident of my story.

"It is certain that I went into the room," I said; "it is certain that I took the Diamond. I can only meet those two plain facts by declaring that, do what I might, I did it without my own knowledge----"

Ezra Jennings caught me excitedly by the arm.

"Stop!" he said. "You have suggested more to me than you suppose. Have you ever been accustomed to the use of opium?"

"I never tasted it in my life."

"Were your nerves out of order, at this time last year? Were you unusually restless and irritable?"

"Yes."

"Did you sleep badly?"

"Wretchedly. Many nights I never slept at all."

"Was the birthday night an exception? Try, and remember. Did you sleep

well on that one occasion?"

"I do remember! I slept soundly."

He dropped my arm as suddenly as he had taken it--and looked at me with the air of a man whose mind was relieved of the last doubt that rested on it.

"This is a marked day in your life, and in mine," he said, gravely. "I am absolutely certain, Mr. Blake, of one thing--I have got what Mr. Candy wanted to say to you this morning, in the notes that I took at my patient's bedside. Wait! that is not all. I am firmly persuaded that I can prove you to have been unconscious of what you were about, when you entered the room and took the Diamond. Give me time to think, and time to question you. I believe the vindication of your innocence is in my hands!"

"Explain yourself, for God's sake! What do you mean?"

In the excitement of our colloquy, we had walked on a few steps, beyond the clump of dwarf trees which had hitherto screened us from view. Before Ezra Jennings could answer me, he was hailed from the high road by a man, in great agitation, who had been evidently on the look-out for him.

"I am coming," he called back; "I am coming as fast as I can!" He turned to me. "There is an urgent case waiting for me at the village yonder; I ought to have been there half an hour since--I must attend to it at once. Give me two hours from this time, and call at Mr. Candy's again--and I will engage to be ready for you."

"How am I to wait!" I exclaimed, impatiently. "Can't you quiet my mind by a word of explanation before we part?"

"This is far too serious a matter to be explained in a hurry, Mr. Blake. I am not wilfully trying your patience--I should only be adding to your suspense, if I attempted to relieve it as things are now. At Frizinghall, sir, in two hours' time!"

The man on the high road hailed him again. He hurried away, and left me.

CHAPTER X

How the interval of suspense in which I was now condemned might have affected other men in my position, I cannot pretend to say. The influence of the two hours' probation upon my temperament was simply this. I felt physically incapable of remaining still in any one place, and morally incapable of speaking to any one human being, until I had first heard all that Ezra Jennings had to say to me.

In this frame of mind, I not only abandoned my contemplated visit to Mrs. Ablewhite--I even shrank from encountering Gabriel Betteredge himself.

Returning to Frizinghall, I left a note for Betteredge, telling him that I had been unexpectedly called away for a few hours, but that he might certainly expect me to return towards three o'clock in the afternoon. I requested him, in the interval, to order his dinner at the usual hour, and to amuse himself as he pleased. He had, as I well knew, hosts of friends in Frizinghall; and he would be at no loss how to fill up his time until I returned to the hotel.

This done, I made the best of my way out of the town again, and roamed the lonely moorland country which surrounds Frizinghall, until my watch told me that it was time, at last, to return to Mr. Candy's house.

I found Ezra Jennings ready and waiting for me.

He was sitting alone in a bare little room, which communicated by a glazed door with a surgery. Hideous coloured diagrams of the ravages of hideous diseases decorated the barren buff-coloured walls. A book-case filled with dingy medical works, and ornamented at the top with a skull, in place of the customary bust; a large deal table copiously splashed with ink; wooden chairs of the sort that are seen in kitchens and cottages; a threadbare drugget in the middle of the floor; a sink of water, with a basin and waste-pipe roughly let into the wall, horribly suggestive of its connection with surgical operations--comprised the entire furniture of the room. The bees were humming among a few flowers placed in pots outside the window; the birds were singing in the garden, and the faint intermittent jingle of a tuneless piano in some neighbouring house forced itself now and again on the ear. In any other place, these everyday sounds might have spoken pleasantly of the everyday world outside. Here, they came in as intruders on a silence which nothing but human suffering had the privilege to disturb. I looked at the mahogany instrument case, and at the huge roll of lint,

occupying places of their own on the book-shelves, and shuddered inwardly as I thought of the sounds, familiar and appropriate to the everyday use of Ezra Jennings' room.

"I make no apology, Mr. Blake, for the place in which I am receiving you," he said. "It is the only room in the house, at this hour of the day, in which we can feel quite sure of being left undisturbed. Here are my papers ready for you; and here are two books to which we may have occasion to refer, before we have done. Bring your chair to the table, and we shall be able to consult them together."

I drew up to the table; and Ezra Jennings handed me his manuscript notes. They consisted of two large folio leaves of paper. One leaf contained writing which only covered the surface at intervals. The other presented writing, in red and black ink, which completely filled the page from top to bottom. In the irritated state of my curiosity, at that moment, I laid aside the second sheet of paper in despair.

"Have some mercy on me!" I said. "Tell me what I am to expect, before I attempt to read this."

"Willingly, Mr. Blake! Do you mind my asking you one or two more questions?"

"Ask me anything you like!"

He looked at me with the sad smile on his lips, and the kindly interest in his soft brown eyes.

"You have already told me," he said, "that you have never--to your knowledge--tasted opium in your life."

"To my knowledge," I repeated.

"You will understand directly why I speak with that reservation. Let us go on. You are not aware of ever having taken opium. At this time, last year, you were suffering from nervous irritation, and you slept wretchedly at night. On the night of the birthday, however, there was an exception to the rule--you slept soundly. Am I right, so far?"

"Quite right!"

"Can you assign any cause for the nervous suffering, and your want of

sleep?"

"I can assign no cause. Old Betteredge made a guess at the cause, I remember. But that is hardly worth mentioning."

"Pardon me. Anything is worth mentioning in such a case as this. Betteredge attributed your sleeplessness to something. To what?"

"To my leaving off smoking."

"Had you been an habitual smoker?"

"Yes."

"Did you leave off the habit suddenly?"

"Yes."

"Betteredge was perfectly right, Mr. Blake. When smoking is a habit a man must have no common constitution who can leave it off suddenly without some temporary damage to his nervous system. Your sleepless nights are accounted for, to my mind. My next question refers to Mr. Candy. Do you remember having entered into anything like a dispute with him--at the birthday dinner, or afterwards--on the subject of his profession?"

The question instantly awakened one of my dormant remembrances in connection with the birthday festival. The foolish wrangle which took place, on that occasion, between Mr. Candy and myself, will be found described at much greater length than it deserves in the tenth chapter of Betteredge's Narrative. The details there presented of the dispute--so little had I thought of it afterwards--entirely failed to recur to my memory. All that I could now recall, and all that I could tell Ezra Jennings was, that I had attacked the art of medicine at the dinner-table with sufficient rashness and sufficient pertinacity to put even Mr. Candy out of temper for the moment. I also remembered that Lady Verinder had interfered to stop the dispute, and that the little doctor and I had "made it up again," as the children say, and had become as good friends as ever, before we shook hands that night.

"There is one thing more," said Ezra Jennings, "which it is very important I should know. Had you any reason for feeling any special anxiety about the Diamond, at this time last year?"

"I had the strongest reasons for feeling anxiety about the Diamond. I knew it

to be the object of a conspiracy; and I was warned to take measures for Miss Verinder's protection, as the possessor of the stone."

"Was the safety of the Diamond the subject of conversation between you and any other person, immediately before you retired to rest on the birthday night?"

"It was the subject of a conversation between Lady Verinder and her daughter----"

"Which took place in your hearing?"

"Yes."

Ezra Jennings took up his notes from the table, and placed them in my hands.

"Mr. Blake," he said, "if you read those notes now, by the light which my questions and your answers have thrown on them, you will make two astounding discoveries concerning yourself. You will find--First, that you entered Miss Verinder's sitting-room and took the Diamond, in a state of trance, produced by opium. Secondly, that the opium was given to you by Mr. Candy--without your own knowledge--as a practical refutation of the opinions which you had expressed to him at the birthday dinner."

I sat with the papers in my hand completely stupefied.

"Try and forgive poor Mr. Candy," said the assistant gently. "He has done dreadful mischief, I own; but he has done it innocently. If you will look at the notes, you will see that--but for his illness--he would have returned to Lady Verinder's the morning after the party, and would have acknowledged the trick that he had played you. Miss Verinder would have heard of it, and Miss Verinder would have questioned him--and the truth which has laid hidden for a year would have been discovered in a day."

I began to regain my self-possession. "Mr. Candy is beyond the reach of my resentment," I said angrily. "But the trick that he played me is not the less an act of treachery, for all that. I may forgive, but I shall not forget it."

"Every medical man commits that act of treachery, Mr. Blake, in the course of his practice. The ignorant distrust of opium (in England) is by no means confined to the lower and less cultivated classes. Every doctor in large practice finds himself, every now and then, obliged to deceive his patients,

as Mr. Candy deceived you. I don't defend the folly of playing you a trick under the circumstances. I only plead with you for a more accurate and more merciful construction of motives."

"How was it done?" I asked. "Who gave me the laudanum, without my knowing it myself?"

"I am not able to tell you. Nothing relating to that part of the matter dropped from Mr. Candy's lips, all through his illness. Perhaps your own memory may point to the person to be suspected."

"No."

"It is useless, in that case, to pursue the inquiry. The laudanum was secretly given to you in some way. Let us leave it there, and go on to matters of more immediate importance. Read my notes, if you can. Familiarise your mind with what has happened in the past. I have something very bold and very startling to propose to you, which relates to the future."

Those last words roused me.

I looked at the papers, in the order in which Ezra Jennings had placed them in my hands. The paper which contained the smaller quantity of writing was the uppermost of the two. On this, the disconnected words, and fragments of sentences, which had dropped from Mr. Candy in his delirium, appeared as follows:

"... Mr. Franklin Blake ... and agreeable ... down a peg ... medicine ... confesses ... sleep at night ... tell him ... out of order ... medicine ... he tells me ... and groping in the dark mean one and the same thing ... all the company at the dinner-table ... I say ... groping after sleep ... nothing but medicine ... he says ... leading the blind ... know what it means ... witty ... a night's rest in spite of his teeth ... wants sleep ... Lady Verinder's medicine chest ... five-and-twenty minims ... without his knowing it ... to-morrow morning ... Well, Mr. Blake ... medicine to-day ... never ... without it ... out, Mr. Candy ... excellent ... without it ... down on him ... truth ... something besides ... excellent ... dose of laudanum, sir ... bed ... what ... medicine now."

There, the first of the two sheets of paper came to an end. I handed it back to Ezra Jennings.

"That is what you heard at his bedside?" I said.

"Literally and exactly what I heard," he answered--"except that the repetitions are not transferred here from my short-hand notes. He reiterated certain words and phrases a dozen times over, fifty times over, just as he attached more or less importance to the idea which they represented. The repetitions, in this sense, were of some assistance to me in putting together those fragments. Don't suppose," he added, pointing to the second sheet of paper, "that I claim to have reproduced the expressions which Mr. Candy himself would have used if he had been capable of speaking connectedly. I only say that I have penetrated through the obstacle of the disconnected expression, to the thought which was underlying it connectedly all the time. Judge for yourself."

I turned to the second sheet of paper, which I now knew to be the key to the first.

Once more, Mr. Candy's wanderings appeared, copied in black ink; the intervals between the phrases being filled up by Ezra Jennings in red ink. I reproduce the result here, in one plain form; the original language and the interpretation of it coming close enough together in these pages to be easily compared and verified.

"... Mr. Franklin Blake is clever and agreeable, but he wants taking down a peg when he talks of medicine. He confesses that he has been suffering from want of sleep at night. I tell him that his nerves are out of order, and that he ought to take medicine. He tells me that taking medicine and groping in the dark mean one and the same thing. This before all the company at the dinner-table. I say to him, you are groping after sleep, and nothing but medicine can help you to find it. He says to me, I have heard of the blind leading the blind, and now I know what it means. Witty--but I can give him a night's rest in spite of his teeth. He really wants sleep; and Lady Verinder's medicine chest is at my disposal. Give him five-and-twenty minims of laudanum to-night, without his knowing it; and then call to-morrow morning. 'Well, Mr. Blake, will you try a little medicine to-day? You will never sleep without it.'--'There you are out, Mr. Candy: I have had an excellent night's rest without it.' Then, come down on him with the truth! 'You have had something besides an excellent night's rest; you had a dose of laudanum, sir, before you went to bed. What do you say to the art of medicine, now?'"

Admiration of the ingenuity which had woven this smooth and finished texture out of the ravelled skein was naturally the first impression that I felt, on handing the manuscript back to Ezra Jennings. He modestly interrupted

the first few words in which my sense of surprise expressed itself, by asking me if the conclusion which he had drawn from his notes was also the conclusion at which my own mind had arrived.

"Do you believe as I believe," he said, "that you were acting under the influence of the laudanum in doing all that you did, on the night of Miss Verinder's birthday, in Lady Verinder's house?"

"I am too ignorant of the influence of laudanum to have an opinion of my own," I answered. "I can only follow your opinion, and feel convinced that you are right."

"Very well. The next question is this. You are convinced; and I am convinced--how are we to carry our conviction to the minds of other people?"

I pointed to the two manuscripts, lying on the table between us. Ezra Jennings shook his head.

"Useless, Mr. Blake! Quite useless, as they stand now for three unanswerable reasons. In the first place, those notes have been taken under circumstances entirely out of the experience of the mass of mankind. Against them, to begin with! In the second place, those notes represent a medical and metaphysical theory. Against them, once more! In the third place, those notes are of my making; there is nothing but my assertion to the contrary, to guarantee that they are not fabrications. Remember what I told you on the moor--and ask yourself what my assertion is worth. No! my notes have but one value, looking to the verdict of the world outside. Your innocence is to be vindicated; and they show how it can be done. We must put our conviction to the proof--and You are the man to prove it!"

"How?" I asked.

He leaned eagerly nearer to me across the table that divided us.

"Are you willing to try a bold experiment?"

"I will do anything to clear myself of the suspicion that rests on me now."

"Will you submit to some personal inconvenience for a time?"

"To any inconvenience, no matter what it may be."

"Will you be guided implicitly by my advice? It may expose you to the

ridicule of fools; it may subject you to the remonstrances of friends whose opinions you are bound to respect."

"Tell me what to do!" I broke out impatiently. "And, come what may, I'll do it."

"You shall do this, Mr. Blake," he answered. "You shall steal the Diamond, unconsciously, for the second time, in the presence of witnesses whose testimony is beyond dispute."

I started to my feet. I tried to speak. I could only look at him.

"I believe it CAN be done," he went on. "And it shall be done--if you will only help me. Try to compose yourself--sit down, and hear what I have to say to you. You have resumed the habit of smoking; I have seen that for myself. How long have you resumed it."

"For nearly a year."

"Do you smoke more or less than you did?"

"More."

"Will you give up the habit again? Suddenly, mind!--as you gave it up before."

I began dimly to see his drift. "I will give it up, from this moment," I answered.

"If the same consequences follow, which followed last June," said Ezra Jennings--"if you suffer once more as you suffered then, from sleepless nights, we shall have gained our first step. We shall have put you back again into something assimilating to your nervous condition on the birthday night. If we can next revive, or nearly revive, the domestic circumstances which surrounded you; and if we can occupy your mind again with the various questions concerning the Diamond which formerly agitated it, we shall have replaced you, as nearly as possible in the same position, physically and morally, in which the opium found you last year. In that case we may fairly hope that a repetition of the dose will lead, in a greater or lesser degree, to a repetition of the result. There is my proposal, expressed in a few hasty words. You shall now see what reasons I have to justify me in making it."

He turned to one of the books at his side, and opened it at a place marked

by a small slip of paper.

"Don't suppose that I am going to weary you with a lecture on physiology," he said. "I think myself bound to prove, in justice to both of us, that I am not asking you to try this experiment in deference to any theory of my own devising. Admitted principles, and recognised authorities, justify me in the view that I take. Give me five minutes of your attention; and I will undertake to show you that Science sanctions my proposal, fanciful as it may seem. Here, in the first place, is the physiological principle on which I am acting, stated by no less a person than Dr. Carpenter. Read it for yourself."

He handed me the slip of paper which had marked the place in the book. It contained a few lines of writing, as follows:--

"There seems much ground for the belief, that every sensory impression which has once been recognised by the perceptive consciousness, is registered (so to speak) in the brain, and may be reproduced at some subsequent time, although there may be no consciousness of its existence in the mind during the whole intermediate period." "Is that plain, so far?" asked Ezra Jennings.

"Perfectly plain."

He pushed the open book across the table to me, and pointed to a passage, marked by pencil lines.

"Now," he said, "read that account of a case, which has--as I believe--a direct bearing on your own position, and on the experiment which I am tempting you to try. Observe, Mr. Blake, before you begin, that I am now referring you to one of the greatest of English physiologists. The book in your hand is Doctor Elliotson's HUMAN PHYSIOLOGY; and the case which the doctor cites rests on the well-known authority of Mr. Combe."

The passage pointed out to me was expressed in these terms:--

"Dr. Abel informed me," says Mr. Combe, "of an Irish porter to a warehouse, who forgot, when sober, what he had done when drunk; but, being drunk, again recollected the transactions of his former state of intoxication. On one occasion, being drunk, he had lost a parcel of some value, and in his sober moments could give no account of it. Next time he was intoxicated, he recollected that he had left the parcel at a certain house, and there being no address on it, it had remained there safely, and was got on his calling for it."

"Plain again?" asked Ezra Jennings.

"As plain as need be."

He put back the slip of paper in its place, and closed the book.

"Are you satisfied that I have not spoken without good authority to support me?" he asked. "If not, I have only to go to those bookshelves, and you have only to read the passages which I can point out to you."

"I am quite satisfied," I said, "without reading a word more."

"In that case, we may return to your own personal interest in this matter. I am bound to tell you that there is something to be said against the experiment as well as for it. If we could, this year, exactly reproduce, in your case, the conditions as they existed last year, it is physiologically certain that we should arrive at exactly the same result. But this--there is no denying it--is simply impossible. We can only hope to approximate to the conditions; and if we don't succeed in getting you nearly enough back to what you were, this venture of ours will fail. If we do succeed--and I am myself hopeful of success--you may at least so far repeat your proceedings on the birthday night, as to satisfy any reasonable person that you are guiltless, morally speaking, of the theft of the Diamond. I believe, Mr. Blake, I have now stated the question, on both sides of it, as fairly as I can, within the limits that I have imposed on myself. If there is anything that I have not made clear to you, tell me what it is--and if I can enlighten you, I will."

"All that you have explained to me," I said, "I understand perfectly. But I own I am puzzled on one point, which you have not made clear to me yet."

"What is the point?"

"I don't understand the effect of the laudanum on me. I don't understand my walking down-stairs, and along corridors, and my opening and shutting the drawers of a cabinet, and my going back again to my own room. All these are active proceedings. I thought the influence of opium was first to stupefy you, and then to send you to sleep."

"The common error about opium, Mr. Blake! I am, at this moment, exerting my intelligence (such as it is) in your service, under the influence of a dose of laudanum, some ten times larger than the dose Mr. Candy administered to you. But don't trust to my authority--even on a question which comes within my own personal experience. I anticipated the objection you have just

made: and I have again provided myself with independent testimony which will carry its due weight with it in your own mind, and in the minds of your friends."

He handed me the second of the two books which he had by him on the table.

"There," he said, "are the far-famed CONFESSIONS OF AN ENGLISH OPIUM EATER! Take the book away with you, and read it. At the passage which I have marked, you will find that when De Quincey had committed what he calls 'a debauch of opium,' he either went to the gallery at the Opera to enjoy the music, or he wandered about the London markets on Saturday night, and interested himself in observing all the little shifts and bargainings of the poor in providing their Sunday's dinner. So much for the capacity of a man to occupy himself actively, and to move about from place to place under the influence of opium."

"I am answered so far," I said; "but I am not answered yet as to the effect produced by the opium on myself."

"I will try to answer you in a few words," said Ezra Jennings. "The action of opium is comprised, in the majority of cases, in two influences--a stimulating influence first, and a sedative influence afterwards. Under the stimulating influence, the latest and most vivid impressions left on your mind--namely, the impressions relating to the Diamond--would be likely, in your morbidly sensitive nervous condition, to become intensified in your brain, and would subordinate to themselves your judgment and your will exactly as an ordinary dream subordinates to itself your judgment and your will. Little by little, under this action, any apprehensions about the safety of the Diamond which you might have felt during the day would be liable to develop themselves from the state of doubt to the state of certainty--would impel you into practical action to preserve the jewel--would direct your steps, with that motive in view, into the room which you entered--and would guide your hand to the drawers of the cabinet, until you had found the drawer which held the stone. In the spiritualised intoxication of opium, you would do all that. Later, as the sedative action began to gain on the stimulant action, you would slowly become inert and stupefied. Later still you would fall into a deep sleep. When the morning came, and the effect of the opium had been all slept off, you would wake as absolutely ignorant of what you had done in the night as if you had been living at the Antipodes. Have I made it tolerably clear to you so far?"

"You have made it so clear," I said, "that I want you to go farther. You have

shown me how I entered the room, and how I came to take the Diamond. But Miss Verinder saw me leave the room again, with the jewel in my hand. Can you trace my proceedings from that moment? Can you guess what I did next?"

"That is the very point I was coming to," he rejoined. "It is a question with me whether the experiment which I propose as a means of vindicating your innocence, may not also be made a means of recovering the lost Diamond as well. When you left Miss Verinder's sitting-room, with the jewel in your hand, you went back in all probability to your own room----"

"Yes? and what then?"

"It is possible, Mr. Blake--I dare not say more--that your idea of preserving the Diamond led, by a natural sequence, to the idea of hiding the Diamond, and that the place in which you hid it was somewhere in your bedroom. In that event, the case of the Irish porter may be your case. You may remember, under the influence of the second dose of opium, the place in which you hid the Diamond under the influence of the first."

It was my turn, now, to enlighten Ezra Jennings. I stopped him, before he could say any more.

"You are speculating," I said, "on a result which cannot possibly take place. The Diamond is, at this moment, in London."

He started, and looked at me in great surprise.

"In London?" he repeated. "How did it get to London from Lady Verinder's house?"

"Nobody knows."

"You removed it with your own hand from Miss Verinder's room. How was it taken out of your keeping?"

"I have no idea how it was taken out of my keeping."

"Did you see it, when you woke in the morning?"

"No."

"Has Miss Verinder recovered possession of it?"

"No."

"Mr. Blake! there seems to be something here which wants clearing up. May I ask how you know that the Diamond is, at this moment, in London?"

I had put precisely the same question to Mr. Bruff when I made my first inquiries about the Moonstone, on my return to England. In answering Ezra Jennings, I accordingly repeated what I had myself heard from the lawyer's own lips--and what is already familiar to the readers of these pages.

He showed plainly that he was not satisfied with my reply.

"With all deference to you," he said, "and with all deference to your legal adviser, I maintain the opinion which I expressed just now. It rests, I am well aware, on a mere assumption. Pardon me for reminding you, that your opinion also rests on a mere assumption as well."

The view he took of the matter was entirely new to me. I waited anxiously to hear how he would defend it.

"I assume," pursued Ezra Jennings, "that the influence of the opium--after impelling you to possess yourself of the Diamond, with the purpose of securing its safety--might also impel you, acting under the same influence and the same motive, to hide it somewhere in your own room. YOU assume that the Hindoo conspirators could by no possibility commit a mistake. The Indians went to Mr. Luker's house after the Diamond--and, therefore, in Mr. Luker's possession the Diamond must be! Have you any evidence to prove that the Moonstone was taken to London at all? You can't even guess how, or by whom, it was removed from Lady Verinder's house! Have you any evidence that the jewel was pledged to Mr. Luker? He declares that he never heard of the Moonstone; and his bankers' receipt acknowledges nothing but the deposit of a valuable of great price. The Indians assume that Mr. Luker is lying--and you assume again that the Indians are right. All I say, in differing with you, is--that my view is possible. What more, Mr. Blake, either logically, or legally, can be said for yours?"

It was put strongly; but there was no denying that it was put truly as well.

"I confess you stagger me," I replied. "Do you object to my writing to Mr. Bruff, and telling him what you have said?"

"On the contrary, I shall be glad if you will write to Mr. Bruff. If we consult

his experience, we may see the matter under a new light. For the present, let us return to our experiment with the opium. We have decided that you leave off the habit of smoking from this moment."

"From this moment?"

"That is the first step. The next step is to reproduce, as nearly as we can, the domestic circumstances which surrounded you last year."

How was this to be done? Lady Verinder was dead. Rachel and I, so long as the suspicion of theft rested on me, were parted irrevocably. Godfrey Ablewhite was away travelling on the Continent. It was simply impossible to reassemble the people who had inhabited the house, when I had slept in it last. The statement of this objection did not appear to embarrass Ezra Jennings. He attached very little importance, he said, to reassembling the same people--seeing that it would be vain to expect them to reassume the various positions which they had occupied towards me in the past times. On the other hand, he considered it essential to the success of the experiment, that I should see the same objects about me which had surrounded me when I was last in the house.

"Above all things," he said, "you must sleep in the room which you slept in, on the birthday night, and it must be furnished in the same way. The stairs, the corridors, and Miss Verinder's sitting-room, must also be restored to what they were when you saw them last. It is absolutely necessary, Mr. Blake, to replace every article of furniture in that part of the house which may now be put away. The sacrifice of your cigars will be useless, unless we can get Miss Verinder's permission to do that."

"Who is to apply to her for permission?" I asked.

"Is it not possible for you to apply?"

"Quite out of the question. After what has passed between us on the subject of the lost Diamond, I can neither see her, nor write to her, as things are now."

Ezra Jennings paused, and considered for a moment.

"May I ask you a delicate question?" he said.

I signed to him to go on.

"Am I right, Mr. Blake, in fancying (from one or two things which have dropped from you) that you felt no common interest in Miss Verinder, in former times?"

"Quite right."

"Was the feeling returned?"

"It was."

"Do you think Miss Verinder would be likely to feel a strong interest in the attempt to prove your innocence?"

"I am certain of it."

"In that case, I will write to Miss Verinder--if you will give me leave."

"Telling her of the proposal that you have made to me?"

"Telling her of everything that has passed between us to-day."

It is needless to say that I eagerly accepted the service which he had offered to me.

"I shall have time to write by to-day's post," he said, looking at his watch. "Don't forget to lock up your cigars, when you get back to the hotel! I will call to-morrow morning and hear how you have passed the night."

I rose to take leave of him; and attempted to express the grateful sense of his kindness which I really felt.

He pressed my hand gently. "Remember what I told you on the moor," he answered. "If I can do you this little service, Mr. Blake, I shall feel it like a last gleam of sunshine, falling on the evening of a long and clouded day."

We parted. It was then the fifteenth of June. The events of the next ten days--every one of them more or less directly connected with the experiment of which I was the passive object--are all placed on record, exactly as they happened, in the Journal habitually kept by Mr. Candy's assistant. In the pages of Ezra Jennings nothing is concealed, and nothing is forgotten. Let Ezra Jennings tell how the venture with the opium was tried, and how it

ended.