

A Circumstantial Puzzle

R. E. FRANCILLON

I

The almost insuperable difficulty of telling a story with even a grain of truth in it is this—or, I should rather say, the two insuperable difficulties are these: firstly, there is never the faintest dramatic point about really true stories; secondly, if they are worth telling at all, they are almost always incredible. And the truer they are, the more pointless and the more incredible they are. The story I am going to tell is neither dramatic nor probable. And yet it seems to me worth telling—independently of its inherent curiosity—as an instance of those extraordinary freaks of psychology which now and again throw out of gear altogether the everyday experience of practical men, among whom I have some claim to be reckoned. It has also a yet more important bearing upon the manner of making delicate investigations which, if I remember to do so, I may perhaps take occasion to point out before I have done. As when I sent you my last contribution to your museum of professional curiosities, I will merge my own proper personality in that of my informant, the solicitor who played so leading and, for a time, so uncomfortable a part in the affair. For all purposes it is more convenient to translate ‘he’ into ‘I’, when one is telling another man’s story. Indeed, it is almost essential to the process of telling the tale as it was told to me.

I, then, early one forenoon, received a visit from my very best client, Mr John Buller.

Mr John Buller was a gentleman who, still hardly past the prime of life, had made a considerable fortune as a builder and contractor. Altogether there must have been something out of the common about him, for he had become the wealthy man he certainly was seemingly in defiance of all established precedents and rules. He was not what is commonly—and often very mistakenly—called a ‘good man of

business'; he always had more irons in the fire than he could possibly attend to personally, or even superintend generally, and he placed such implicit trust in all who served him or dealt with him as to amount to credulity. Nevertheless, I am by no means sure myself of its being really singular that his many irons should have taken excellent care of themselves, and that he very rarely indeed, at least to my knowledge, found himself seriously deceived. I need hardly say that, like all men of such a temper, to be found out in deceiving him in the smallest trifle was to lose his confidence irrevocably and for ever; so that not only were moderately honourable men put upon their honour to an unusual degree in their relations towards one who trusted them so completely, but the dishonourable were by experience taught to fear injuring one from whom everything was to be gained but pardon. He certainly was not one of those who hold that in business a man should have no enemies and no friends. All men were his friends until, as sometimes would happen, they became his enemies. And yet one might know him for years without suspecting that he had any sort of temper at all. Doubtless it was the consciousness on his own part of having one, and the suspicion that it might be a weakness or a failing, that made him seem needlessly hard and reserved. On the whole, I incline to ascribe his success in life less to courage and over-confidence than to a yet more unbusiness-like habit of always doing his work a little better than his contract required. I would pay ten per cent higher rent, any day, to live in a house that I knew to have been built by John Buller. I should know that everything about that house was better than it seemed. And that is the chief reason why I set out by speaking of him as a gentleman. For he had risen from the lower rounds of the ladder, and, so far as he might be called a diamond, was decidedly an unpolished one. He was, I believe, a seriously religious man; he was an unquestionably generous and charitable one; not highly educated, but with plenty of intelligence and openness of mind. I should add that he had never been married; was without known relations; and lived alone in thoroughly respectable comfort, without pretence of any kind. The nature of his business, by no means confined to the limits of the northern town where we both lived, took him about a great deal, and no doubt largely helped him to do without much society at home. For that matter, he was, socially speaking, above one-half the place and below the other; so, though universally respected, he must, on the whole, have lived almost too

much alone. But in this matter, as in all things, habit is everything; and so busy a man had little time to feel dull.

'Mr Standish,' he began, in the broad north-country speech, which I shall make no pretence of reproducing, 'something mortal queer has happened, that I can't make head or tail o'. It's not the money's-worth, though fifty pound is fifty pound; but—Look here!'

'Your cheque for fifty pounds, cashed by the Redport branch of the County Bank, and returned to you in the regular course. Well, what's wrong?'

'Do you see anything queer about that cheque, Mr Standish—anything out of the way?'

'No. It's drawn to yourself or order by yourself; endorsed by you; and nothing wrong about date or anything else that I can see.'

'And if you'd been a clerk at Redport, you'd have cashed that over the counter without any bones?'

'Of course I should; as I suppose from this you have an account there.'

'And that's just what was done, then. And all the same, that cheque was no more filled up, nor signed, nor backed by me than it was by you.'

'You mean to say it's forged? By Jove, that's a serious thing! Do you mean to say that some rascal has been clever enough to fill up and sign a whole cheque in your handwriting, even down to the least turn of the smallest stroke of the pen? I'd have sworn to this being your own handwriting before a jury.'

'Ay, Mr Standish; and so would I, if I didn't know. But I do know; and that's no more my cheque than it's yours. And I'm hanged if I know what to do.'

'You've seen the bank manager here? What does he say?'

'No, I haven't. I haven't seen a soul; and what's more, I don't mean to, unless I'm driven. And it's to get out of being driven I'm come to you. This cheque isn't the first of 'em, Mr Standish—no, nor the second, nor yet the third. There's four cheques of fifty pounds apiece; and I've not drawn one!'

'And you haven't found it out till now?'

'I've found out nothing, Mr Standish, mark that—not one word. Nothing's found out till it's proved. I want to know what I can do.'

That premature question was the only sign of precipitancy or impatience I had ever seen in John Buller. I began to see that he was

disturbed by something beyond the loss, to himself or the bank, of two hundred pounds, or by the always detestable necessity of being mixed up in what looked like a criminal matter. So I made no answer, which is always the best way of getting quickly at the bottom of a story.

'I'm putting up the new row of villas on the esplanade at Redport,' said he. 'It's a biggish job in a small way, and it's very much on my own account; and what with the hands, and one thing and another, there's a goodish lot of cash floating about from week to week—going out, anyhow, though of course none to speak of coming in. So, to save a lot of bother, I've had for some time an account with the branch at Redport. You don't know the place, I believe?'

'I've never been over there yet; but I must run over some day, when I can get a holiday. Well?'

'It's been main through me that the place has got on well enough to make it worth the Bank's while to have a branch there; and if I was to draw for five times what's to my credit, I don't suppose they'd make any bother, looking to my credit at the main branch here. So this game might go on any time before I heard I'd overdrawn. As far as I'm concerned, a cheque on the branch at Redport's much the same as one on the bank here.'

'Well?'

'You see, though that job's middling big, I've got too many bigger on hand to bother in person with Redport. It's two months since I've been near the place, and may be it'll be another month before I can get over there again. So I've got a clerk of the works in an office in one of the villas, and he comes over to me here every Friday to report and take any new orders, and I give him cheques on the Redport branch for what's wanted—he brings me his accounts and vouchers, of course, and I settle that way whatever has to be paid running. And some of the cheques I receive I send over by him to be paid in there.'

'Excuse me,' said I, 'but doesn't this seem rather a loose and rough way of doing things? In the first place, I don't see why you should make any payments through the Redport branch at all; and certainly I don't see how all this concerns these forgeries.'

'I'll tell you why I do it, and how it concerns these—*forgeries*, too. I want to keep as much cash knocking about in Redport as I can, and to keep as little from going out; that's the way to push a new place on. And, for the same reason, I don't want those branch clerks to find

they've got too little to do. My clerk comes to me at four o'clock every Friday afternoon. First of all, I give him a cheque for the men's week's wages. Then we go through the accounts, and for any that I want to settle off-hand I either draw separate cheques in favour of the different parties, or else I give him another lump cheque for him to cash and pay out in gold. In fact, there's all sorts of things to be paid in all sorts of ways. If the account seems running low, it's easier for me to pay in a few cheques than to bother the bank here. Anyhow, it saves me a bushel of bother, and don't oblige me to give more than an hour a week to Redport—and even an hour's too much at times.'

'Just tell me precisely everything that happens, please. We're rather vague, where we are. He comes to you at four every Friday, and you give him all these cheques—whatever he asks for—and then he goes back at once to Redport by rail?'

John Buller glanced at me sharply. By those words 'whatever he asks for' I had trodden upon what is always the most sensitive of an over-trustful man's corns: I had hinted at the want of worldly prudence which such a man, far more than any other, hates to be suspected of lacking.'

'I'm not quite a born fool,' said he. 'We go through the accounts, and he stays for supper and a bed. By breakfast-time next morning I've found a half hour to examine the accounts and to write the cheques. I give him the whole lot in a leather case, and he goes back to Redport; and it's his duty, before he goes to the office, to go to the Redport Bank and pay in and draw out whatever's required.'

I did not see how this made matters any better from a prudential point of view; but I did not venture again upon what I felt to be rather dangerous ground.

'Then all your transactions with the branch bank at Redport,' I asked, 'are confined to ten o'clock on Saturday morning? *This* cheque is stamped as cashed on the 15th, which *would* be a Saturday. Of course we shall learn from your passbook, or from the cheques themselves, if that was so with the others. If so, the false cheques must either have been presented together with the others, or by somebody who knew your system. Also, it is clear they were drawn, judging from this, by somebody who had exceptional means of knowing your handwriting, and of practising it at leisure—and, if I may say so, how little likely you were, with such a system of business as yours,

to detect fraud very soon. Also, by somebody to whom your cheque-book was accessible, in one way or another. Are these cheques taken from your cheque-book, or can the thief have got hold of some other?’

I could see that John Buller began to look strangely troubled.

‘From mine!’ said he, in a curiously defiant tone.

‘And the counterfoils? Cut out, I suppose? That’s the usual way.’

‘No; every man Jack filled up in a way that would take the very devil in. And yet, Mr Standish, those cheques are no more my drawing than they’re yours. I keep a private account of every cheque I draw; and it stands to reason that when four cheques that you know you didn’t draw are alone missing out of an account of fifty that you know you *did* draw, then you can’t be mistaken. That’s as clear as day.’

‘All right, Mr Buller; it *is* as clear as day. And though criminal business is very much out of my line, we’ll have that forger beyond the seas in, comparatively speaking, the twinkling of an eye. What’s the fellow’s name?’

‘His name? And how the deuce, sir, should *I* know his name?’

‘Not know the name of your own clerk of the works at Redport? By Jove, Mr Buller, I *shall* begin to think you a queer sort of a business man!’

‘We’re at crooked answers, Mr Standish, it seems to me,’ he said, wiping his forehead hard, though the weather was unusually cold. ‘My clerk at Redport is Adam Brown.’

‘Then it’s lucky Mr Adam Brown didn’t live when forgers were hanged,’ said I. ‘You won’t be able to recover from the bank, I’m afraid; such forgeries as those defy even extraordinary care to detect them. A bank clerk is expected to be a great deal; but nobody expects him to be a conjurer. But’—

To my amazement, John Buller sprang up in a towering rage.

‘And you—you dare to hint that—that—that poor lad, who’s as honest as the day, would steal one farthing from me—a young man I’d trust with untold gold—the orphan of the best woman that ever touched God’s earth! I won’t hear it, sir! I didn’t come to *you* to hear slander against *her* son, that I’ve looked after for *her* sake, and who’d no more touch a farthing rushlight that belonged to me than you would yourself, sir! If there’s one man who’s as guiltless as the babe unborn, it’s Adam Brown!’

'I honour your confidence in your *employés*, sir,' said I. 'Trust makes Trustworthy nine times out of ten. But look here. Here is a man whom you trust implicitly on your own showing. There is your cheque-book for one night every week under the same roof with him, the place where you keep it probably known to him. That man knows your writing, and how you fill up your cheques and your counterfoils. That man transacts *all* your business with the bank at Redport. That man, it seems, may account to you or not account to you just in what form he will. Nobody else in your employ seems open to suspicion; no stranger could act in such a way without instant detection. Think what any jury would say to such a state of things. We've as yet got no direct proof; but, with such circumstantial evidence to start with, direct proof is absolutely sure to come. Why, he might hope to carry on such a game as that safely for many years; at any rate, till he had restored what he had taken, as all those young rascals always "mean" to do some day when some impossible horse wins some impossible Derby. And I'm afraid, previous good character in such cases always goes against a man. It doubles the guilt of his downfall, and is, indeed, the very means and cause of his being able to fall. Adam Brown is the man.'

John Buller's anger passed suddenly, as if ashamed of itself; and there was no mistaking the profound grief and distress of the tone in which he answered me.

'You'll excuse me,' said he. 'It was because I saw all this just as well as you do that I came here, hoping you, as a practical and unprejudiced man, would help me to see t'other side of things. And I was disappointed you didn't, and that was what made me fly. Don't you go to mistake me for being any softer than my neighbours. If you can prove to me the man who's been tampering with my cheque-book is Adam Brown, I'll treat him like a viper, Mr Standish—that I will! I'd sooner cut my own throat than throw a crust to my own son, if I had one, if I couldn't trust him as my own right hand. And, if you'll believe it, sir, Adam Brown has been more to me than if he was my own son. For he's the orphan boy of the only woman I ever wanted to marry, or ever shall. I don't suspect him for one moment—not I. But for that very reason I want you to show me how to put him above the suspicion of any outside man, such as you. Take my word for it, it's not Adam Brown. If it was, I'd have done his business for him pretty quick, without bothering myself to come to you. But make as if I

thought it was: you prove the innocence of an innocent lad, and, by Jingo, you'll take off my mind the biggest load of bricks that ever was on.'

The speech was inconsistent enough. But one thing was plain from it—John Buller was determined to disbelieve the clear evidence of his own reason. He had not come to me to find out a thief, but to get me to prove to his own satisfaction that the thief was an innocent man; and, at the same time, to acquit him in his own eyes of intentional self-deception. He knew how he would have to act if he found his trust deceived, and the severity which he thought his duty in such cases frightened him, lest he should feel compelled to exercise it towards Adam Brown. I could not help smiling at the openness of the workings of his mind, or being touched by them, too. I had never suspected my substantial client of having been the victim of a romance since I had first gone down from London to Carcester.

'Then,' I asked again, a little hypocritically, 'you are convinced in your own mind, from your previous knowledge of his character, that Adam Brown is *not* the man?'

'I'm just as certain he's not as that I stand here. And, more for his sake than my own, I mean to know who *is* the man.'

'Have you spoken about it to Adam Brown?'

'Not I. I'd as soon speak to you, Mr Standish, on the supposition that it might have been *you*.'

'Very good. If Adam Brown—'

'*If*, sir?'

'Since Adam Brown is innocent, we can very soon put him beyond the reach of any sort of suspicion, and without bringing the people at the bank into the affair—at least, not in any way that would make them think anything was seriously wrong in any particular direction. In the first place, arrange with them, both here and at Redport, not to cash any cheque of yours not bearing a certain private mark (which you will keep secret from all your *employés*) without forthwith advertising you of the person by whom it was presented. This will have the effect of narrowing matters very considerably. What had better be done further I think we will wait and see.'

'You quite understand, Mr Standish, that whatever you do will find out who was the real man—not young Adam Brown? I—I doubt if I quite like to do that about the private mark after all. It seems a bit mean-like to my mind.'

'It's the best way of clearing Adam Brown if—since he's innocent, it seems to me,' said I.

'You think that? Well, you're right, I suppose. And, by Jingo, as he is innocent why should I be afraid? If he wasn't—if I wasn't as sure of it as I'm alive—but it can't be! I'd sooner doubt my own right hand! I will. I'll settle about the private mark this very day.'

Of course I had not the faintest doubt in my own mind about the identity of this ingenious and systematic forger with Mr Adam Brown. I had already given my reasons to John Buller; and they are so perfectly obvious, under all the circumstances, that I need not repeat them here. I could quite understand why John Buller, since he had a more than common interest in his clerk of the works at Redport, should be very anxious to be convinced that his belief in the latter's innocence was not inconsistent with the common sense proper to a shrewd man of the world, whose pride in never being 'done' is always the greater in proportion as it is unjustified. Men who are really sharp and shrewd know too well that they are always and inevitably being 'done' to bother their heads about their share in a universal doom.

I knew Adam Brown pretty well by sight, and a little by reputation. He was a good-looking, pleasant young fellow, certainly too young for his over-responsible place in John Buller's service, but well up to his work, and very popular with the young men of his own class in Carcester. His father had been an unsuccessful commission agent, and, as I had today learned for the first time, the successful rival in love of John Buller. I must leave it to others wholly to understand why the beaten suitor, whom nobody suspected of having a grain of sentiment in his composition, should have made himself a second father to this young man—in a reserved and wholly undemonstrative way, that is; for I feel certain now that Adam Brown looked upon himself simply as an ordinary *employé*, and did not fancy that the place he held in John Buller's business was due to the place in John Buller's heart of his dead mother. I daresay that little romance might prove worth writing for its own sake in the hands of a sentimental author. But this story is *not* a sentimental one.

So I was really rather sorry that circumstances pointed so clearly to Adam Brown as the guilty man, though of course I felt also that John Buller's eyes ought to be opened, and that such ungrateful crime

ought to be punished as openly and as richly as it deserved. I had not the least intention of helping my client to persuade himself of the innocence of a guilty man. On the contrary, I fully meant to expose the young rascal before he could do worse harm; and for that purpose the plan of privately marked cheques seemed the best that, upon the spur of the moment, I could hit on. It would satisfy John Buller by avoiding immediate scandal, and no doubt convict the forger just as well as any more open way.

But the explosion was to come more sharply and swiftly than I had planned.

On the following Saturday morning the spirit moved me to take John Buller's house on my way to my own office, for I was not particularly busy at the moment. I thought it advisable to see with my own eyes something of that curious weekly despatch of cheques and bills to Redport, and I wanted also to make more particular acquaintance with the physiognomy of Mr Adam Brown. I believed in physiognomy in those days. I need hardly say that I no longer now do anything of the kind, beyond knowing when a man eats too much and drinks too often. I have seen such saintly faces in the dock, and men on whom Nature has stamped blackguard, or even murderer; have been among the best whom she has made. Adam Brown, who had finished his breakfast and was just on the eve of starting for Redport, fell into neither of these extreme classes, and might easily have belonged to either side of the broad band between them where good is inextricably and undecipherably mixed up and often confused with harm. As I have said, he was young and good-looking; and he had a good face too, like a lad's who comes of good people and has been brought up well. And, what was better, it was not a weak one, nor a stupid one. But, at the same time, it wasn't a happy one, and gloomy rather than merely grave. His eyes, instead of looking bright or open, as a young man's should always be in the morning, were dull and red, as if he had either slept but little or were in the habit of taking something stronger than tea or coffee for breakfast when at home in his Redport lodgings. In such cases, the eye and the hand are one; and his hand was not quite so steady as he held out his hand for the leather cheque-case, so I thought at least, as it ought to have been.

'I've only dropped in to see if you've made your arrangements about marking today's cheques,' said I, as soon as Adam Brown had closed the street-door. 'You've found nothing new, I suppose?'

'No. I wish to Heaven the thing was out and over; it worries me more than I try to say. There's nothing so horrible as having somebody about that you can't trust and you don't know who. And you're a married man, Standish; you don't know what it means to swallow all your own worries yourself, with nobody to give the least bit of 'em to. But—holloa! Hi, Adam!' he called out, throwing up the window and calling down the street. 'Just to show you how things bother me,' he said to me, 'I've left out of the case just the very cheque from Archer & Company that I wanted to have paid in at Redport this very day. Hi, Adam! Ah, here you are! I was afraid you were out of earshot; but you're in lots of time for the train. There's something I wanted to say to you, and Mr Standish coming in just now—'

There was nothing in the sudden recall, however unusual, to frighten an honest man. But I could not mistake my eyes—there are some cases in which we can't help reading faces, ay, and in believing what we read. If ever fright turned a man's face red and pale, it turned Adam Brown's now.

'Here's a cheque of Archer's,' said John Buller, noticing nothing, 'that I want paid in at Redport this morning, and I forgot it when Mr Standish came in. Put it in the case with the others. Here it is. Three hundred and eighty-eight pounds nine.'

Adam Brown held out his hand for the cheque; but a sudden inspiration, prompted by the young man's unmistakable confusion, made me say,

'Yes; there's plenty of time for the train, but not for me. There's something I must say to you, Mr Buller, before I go on to the office, and I've only allowed myself a minute to spare. Would you mind leaving us alone for one minute, Mr Brown? You can leave the case here; Mr Buller can put in the cheque while he's listening to me to save time.'

I watched the young man while I spoke, and what I saw made me feel more sure than ever. I held out my hand for the case, to pass it to John Buller, and felt Adam's fingers tremble as they touched mine. And yet not a word had been said that could alarm a perfectly innocent man, who has no secrets from his employer or even from his employer's attorney.

'Wait a bit,' I said to John Buller, as soon as Adam had left the room. 'Before putting in that cheque, just see if the others are as they ought to be.'

'The others? Of course they are. What do you mean?'

'Why, as you made one mistake, you might by chance have made another, you know. Well, while you're overhauling, I only just wanted to say—'

There was nothing I wanted to say, but I had no need to think of a pretext. I had my eye on John Buller, and before 'say' was off my lips—

'Good God!' cried he. 'Look here! Brown!' he shouted, 'Adam Brown—'

'Don't frighten him,' said I, rising and opening the door, knowing what John Buller had found in the case as well as if I had seen it with my very eyes. 'Mr Brown, you may come in now.'

He came in, as a detected criminal comes before a judge, trembling and pale. I wondered he had been able to remain in the hall all alone for that terrible moment, during which, as he must have known, he was being tried, found guilty, and condemned.

To my surprise, John Buller, whom I had thought in the first stage of a passion, sat still, in front of his detected clerk, without a word. But I should not like to have been in Adam Brown's shoes during that silent pause. There was no sign or thought of anger in the long look of mingled sorrow and scorn—more of sorrow than of scorn—with which John Buller regarded the young man to whom he had tried to be a second father. I had done my duty, I suppose; but I could not help pitying both, and I know whom I pitied the most of the two. It was not the younger man.

I looked steadfastly at the fifth forged cheque for fifty pounds which John Buller had found, just as I had expected, in the leather case, and the preparation of which was quite enough to account for the sleepless look of the young man's eyes. It seemed to me that the imitation was even better than before.

'Adam Brown,' said John Buller at last, in a voice full of sadness, and yet of the double pathos which comes alone from more dignified firmness than I should have expected from such a man—'Adam Brown, I know well enough that you see your deceit discovered, and I won't add to your wrongdoing by tempting you to tell a lie. I knew your mother—long ago—and for her sake I first gave you work, and bread to work for. But it was for your own sake I trusted you, even as she might have trusted me; and the end is that I shall never be able to trust man, woman, or child again. That is the injury *you* have done to *me*; and there's none greater that man can do man. I fought hard

against the belief of my own eyes—for weeks I've fought against it; but I know now. Don't be afraid. I'm not going to have you—your mother's son—put in the dock as a felon. But there's nothing I can do *for* a man—a boy—that—that—Go; and never cross my path again.'

The culprit tried to lift his eyes, but failed.

'Sir,' he began, 'I do not defend—I do not excuse—I never intended—'

'I am sorry for myself. Do not make me despise *you*. A man does as he intends. I'm wrong not to prosecute you; it's what I should do to any other man who did as—as you have done. Go. I give you the chance to redeem yourself, if you can; but not with me. Go.'

Without one attempt to defend or excuse his guilt, far less to deny it, the young man was gone.

'I do *not* thank you for this, Mr Standish,' said John Buller. The tears came into his voice as he turned away.

II

The more I thought things over, the less displeased I was with myself for the way in which they had gone. The more anybody thinks about it, the more finished a rogue, in spite of his years, will Adam Brown appear to be. His plan was as clear as daylight now. Obviously, he had easily found where his employer kept his cheque-book for the bank at Redport, and spent the better part of Friday night in filling up one of its forms, and manipulating the counterfoil so as to produce an exact facsimile of a cheque drawn and signed by John Buller. On my life, I believe he might, so perfect was his process, have got a jury to acquit him on the ground that some strange accident must have been his enemy, and that the cheque was really John Buller's after all; for the best men of business may be guilty of mistake or error now and then. Yes, but then you see that defence would not have done after all, seeing that here was the sixth cheque forged in six weeks; and that John Buller not only had never had occasion to draw these, and knew he never had drawn them, but had kept a perfectly complete and accurate account, inaccurate in no slightest particular, of all he had had occasion to draw and remembered drawing. Mistake—if the reader will think for one instant—was thus rendered absolutely impossible. And not only was the matter clenched now by conduct on Adam Brown's part amounting to con-

fession, without so much as an appeal for mercy, but *every cheque in the case bore the private mark except this alone*. And the packet had been in no hands but those of Adam Brown.

Of course it was natural that John Buller, like all men of his temper when they met with such everyday things as ingratitude and breach of trust, should feel misanthropical, and as if confidence in his fellow-creatures was henceforth dead in him. But very few men indeed are Timons. We mostly return to our original nature: instinctive trust is happily a fine hardy growth that requires a great deal of killing. In a little while, no doubt, John Buller would trust the next stranger rather more implicitly than if he had been his own brother, and be all the better for being rid of such an exceptionally clever rogue, a man with a positive genius for forgery, as his ex-clerk of the works at Redport. Perhaps, even, his experience would have a wholesome effect upon him by teaching him that the son of a woman we have loved in our youth is not, solely for that rather sentimental reason, bound to be better than all other sons of Eve in general. Young men who have had mothers have also had fathers; and Mr Brown, the commission agent, had not borne altogether the highest of characters while alive.

I did not see, or hear from, John Buller for the next few days; which was rather singular, as he nearly always had a good deal of business on hand which required the help of a solicitor, and as two or three important agreements to which he was party were just then passing through my hands. But I heard in various incidental ways of young Brown. A clerk of mine was an acquaintance of his; and he told me—without knowing any of the circumstances—that Brown had suddenly left John Buller and had gone up to London to find another situation; which, without any sort of character (for John Buller was incapable of giving a false or even a misleading one to anybody), I imagined he would find it hard to do, except as active partner in a firm of forgers. From another source I heard he had had a fortune left him, and was going to live on a fine estate in the country. Anyhow, he left both Redport and Carcester without leaving behind him a guess as to the true reason of his departure.

It was not, indeed, till the following Friday afternoon that I next received a visit from John Buller. I thought him looking fagged and harassed, and I told him so.

‘I’m afraid you keep too many irons in the fire,’ said I.

'Not a bit of it. One keeps the other warm. If you was as much by yourself as I am, you'd want a bit more work than you could manage, just to keep you and yourself from quarrelling.'

'Have you heard anything more of young Brown?'

'Young Who?'

'Young Brown.'

'I've forgotten his name. And you won't remind me of it, if you and me's to keep friends. There's no such name. Talking of not looking well—it's you that don't look yourself, it seems to me. You want a day's holiday, and I've looked in to ask you to be so kind as to take one.'

'You're very kind, I'm sure; but—'

'“But” be hanged! Look here, Mr Standish. Today's Friday; and there's the usual business of paying in and drawing out to be done over at Redport tomorrow. I can't do it myself, as I've got to be in three other places at once by the first train; and I'm not such an ass as to trust any of my people here with the value of sevenpence-halfpenny. Once bit, twice shy. I've done with trusting for the rest of *my* days. At the rate of fifty pound a week, it don't pay. You've never been over at Redport; and, though I say it that shouldn't, the place is worth seeing, as a specimen of what places can be made to grow. You take a day's run over there tomorrow—you and Mrs Standish too. I'll give you a pass on the line, and telegraph to the Star to treat you like princes and princesses. All you'll have to do will be to hand my cheque-case over the bank counter, which won't take you two minutes, or fifty yards out of your way to the new pier; and then you can make a Saturday-to-Monday of it, if you please. I want you to see Redport before it grows out of all knowing. Say yes, and I'll have the cheques and things ready for you to pick up at my house on your way to the train.'

I was not particularly anxious for a holiday; and certainly no wish to spend one *en prince* at the Star. But, at the same time, I had no sort of objection to an idle day, and it was almost necessary, as a matter of business, to see the neighbouring town which was becoming every day more and more an office word. So, though more to please my best client than for any other reason, I agreed, only bargaining that I should be left free from the special attentions of the Star. John Buller thanked me for my promise to go as if I had done him some extraordinary favour.

'Well, if you won't let me telegraph, when you do ask for lunch at the Star, mention my name. You won't see much going on in the building line just now; one of the things I've got to be away for tomorrow is to get another scoundrel—till *he's* found out, like the rest of 'em—in the place of poor young—of that young blackguard whose name I'll never remember again, if I live for a thousand years.'

Now I don't want to have it supposed for a moment that my going over to Redport alone—that is to say, without my wife—was due to any fault or neglect of mine. If I could have foreseen that my day of idleness was to be one of solitude also, I should probably not quite so readily have consented to take a holiday. As it happened, however, I found, when I got home from the office, that Mrs Standish had almost that very moment received an urgent summons to the sick-bed of her sister, who lived at the other end of England, which obliged her to take the very next train from Carcester and to travel all night through. Naturally, until I had seen her off, I did not think again of my promised visit to Redport. So, as it was too late to back out of going, I decided to run over in the morning, do my business at the bank, and get back as early in the afternoon as the then infrequent trains between Redport and Carcester allowed.

So next morning, having told my clerks to close the office at the usual hour which on Saturday was always an early one, I went to John Buller's house, and from his hands received the cheque-case which he had ready for me. Knowing his feelings about the matter, I refrained from making any sort of allusion to it, and even made a point, while receiving the case, of speaking carelessly about indifferent things. I put the case, otherwise untouched, in my breast-pocket, and there it remained till I reached the counter of the bank at Redport.

'Where's Mr Brown?' asked the clerk, as he took the leather case. 'It doesn't seem like Saturday morning without seeing Brown.'

'He's away just at present,' said I. 'Mr Buller asked me to give you this. All right, I suppose?'

There was no need to lessen my dignity in Redport as Mr Buller's legal adviser, or to give Adam Brown the reputation he deserved, by explaining why I was doing the work of a builder's clerk and messenger on this occasion.

'All right,' said the clerk, turning over the cheques and duly noticing whether they were properly endorsed, and so on. 'Quite

right. By the way, there's a message or something the manager wants to send to Mr Buller. I believe. I was to tell Brown so when he called. I suppose you'll do just the same?'

'I can take any message for Mr Buller,' said I. 'Anyhow, I shall be seeing him on Monday if that will do.'

'I daresay it will. Would you mind stepping this way?'

I followed the clerk into an inner room, where I for the first time met the manager of the Redport branch of the County Bank, hitherto known to me as Mr George Richards by name only. We bowed, and he offered me a seat politely.

'You are my friend Mr Buller's new clerk of the works, I presume?' asked he.

'No,' said I. 'I have no business in Redport, except to cash and pay in these papers for Mr Buller, while passing by. But if there is any message I can give him—'

'I don't know. You are not leaving Redport immediately, I suppose?'

'Well, as to that, I am. In fact, by the very next train.'

'By the next train? H'm!' Mr Richards was a very young man for his place, and I began to fancy there was something I did not like in his manner. 'Going back to Carcester anyhow, I suppose?' he asked again.

'Yes,' I answered shortly. 'And I believe the train starts in half an hour. So if you can tell me what you want said to Mr Buller I shall be glad, as I haven't much time to lose.'

'Yes—of course—certainly. But there is a little matter: would you mind telling me if you received these cheques straight from Mr Buller?'

'Certainly I did. Is there anything wrong?'

'You received them just as they are now?'

'Exactly as they are now. What is it, Mr Richards? I am really in a hurry—'

'I'm very sorry. But you see, I am in a responsible position, and one can't be too careful in these days. I have already sent a messenger to telegraph to Mr Buller; would you mind waiting here till he comes?'

'The messenger?'

'No, till Mr Buller can come over. I daresay it is all right, but—'

'But I can't wait, Mr Richards. May I ask you what you mean? I

can tell you that Mr Buller is not in Carcester, and will not get your telegram till Monday, if then.'

'That's awkward, by Jove, if it *is* so. But that we shall see.'

'But meanwhile I must wish you good-day. If there's anything wrong you must settle it with Mr Buller. I can't wait now.'

'No? Well, then, Mr—Mr—I must frankly tell you that I must ask you to wait, even if it's till Monday, till Mr Buller can come over here. It's an awkward situation I'm placed in, but—and I daresay Mr Buller is *not* at Carcester, as you say; but—well: whether you're—it's, all right or all wrong, you see, in your own interest that I must ask you to remain. You see here's a cheque here that I daren't cash without special instructions from Mr Buller.'

'Don't cash it, then. Good-day—'

'Quite so. But I'd advise you not to be in quite such a hurry to be off, all the same. In fact, it's my unpleasant duty to ask you to stay here at the bank until the fact of *this*, cheque being in your hands can be more fully explained.'

'I have explained it,' I began rather angrily. 'I received it from Mr Buller, if it came out with the rest from that case lying before you. Why should you venture to speak, even to a stranger, as if you had any reason to doubt his word? I don't understand this at all.'

'For this reason: I have the best reason for believing that this cheque was never drawn by Mr Buller. And now you see how it becomes my unpleasant duty—'

'Nonsense! As if I hadn't received every one of those cheques straight from his hands! You talk as if you took me for a forger. Well, I suppose I must excuse you, on the ground of over-zeal.'

'It is most improbable that this cheque was drawn by—well, never mind why. I'm bound to tell you that if you refuse to wait here for Mr Buller's arrival of your own free will, and in your own interest, I shall have to call upon the police to assist me in the execution of my duty towards the bank and its customers and the public at large.'

'Why,' I began, my anger half losing itself in amusement, 'this is something too absurd. You can't call in a constable unless you can give him good reason to suspect me of felony. I have half a mind to let you try, for the fun of the thing. Only it would be wasting my own time. So I'll put an end to your scruples about the public at large by telling you at once that my name is Standish, and that I am solicitor to Mr Buller, and live at Carcester. And the next time I advise you, as

a lawyer, to be more careful how you treat people who come to your bank.'

'You are Mr Buller's solicitor? Indeed? Of course that *is* important—very important; and no doubt you can send for somebody in Redport who knows you? No—we can't be too careful in these days.'

'I don't know a soul in Redport.'

'No? H'm! Well, Mr Buller will know you—when he comes.'

'But I tell you he won't get your telegram for at least two days. This is monstrous!' I broke out, my amusement turning back into anger again.

'Monstrous or not—Well then, perhaps, as you feel safe from being brought face to face with—I should say, as you are convinced Mr Buller is not at home, I suppose you have friends or clerks in Carcester who could give evidence as to who you say you are—are, I ought no doubt to say? The telegraph's as open to you as to me.'

'You positively are so insane as to say you will forcibly detain me—*me*—in Redport unless I can convince you that I am myself? And for no reason—'

'You must make up your mind to it. I know what law is,' said Mr Richards; 'and—well, not to mince matters, I've already got our police sergeant waiting in the next room. A messenger from the bank can dispatch any summons to any of your friends, if you'll write it down. Yes—it *is* in my power to give you into custody on suspicion of having forged a cheque which you yourself admit has passed through the hands of no third parties—a cheque of £50, signed John Buller. And as to why I have particular reasons for my belief, I don't mind telling you it's because the bank here has had special notice from the chief branch at Carcester to cash no cheques signed 'John Buller' till we've communicated with the drawer, and to detain the person presenting them, whoever he may be—unless the cheques bear a certain private sign. There's reason for that, you may be sure. And there is the sign on every one of these cheques—except the one for £50.'

'You mean to say that this cheque for £50 is the only one unmarked?'

'The only one.'

'Let me see it, if you please.'

He held it so that I might see it, taking care that I should have no chance of wresting it from his hands. I certainly could not blame him

any longer for over-zeal, seeing it was on my own advice he was acting. But what room could I find for a single thought, save that an unmarked cheque, as like those presented by Adam Brown as a cheque could be, *had been received straight from John Buller's very own hands by my very own?* Surely it looked more like witchcraft than forgery.

And yet Adam's effective confession of guilt, and the regularity with which the undoubtedly forged cheques had been presented—I could not make head or tail of it at all. I must have been bewildered; I must have seemed confused, as if with guilt or fright, for I was confused in reality. I could not even affect the indignation of injured honesty; I was not indignant with Mr Richards for being suspicious of what might be witchcraft, but certainly had all the air of a forgery—I, Charles Standish, being the forger!

'It is utterly unintelligible,' said I, using the common phrase of people who won't, rather than can't, explain things that seem going against them. 'But I am sure of one thing—Charles Standish of Carcester I am. And I don't want to stay in Redport till Monday. I will telegraph, as you say. I'll send word to my wife to—but no; *she's* not in Carcester either just now. I must send for one of the clerks at the office, I'm afraid, and make everybody wonder at what I can have been doing at Redport to need proof of my identity. Give me a form, and I'll write a message for my clerk—'

For my own credit's sake, and out of justice to Mr Richards's zeal, I chose to wait in an inner office of the bank till somebody whom I knew should come. I need hardly say that Mr Buller, being away from getting telegrams, never came. But it was not till hours had passed that I began to realize that it was Saturday afternoon—and that my idle dogs of clerks had of course taken advantage of my absence to close the office and go off to play at an exceptionally early hour. Closing time for the bank itself (also earlier than usual on Saturdays) had come when I saw in my mind, as clearly and truly as with my eyes, my telegram lying unopened on my clerk's desk at Carcester—and tomorrow was Sunday.

All I could do was to send off six telegrams to six different people, in the bare hope that one of them might bring over to Redport some respectable citizen of Carcester before the very last train. Not one brought a soul. And I could see what Mr Richards thought of the

result of my telegrams when I had, perforce, to put up with the accommodation of the police station instead of the hotel, there to remain until John Buller himself should come and set me free.

In effect, I was a prisoner on suspicion of Forgery—and I had in truth presented an unquestionably forged cheque that had been through no hands but my own! It was the most unaccountable mystery I had ever known; and it kept me from sleeping, even more than the discomfort of my cell, as much as if I were really a conscious sharer in the villainies of Adam Brown. This could not be his doing—and what then of the rest, and of his admitted guilt concerning them? Not even sleep, when it came in an uncomfortable shape at last, let me dream of a possible way through such a mystery.

It was not till Monday afternoon that I received the welcome news that John Buller was on his way to see me at the police station in company with Mr Richards. I must say that I had become more anxious now about getting home as fast as I could than about anything else in the world. It is not an amusing thing to be treated in a strange place as a suspected felon; and I have held very strong views about the treatment of unconvicted prisoners ever since that Redport Sunday.

‘Here he is, sir,’ said Mr Richards. ‘This is the—the gentleman who presented that cheque on Saturday morning. I hope and trust it’s all right; but in these times, you see, one can’t be too—’

‘Thank Heaven, at last!’ said I, springing from my seat, and holding out my hand. ‘I’ve never passed so long a day since I was born; but I certainly don’t complain of Mr Richards—he’s been zealous enough, anyhow; and I only wish *my* clerks would simply do what they’re bid, and give up that confounded habit of thinking for themselves. If you ever have to leave the Company’s service, Mr Richards, for want of thinking-power, never mind; I’ll take you into mine. Well, Mr Buller, you must have slipped into drawing *one* unmarked cheque, after all?’

‘No, sir!’ said John Buller, with strange vehemence, for him. ‘No—I did *not* draw that cheque—with or without a sign. I drew no cheque for fifty pounds at all. And if you’re the rascal that has been up to these games, and got it all on poor young Adam’s shoulders, I’m glad I see you here; I’m glad of it, with all my heart and soul. I’m hanged if I didn’t know I was right, all along. Adam Brown, if a letter

can find him, poor lad, goes back to my works at Redport this very hour!

Could I believe my ears?

'You—John Buller—you believe *me* guilty of having forged cheques, and tried to throw the guilt of it upon Adam Brown? Think for one least moment of what you are saying—'

'Think? Thinking's plain enough, it seems to me—a mile too plain by the longest chinks you can draw. It's likelier anybody would be a rogue than the orphan lad I'd brought up as my own son. I daresay, like enough, he was too taken aback by such a charge to say a word. I wonder he didn't double his fist, and knock me down. But I hope I'm a just man if I'm a bit of a hasty one. I'm not going to be hasty with *you*. If you can explain what's at best an ugly business, say it out like a man.'

'If I didn't respect an old client, and an old friend—But I can't forget how you've been worrying about this business. Explain? I will, though I don't see how you and I can ever be friends again. You know as well as I do that I never cashed a cheque for you in my life before, or ever was at Redport till the day before yesterday—'

'Ay; so you say.'

'So I *do* say. And you know that I received that case of cheques and bills—whatever they were, for I never looked at them—from your own hands on Saturday morning.'

'Did you? That's my cheque-case, sure enough. But suppose you did, what then? Because something comes out of it, it doesn't follow it was I who put it in. No, no. I never drew that cheque. You present it to be cashed, and it purports to be drawn, signed, and endorsed by me. You say you received it from me. I say you didn't. And I ought to know; for you couldn't have received a cheque that never was drawn. Justice is justice. Adam Brown goes back to my works; and you'll go to the country's, whoever you are. I don't know what's the right way to start a prosecution, but that's easy known. I'll see Standish this very day.'

'You'll see Standish?'

'Ay, Standish of Carcester, my lawyer. Criminal business isn't his line, he says; but he'll do it for me.'

'You mean I'm to prosecute myself? Well, it all seems queer enough. Perhaps I don't know who I am. Do you?'

'No, sir, I don't, I'm happy to say. Forgers aren't in *my* line.'

'Good Heaven! Do you mean to deny that *I* am Mr Standish of Carcester?'

I saw a very decided smile come over the face of Mr Richards. And it was not pleasant to see. For if John Buller, as he was quite capable of doing, chose to prosecute me for forgery—well, I should be acquitted, of course, but my character would be gone for ever and a day. The names of ladies are not more delicate than those of professional men.

'Come, none of that nonsense,' said John Buller, 'you're no more Standish than I am the Duke of Wellington. It does aggravate me to hear a man talk in that way. If you choose to deny that you're the Duke of Wellington, when I say you are, we'll have a wager upon that, and toss up for the winner. You come and dine with me at the Star, both of you, and I'll treat you like princes. We'll eat cheques for fifty pound apiece between slices of brown bread-and-butter cut thin, with lemon and cayenne. Its very odd, but I took a fancy to you the first minute I saw you. There's something about you puts me in mind of somebody or other—I never could remember names. But it's all one whoever we are. We're the sparks that fly upwards; and by Jingo, we'll have a jolly good fly . . . Who are *you*?' he called out at the top of his voice to Richards. 'You're a murderer, sir, and a forger, and a fool. Come and dine with me at the Star. . . .'

I need not continue the talk of poor John Buller, whom overwork, and loss of faith in the one human being who was dear to him, had driven out of his mind. It was an overwhelming relief when my managing-clerk arrived, and when sufficient explanations were obtained to allow of my return home in company with my poor friend. Even to the zealous Mr Richards the state of things was as clear as day, so far as he knew.

III

It was not hard for me, now, to see how John Buller, once assured against his will of Adam's treachery in the first instance, had brooded over the shock, with an already overlonely and overburdened mind, till, as sure as Friday night came round, he, possessed by the demon of monomania—which simply means the abnormal growth of a natural and normal idea—drew the cheque which haunted and fascinated him. If my readers cannot follow the chain of mental

association, with its manifold links of time, place, person, and occasion, in which his disturbed brain became tangled and coiled, I fear I cannot hope to make it very clear. But there are very few who have not met with the most extraordinary cases of monomania in some form, and noticed how consistent they are with all outward appearance of sanity. Are there very many of us who have not felt some form of it ourselves in some slight degree? But, fortunately, few of us live altogether alone; few of us are overtrustful or, therefore, half maddened when deceived; most of us have more, if not much more, self-control than was evidently possessed by John Buller. And yet he must have had a great deal. Only the insane can tell the very torture of self-suppression they have to undergo when they feel monomania slowly broadening into a wider, if not deeper, mode of lunacy. For, conscious of its own state every diseased brain must be when that state first begins.

And yet—*could* this be all? The madness of John Buller did not account for the more than apparent guilt of Adam Brown.

It was not till years afterwards—not till my poor old friend had left all his troubles behind him; not till I had long ago given up puzzling my head about the matter—that I one day received a letter bearing an Australian postmark, and addressed to myself in a strange hand. There was nothing curious in that; but, as I read, the story I have been trying to tell came back to me as freshly as if it had all happened yesterday. For thus the letter ran:

Sir,—It will doubtless surprise you to receive this from me; for I cannot suppose that you will remember so much as my name. But you will remember—I fear only too well—a clerk in the service of Mr John Buller, who was dismissed from his service for embezzlement. I am that man; and my reason for calling myself to your remembrance is, that I have at last found myself able to repay the sums that I abstracted wrongfully, and for which only Mr Buller's kindness saved me from being sent to gaol. I do not, moreover, want him to think me always such a hopelessly ungrateful and treacherous scoundrel as he must be thinking me. I got into bad ways, knowing them bad all the time. I wanted more money than I could get honestly, and I had to pay it. I needn't tell *that* story; it's over now, and no harm done to anybody but me.

I was tempted, by what I called to myself need and weakness, to 'borrow', I called it then—to steal, that is to say—some of the money I drew from

Redport bank. I had complete control of the accounts at Redport, and I suppose it was all so easy that at first it didn't so much feel like stealing, and so I went on and on. I used to take sometimes more than fifty pounds together. I've sent you a statement of all I took; and I hope it's correct, for of course I had to muddle up all the accounts. You see, sir, Mr Buller, always used to give me a fifty-pound cheque over and above what I asked for, meaning, I suppose, to keep plenty of ready-money in the works for the week; and I never told him it was more than was wanted, for the reasons I've written. The only excuse I had is this—I never knew how much I owed to Mr Buller. I thought I was nothing more to him, and rather less, than any other man. That's no reason I should rob him, but it makes me a bit less of a thorough blackguard. He ought to have had me sent to gaol. And when he didn't, but just as much as told me to go and do no more wrong, as if I had been his own son—well, sir, it did go to the bottom of all the heart I've got, and I'd like him just to know that he wasn't foolish in being kind. If I ever did another wrong, or mean, or dishonest thing, I should have been the biggest cur on earth. I got a chance in New Zealand, and I should like him to know that his words made a man of me. This is a poor sort of a letter, but I can't say what I feel, and I won't try.—Trusting to hear from you per return, yours respectfully,

ADAM BROWN.

And that is the not wholly unsatisfactory end of a sad story. I suppose that the *first* cheque must have been some sort of a blunder; and that an obstinate man's supposition that forgery on somebody else's part was more probable than a blunder on his own, resulted in—what we have seen. I intended, when I set out, to point a good number of morals, legal and otherwise. But I will content myself with two. One is, that justice has even queerer ways of going to work than law—as when it punishes a man for a fault that hasn't been found out by finding him guilty of one that he has never committed. The other is, that trust, even if carried to the pitch of insanity, is not by any means so mad a thing as it seems. John Buller's over-trust sent him out of his own mind, but it saved another man.