

The Moonstone (Wilkie Collins) – Episode 13

Franklin Blake's narrative.

Up in Yorkshire, he has discovered that the thief of the diamond seems to be himself. The maid Rosanna who killed herself had hidden his paint-stained nightshirt. But even if he took the diamond while sleep walking, how did it get to London, to Septimus Luker? Gabriel Betteredge sent him to Mr Bruff, and both older men believe someone else may have worn his nightshirt, or marked it deliberately, and that Rachel must now speak of what she knows. Mr Bruff says he will arrange a meeting.

Episode 13

The next day was the longest in my life. The day after, Bruff came early and gave me a key. 'She's coming to lunch and will stay the afternoon. This is the key to the garden gate. At three, let yourself in. The living-room door will be open. Go in and open the door into the music room. You'll find her there alone.'

Later that morning I received a letter from Betteredge. Ezra Jennings, the doctor's assistant, had stopped him at the station and asked who I was. Later, he had mentioned me to Dr Candy. The doctor had said he particularly wanted to see me, whenever I returned to Fritzinghall. He asked Betteredge to let me know this.

The clock of Hampstead church struck three as I stepped into the garden. The birds were my only witnesses. I crossed the empty living-room to the music room door. She was playing the piano. The tune brought back a wave of memories. I had to wait and pull myself together. Finally, I opened the door.

She got up, and we faced each other in silence. 'Rachel!' I said gently. She advanced, as though against her own wishes, her cheeks a warm dusky colour. I forgot everything, saw only the woman I loved walking towards me. I took her in my arms, covered her face with kisses. There was a moment when I thought my kisses were returned but then suddenly she let out a little cry, like a cry of horror, and pushed me away from her. I saw merciless anger in her eyes, total contempt on her lips. 'You miserable heartless coward!' she said. 'After what you've done, you play on my weakness, trick me into letting you kiss me!'

'You say "what you've done". What have I done?'

'What have you done?' she cried. 'You dare ask me that! I kept your crime a secret— and suffered the consequences. You were once a gentleman, dear to my mother, dear to me...' She dropped into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

'Rachel,' I said, 'I came here to tell you something very important. Will you at least just listen to what I have to say?' She neither moved nor answered.

I told her of my discovery at the Shivering Sand. She never said a word, never even looked at me. 'I have a question to ask you,' I said. 'Did Rosanna show you the nightgown? Yes or no?'

She jumped to her feet, looked at me searchingly, as though trying to read something in my eyes. 'Are you mad?' she said.

I simply replied, 'Rachel, will you answer my question, please?'

Her lips curled into a bitter smile. 'They say your father's death has made

you a rich man. Have you come here to repay me for the loss of my diamond?’

I could control myself no longer. ‘You’ve done me wrong!’ I cried. ‘You suspect me of stealing your diamond. I have a right to know why!’

‘Suspect you!’ she exclaimed. *‘I saw you take it with my own eyes!’*

I stood there speechless.

‘Why did you come here?’ she asked contemptuously. The only words I could find were, ‘Rachel, you once loved me.’ I took her hand. She looked away, her hand trembling in mine. ‘Let me go!’ she said faintly.

I led her gently to the sofa and sat her down beside me. ‘Rachel,’ I said, ‘I can’t possibly explain what I’m going to say. Yet it is the truth. You say you saw me take the diamond with your own eyes. What I say is this: I now realize - for the first time - that I took it. Do you still doubt my sincerity?’

‘Let me go,’ she repeated weakly, but her head sank to my shoulder, her hand unconsciously closed around mine. ‘Tell me everything that happened,’ I said, ‘from when we said goodnight to when you saw me take the diamond.’ She lifted her head, made an effort to release her hand. ‘Why go back to it?’ she said.

‘I’ll tell you why,’ I replied. ‘Because we’re the victims of some horrible trick.’ Tears fell slowly over her cheeks. ‘Oh!’ she whispered, ‘Oh, how I’ve tried to persuade myself that.’ I held her closer. ‘You tried alone, without me to help you.’ My words seemed to awaken hope in her. ‘What happened after we left each other that night? Did you go straight to bed?’ She nodded.

‘About twelve o’clock, but I couldn’t sleep — I was thinking of you.’ Her answer almost brought tears to my eyes. ‘I got up at about one o’clock,’ she continued, ‘and lit a candle. I was about to go into my sitting-room to get a book. I had just opened the door — when I saw a light under the other door and heard footsteps approaching along the corridor. I thought it was my mother, coming to try and persuade me to let her take care of the diamond. I blew out the candle so she would think I was in bed. The door opened and I saw...’

‘You saw?’

‘You. In your nightgown, a candle in your hand.’

‘Were my eyes open?’

‘Yes. They were very bright. You came into the middle of the room, looking around you, as though afraid of being found out. I couldn’t speak or even move to shut the door. You could easily have seen me, but you didn’t. I’m sure you never saw me.’ I asked her how she was sure. ‘If you’d seen me you wouldn’t have taken the diamond. You went straight to the cabinet and opened drawers until you found it. I saw the stone shining in your hand as you took it out. You stood there for what seemed like ages, thinking, seemingly uneasy about something. Then you left. You went straight out, leaving the door open. I stood there in the dark listening to your steps dying away.’

I got up and walked up and down. ‘So?’ she said. ‘What do you have to say now?’ She waited pitilessly for my reply. I had none, only the terrible, shameful helplessness of my situation. I suddenly felt the horror, the disappointment she must have felt. I turned and opened the door to leave. She jumped up, closed the door. ‘No!’ she said, ‘Not yet.’ She spoke without looking at me. ‘I won’t tell you what I felt, Franklin. I’ll simply tell you what I

did. I decided to tell no one. I was prepared to believe anything —no matter what! — rather than believe you were a thief. I raised the alarm the next morning. And what was the first news I heard afterwards? I heard that YOU had called the police! You were working harder than anyone to recover the jewel that you already had! But even then — even then something wouldn't let me give up my faith in you. I went down to the terrace and forced myself to speak to you — have you forgotten what I said? I gave you several opportunities — didn't I? — to tell me the truth. I let you know in the clearest possible way —without actually saying it — that I knew you had stolen it. All you did was look at me with your false face of innocence just as you are now! I saw you steal it! I saw you pretend to help the police! You pawned it in London and ran away abroad the next morning. And now you come here and tell me I have wronged you!

I brushed past her and opened the door. 'Why did you come here?' she said. 'Why? Are you afraid I might make the truth known? Now that you're a rich man you can marry anyone you want, can't you? I can't expose you. I can't tear you out of my heart, even now!'

'You shall know that you have wronged me yet,' I said, and left her. 'Franklin!' she cried after me. 'I forgive you! Oh, Franklin, we shall never meet again? Say you forgive *me!*' I turned, and waved my hand, seeing her only dimly through the tears that had conquered me, before I left the garden.

Late that evening Mr Bruff visited me, not at all his usual confident self. 'You know the truth at last,' he said. 'However, the price you - both of you - paid was too much. She will get over this, with time. Promise me, Mr Franklin, that you won't try and see her again without my approval.'

'You have my word.'

'Now, in my opinion, it would be better to consider the inexplicable events which Miss Rachel described as dead and buried.' He saw my total confusion. 'We're wasting our time in the past, Mr Franklin. We must look to the future. What do we know? We know it was pawned to Mr Luker. Do we know who by? No. Where is it now? In Luker's bank. And there is every chance that the person who pawned it may want to get it back. It is already June - almost a year since it was put in the bank. So I suggest watching the bank. However, if Murthwaite is right, then the Indians will be watching it too. Whatever happens, we must find out *who* pawned the diamond. Only the discovery of the thief can restore you to your rightful place in Rachel's heart. It means waiting about a fortnight at most.'

'A lifetime,' I said. 'My existence is a horrible dream. I must do something now! I had thought of contacting Sergeant Cuff...'

'Useless. He has retired from the police.' I told him I knew where to find him. 'All right, do what you want,' said Bruff picking up his hat. 'Yes, it's worth a try. As for me, I'll take care of the bank.' We parted.

Next morning, as I walked up the garden path of a little cottage in Dorking, I saw Cuff's favourite flower everywhere around me. Far from the crimes of the great city, he was living out his last years here. His wife told me he was in Ireland on rose business. For how long? She didn't know I gave her my card and asked whether he could contact me as soon as he returned.

For most of that night I sat smoking, building up wild hopeless theories and knocking them down again. The next morning, pure chance rescued me from

my confusion. I put on the coat I was wearing the day I visited Rachel and found Betteredge's letter in a pocket. I read it again. Dr Candy had said he wanted to say something very important to me. Instinct told me to go to Yorkshire that day. The next train left three hours later. As I sat wondering how to kill the time, my thoughts kept wandering back to the birthday dinner. I tried to remember all the guests. Most of them were from Fritzinghall, except Godfrey, Mr Murthwaite and Miss Clack. I decided to pay Godfrey a visit.

I drove to his club, where I met a friend in the hall, a friend of Godfrey's also. He told me that shortly after Rachel broke off their engagement, he had made an offer of marriage to another very rich young lady — who accepted, but a few days later the engagement was suddenly broken off. Soon afterwards, Godfrey was extremely generously remembered in the will of a very rich old lady, a member of the Young Mothers' Etc., Etc. Society. Five thousand pounds richer, Godfrey felt the need for a rest from his charitable activities. He had left London for Europe the previous day and was expected to be gone at least three months.

1964 words, without intro