

The Moonstone (Wilkie Collins) – Episode 10

Miss Clack, painfully religious and resentful of others who seem to be enjoying themselves, convinced that their souls are in peril, is narrating.

Godfrey Ablewhite has deserted his good causes to pursue Rachel Verinder. She consented to marry him, but on that very day her mother died. To get away from unhappy memories in London and Yorkshire, Rachel has taken a house in Brighton, with her aunt Ablewhite and her cousin Clack staying with her. Something the lawyer, Mr Bruff, has told Rachel, made her decide not to marry Godfrey.

Episode 10

When I returned to the house, I entered the dining-room and found myself face to face with Godfrey Ablewhite. He made no attempt to leave. On the contrary, he came warmly forward to greet me. ‘Dear Miss Clack, I’ve been waiting to see you!’ He knew my friends must have kept me informed of his shameful neglect of our charities. Perhaps he wanted to explain his behaviour.

‘Have you seen Rachel yet?’ I asked. He sighed gently, and took me by the hand. I’m sure I wouldn’t have let him if he hadn’t given me this astonishing reply:

‘Yes,’ he said perfectly calmly, ‘and we talked about our engagement. She has decided to leave me free to make a happier choice elsewhere. And I have agreed.’ I stood staring at him, my hand in his. He led me to a chair. ‘Suppose we sit down,’ he said sweetly. The man has such a way with ladies I felt completely helpless. I remember he was very affectionate.

‘I have lost a beautiful girl, an excellent social position, and a large income,’ he began. ‘I have agreed to it without a struggle, and curiously I don’t care. Now, when I think about it, I don’t even know why I proposed marriage to her. The result, however, is that I have neglected my dear Ladies. I feel like a child who doesn’t know why he’s been naughty.’ I remember he became even more affectionate (he even put his arm round my waist).

‘Dear friend,’ he went on, ‘the idea of marrying Rachel seems to me now like a strange dream. My true happiness is with my dear Ladies, in doing my modest Christian work. I don’t need an income! Or a social position! Or Miss Verinder! A month ago I was pressing her rapturously to my heart. Today she told me she loves another man and that marrying me was an attempt to forget him. And all I feel is an overpowering sense of relief.’

It was easy to recognize the reappearance of his finer nature in his eagerness to return to his Ladies and his Poor. I told him this in a few sisterly words. His joy was beautiful. He compared himself to a man coming out of darkness into light. Our brother had returned among us! He pressed my hands to his lips. I felt my eyes closing in self-forgetfulness. Then the bell rang. He started up.

‘I must rush to the station,’ he exclaimed. I asked him why he was in such a hurry. ‘I must tell my father about this — his heart was set on our marriage.’ He hurried out. I went in to luncheon, naturally curious to see how all this had affected Miss Rachel. She was silent, distant, yet seemed to be relieved. I had the impression she felt free again to think about the man she loved.

I was sure old Mr Ablewhite would arrive that night — considering the importance his greed had attached to his son’s marriage to Rachel. He arrived the next day, followed soon afterwards by Mr Bruff ‘Well, this is a surprise, Mr Bruff,’ he said. ‘When I left you yesterday I hardly expected to see you here today.’

‘After our conversation,’ Bruff replied, ‘I thought perhaps I might be of some use.’ He seated himself by Rachel. Mr Ablewhite stayed purposefully in the middle of the room. ‘Rachel, my dear,’ he said most affectionately. ‘I have heard some very extraordinary news. Please, would you come into the sitting-room with me?’

'Whatever you want to say to me can be said here in the presence of my...' (she glanced at Mr Bruff) '...of my mother's old and trusted friend.'

'Very well, my dear,' Mr Ablewhite said patiently. He took a chair, smiling sympathetically at her. 'It's obvious you two have had a lovers' quarrel.'

'Let us understand each other, Mr Ablewhite,' she said. 'No quarrel took place between your son and me. If he told you I suggested breaking our engagement, and that he agreed — he told you the truth.'

Mr Ablewhite went slightly red but replied sweetly. 'Come, come, my dear! Don't get angry. And don't be hard on poor Godfrey. He means well.'

'Mr Ablewhite, we have agreed to remain cousins. Is that clear?'

He went a shade redder. 'Must I understand then that your engagement is broken?'

'That is what you must understand, Mr Ablewhite. And that is all I have to say.' She turned and stared out at the sea.

Getting up, Mr Ablewhite pushed his chair back so violently it fell over. 'If my son doesn't feel this insult, I do!' he announced.

Rachel looked at him, surprised. 'Insult?' she said.

Mr Ablewhite was now purple. 'Yes, insult!' he repeated. 'I wasn't considered good enough for your mother's sister and now my son isn't good enough for you!'

A few wise words will help them, I thought to myself, and I got up. 'As an affectionate well-wisher,' I said, holding up one of my books, 'I am sure that these Christian words of love may...' Mr Ablewhite knocked the book out of my hand. 'Shut up!' he shouted, and turned to Rachel again. 'It is my duty to inform you, young woman, that if my son isn't good enough for you then I certainly can't be good enough to remain your legal guardian.' He smiled bitterly, bowed and marched out of the room.

'You idiot!' said Aunt Ablewhite, turning on me. 'You're the one who annoyed him! I hope I never see you and your stupid books again.' She went over to Rachel and kissed her. 'I beg my husband's pardon, my dear. Please, is there anything I can do?'

'Answering for Miss Verinder,' said Bruff, 'could I ask you to leave the room for ten minutes?' She left without a word. He looked hard at me, expecting me to follow, but soon gave up. 'My dear Rachel,' he said, 'would you like to come to stay with us in Hampstead — until we've decided what to do next?' She nodded, before I could even say a word.

'Stop!' I said. 'Mr Bruff! You're not her relative! I am. I invite her.' Rachel looked at me with cruel astonishment. Bruff said nothing. 'Rachel, dearest Rachel, come and share my modest home with me!'

'You're very kind, Drusilla,' she said. 'But I have accepted Mr Bruff's invitation.'

'Oh Rachel!' I cried, 'please don't say that! Please don't go! I dream of making a Christian out of you — as I was trying to do with your poor dear mother who died with her soul calamitously unprepared.'

Rachel started back, looking at me almost in horror. 'Come away, Mr Bruff. That wretch tries to make me doubt that my mother, who was an angel on earth, is an angel in heaven now! It stifles me to breathe the same air as her.'" I was left there, alone. From that day forth, I never saw Rachel Verinder again.

SECOND NARRATIVE

by Matthew Bruff, Lawyer

Money-Lending

I can throw some light on certain points which have remained in the dark. My narrative begins shortly after Lady Verinder's death, when I heard of Miss Verinder's proposed marriage.

I was so terribly disappointed when I heard that she was to marry a man I had always believed to be a smooth-tongued flatterer. I was certain of his financial motives and felt it was my duty to warn Miss Rachel but I did not want to worry her so soon after her mother's death. On the other hand, if I remained silent she would go ahead with a marriage that would make her unhappy for life.

I called at the hotel in London where Mrs Ablewhite and Miss Rachel were staying. They were going to Brighton the next day. Unexpectedly, Mr Godfrey could not accompany them, so I offered to. I was able to talk to Miss Rachel the next day. I recommended that she should tell Ablewhite in private that she had proof of his financial motives, and that therefore the marriage was out of the question. I told her to tell him that if he tried to oppose her, she would make her knowledge public.

After I returned that evening, Ablewhite's father came to my office. He told me that his son had been dismissed by Miss Rachel - *and had accepted it*. This confirmed my theory: that Godfrey needed a large sum of money and needed it *quickly*. Why else would he give up so easily a lifetime of luxury? His father wanted to know whether I had an explanation for Miss Verinder's extraordinary behaviour. Needless to say, I couldn't oblige him. I was sure that Miss Verinder might find him difficult to deal with when he visited the next day. I thought it better if I was with her. The meeting has been described by Miss Clack and resulted in Miss Rachel coming to stay with my wife and me.

A week after the end of her stay with us, my secretary informed me that a gentleman wanted to see me. There was a foreign name on the man's card; below it, was handwritten: 'Recommended by Septimus Luker.' He was extremely polite, well-mannered, and very smartly dressed in European clothes.

The moment he entered my office I knew he was one of the three Indians. I felt uneasy - knowing he would have murdered me if he thought I had the Moonstone. I asked what his business was.

He unfolded a gold cloth and showed me a tiny box, beautifully decorated with jewels. 'I have come, sir,' he said, 'to ask you to lend me some money. I can leave this as a guarantee.'

'Luker recommended me?' I asked. He nodded. 'Yet he knows I'm a lawyer, not a money-lender like him. He refused you?' He nodded. 'And so do I, I said. He wrapped up the box and got up.

'Supposing, sir,' he said, 'that you could have lent me money, how long would you have given me to pay it back?'

'A year,' I replied.

'Is that the usual time in this country?' he asked. When I said it was, he smiled contentedly and bowed. I felt sure for some reason, as I watched him leave, that pawning the box was just an excuse to lead up to that very last question.

Shortly afterwards, Luker came to see me. The substance of what that slippery old crook had to say is this:

The Indian had visited him the day before, dressed in the same way. Luker recognized him as one of the Indians who had been begging at his house. Knowing that he must also be one of the men who had robbed him of his banker's receipt, Luker was terrified. The man showed him the box and asked for a loan.

Luker refused, saying the best person to ask was a respectable lawyer. He recommended me. I asked him what the Indian had said before leaving. He had asked the same question, and got the same answer. A year.

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