

the time—I mean at the time when she was lost?’

‘I know nothing.’

‘Absolutely, nothing?’

‘Absolutely, nothing.’

‘Have you never felt a suspicion of how it happened?’

Her face changed: she frowned as she looked at him. ‘Not till weeks and months had passed,’ she said, ‘not till it was too late. I was ill at the time. When my mind got clear again, I began to suspect one particular person—little by little, you know; noticing trifles, and thinking about them afterwards.’ She stopped, evidently restraining herself on the point of saying more.

Amelius tried to lead her on. ‘Did you suspect the person—?’ he began.

‘I suspected him of casting the child helpless on the world!’ Mrs. Farnaby interposed, with a sudden burst of fury. ‘Don’t ask me any more about it, or I shall break out and shock you!’ She clenched her fists as she said the words. ‘It’s well for that man,’ she muttered between her teeth, ‘that I have never got beyond suspecting, and never found out the truth! Why did you turn my mind that way? You shouldn’t have done it. Help me back again to what we were saying a minute ago. You made some objection; you said—?’

‘I said,’ Amelius reminded her, ‘that, even if I did meet with the missing girl, I couldn’t possibly know it. And I must say more than that—I don’t see how you yourself could be sure of recognising her if she stood before you this moment.’

He spoke very gently, fearing to irritate her. She showed no sign of irritation—she looked at him, and listened to him, attentively.

‘Are you setting a trap for me?’ she asked. ‘No!’ she cried, before Amelius could answer, ‘I am not mean enough to distrust you—I forgot myself. You have innocently said something that rankles in my mind. I can’t leave it where you have left it;

I don’t like to be told that I shouldn’t recognise her. Give me time to think. I must clear this up.’

She consulted her own thoughts, keeping her eyes fixed on Amelius.

‘I am going to speak plainly,’ she announced, with a sudden appearance of resolution. ‘Listen to this. When I banged to the door of that big cupboard of mine, it was because I didn’t want you to see something on the shelves. Did you see anything in spite of me?’

The question was not an easy one to answer. Amelius hesitated. Mrs. Farnaby insisted on a reply.

‘Did you see anything?’ she reiterated.

Amelius owned that he had seen something.

She turned away from him, and looking into the fire. Her firm full tones sank so low, when she spoke next, that he could barely hear them.

‘Was it something belonging to a child?’

‘Yes.’

‘Was it a baby’s frock and cap? Answer me. We have gone too far to go back. I don’t want apologies or explanations—I want, Yes or No.’

‘Yes.’

There was an interval of silence. She never moved; she still looked into the fire—looked as if all her past life was pictured there in the burning coals.

‘Do you despise me?’ she asked, at last, very quietly.

‘As God hears me, I am only sorry for you!’ Amelius answered.

Another woman would have melted into tears. This woman still looked into the fire—and that was all. ‘What a good fellow!’ she said to herself; ‘what a good fellow he is!’

There was another pause. She turned towards him again as abruptly as she turned away.

‘I had hoped to spare you, and to spare myself,’ she said. ‘If the miserable truth has come out, it is through no curiosity of yours, and (God knows!)